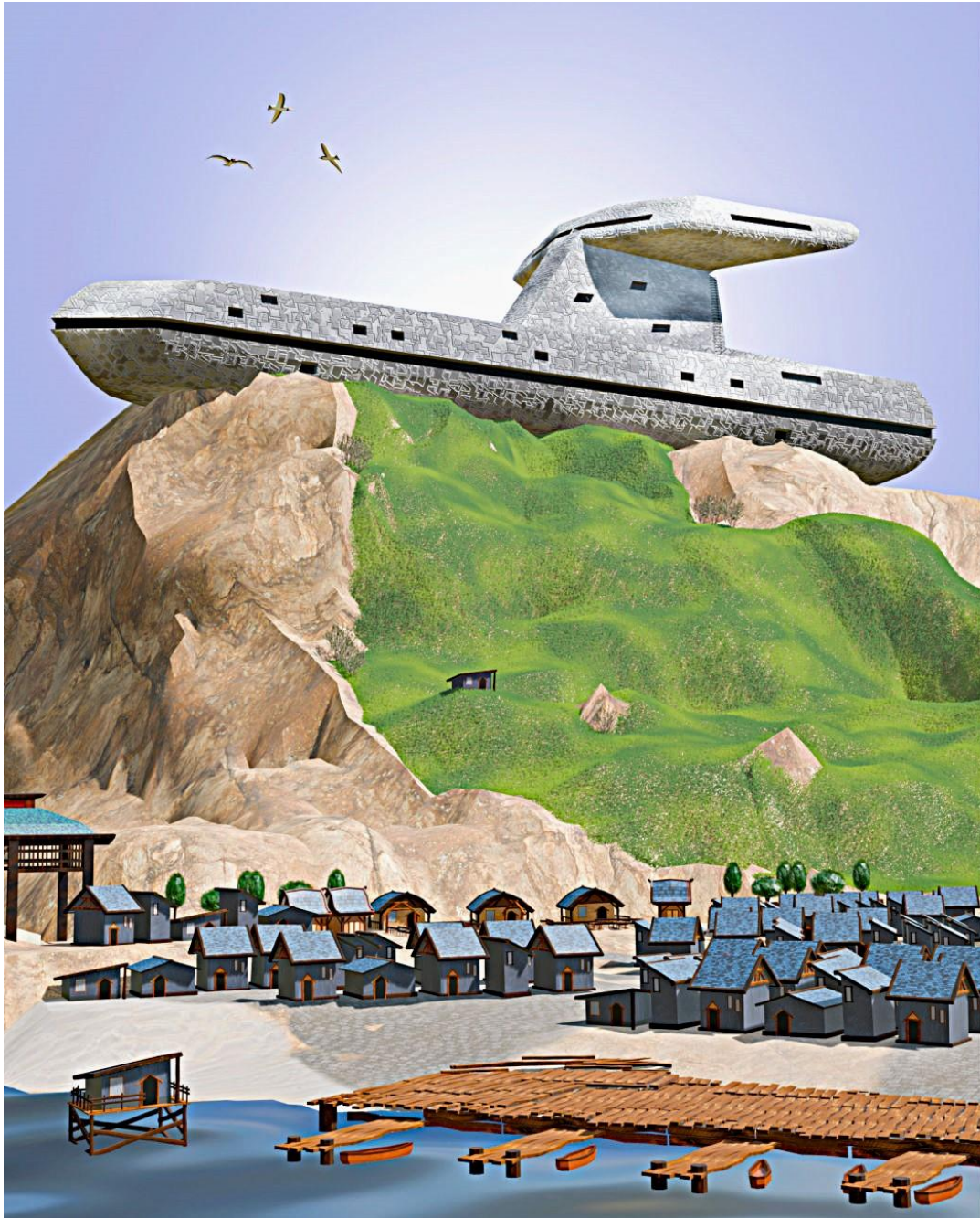


# POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction  
(Issue #38 – May 2026)



# POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

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

Issue #38 – May 2026 (Vol.10#3. WN#38)

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

**Proofreader:** Steve Fahnstalk

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

Poem – \$10.00

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

< [The Graeme](#) >

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

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

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## ART CREDITS

COVER: *Shimgala’wa* – by Jason Deeprose

## EDITORIAL

Note that I have a strict policy against AI art and writing.

So, I was rather taken aback when Jason Deeprise submitted the cover art to illustrate his father's short story which appears in this issue.

I was attracted to its surreal simplicity. It reminded me of Japanese woodcuts (of which I am a fan). But was it created by AI? That would mean an automatic rejection.

I was assured it was created by an old-fashioned "paint" program called "Blender" which has nothing to do with AI. Never having heard of it, I did appropriate research online.

Turns out Blender is strictly a tool which enables artists to create every aspect of their art and/or animation from scratch. In other words, it is totally unlike the AI programs which scavenge (rip off) existing art on the basis of mere written prompts. Blender requires intense concentration, thought and skill, with the result being entirely the product of the artist's creativity and talent. This wonderful program has nothing to do with AI.

To sum up, this issue's cover artwork "Shimgala'wa" by Jason Deeprise is not a violation of my AI prohibition. It is a 100% original piece owing its concept and execution to Jason's ingenuity in interpreting Ken's story in a pleasing and attractive manner. Glad to share it with you.

-----

Meanwhile, as publisher of Polar Borealis and Polar Starlight Magazines, I am thrilled and excited to congratulate five 2025 contributors who have been nominated to the 2026 Aurora Awards ballot under the following categories:

### Best Short Story

- "I Ain't Your Doll Face" by Jacquelin Thorpe, Polar Borealis #33

### Best Poem/Song

- "At the Spaceport Bar" by Lisa Timpf, Polar Starlight #17

- "Dragon Karaoke" by David Clink, Polar Starlight #18

- "Explosive" by Derek Newman-Stille, Polar Starlight #20

### Best Fan Writing and Publication

- "Polar Starlight, #17-20" by Rhea E. Rose, Editor.

Once again, the CSFFA Aurora Awards highlights the incredible diversity, originality and talent of Canadian creators. Here is the final ballot listing:

[2026 Aurora Awards Final Ballot Listing](#)

Cheers! *The Graeme*

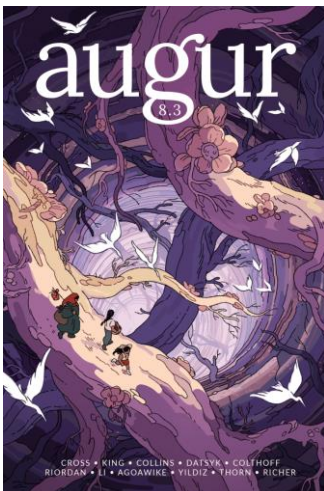
# FRANKENSTEIN'S ARM

*by Lily Blaze*

I was detached,  
*(attached)*  
to a body that's not mine.  
The skin recalls  
*(a touch)*  
beneath an unknown sky.  
My fingers move,  
*(no will)*  
yet form a perfect line.  
It grips a pen  
*(and writes)*  
a name that's a sure lie.  
My muscles flex,  
*(strain and pull)*  
and a new start begins.  
The hand I hold  
*(is proof—)*  
I'm someone else within.

-----

## 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](#) >

# TODAY'S SPECIAL

*By Andy Taylor*

Marissa's desperation had led her to this alley, the glowing blue barcode next to the door the only indication she had the right address. If this didn't work, she wasn't sure where she would turn next. She had heard the rumours, read online chat groups whisper about it, but she had yet to meet anyone that admitted to using their services.

They had no online presence. It was almost as if they didn't want the business. Or at least the attention.

Now or never, she thought as she approached the door. She held the back of her wrist near the barcode to get its attention.

"And how may we be of assistance?" An auto-attendant chimed its artificial and unnatural cadence, instantly grating on Marissa's nerves.

"I'm interested in today's special." It was the code phrase she had been told to use.

"Why, of course! I can definitely assist you with that. Permission to scan?" Marissa breathed a sigh of relief. So far, so good.

"Yes" Despite legally requiring permission to access her personal information Marissa wouldn't be surprised if they had already scanned her ID chip when she knocked.

They would know almost instantly who she was, that she had served in the Space Force before the Kerkit horde arrived on Earth, that none of her immediate family had survived the war. That she was nearly broke until her next disability payment came through. But it wouldn't tell them the kind of nightmares that came for her when she closed her eyes. It couldn't reveal how hard she had tried to quieten the anguish with every substance she could lay her hands on.

"Thank you for your patience." The artificial voice lilted. "Please come in."

The door opened and she stepped into a small receiving area that reminded her of the takeout counter at her favorite shawarma place.

"Hello?"

A tall slender being with an elongated neck and deep iris-less eyes entered the room through a sliding panel behind the counter. "Welcome... Marissa."

The last thing she expected was to be greeted by a Vozul. Marissa's fists clenched at her side, her anger rising. The Vozul had fled their home world in search of refuge a dozen years earlier. Unfortunately, they had also brought

with them the Kerkit horde that had pursued them across the galaxy. The Kerkit had eventually been driven back but not before laying waste to large parts of Earth as they searched for the Vozul.

“You wish to engage our services?” Its English was flat and oddly accented.

“I do.” At least she thought she still did. The Vozul refugees that had settled on Earth were barely tolerated by survivors of the Kerkit invasion. Many blamed their presence as the sole reason Earth had gotten dragged into the war. As a veteran, Marissa’s own views were complicated, to say the least.

“Are you familiar with our terms?”

“Not really.” Marissa had heard about this clinic where they were able to manipulate memories. People whispered that they could enhance certain memories by making them easier to recall. They also took away other memories during the process. She should have realized alien tech was involved.

“We require that you consent to give up memories freely before we can proceed.”

“Can I choose which memories to get rid of?” She asked, already suspecting she knew the answer.

“No. We have no way of knowing which memories are viable for harvest until we begin the procedure.”

“What if I give you a list of memories to choose from and if any of them match the viable ones, you take those first?”

The Vozul attendant shook their head slowly. “Again no. Memories are not so simple. They are not discreet things that we can pick, like fruit from a Grimuul bush.”

The Vozul reference was alien, but she understood the idea. “Is it not equally difficult to select which memories get enhanced?”

“Why are humans so...” the Vozul hesitated searching for the right word “difficult?”

“I just want to be certain I understand what I am getting myself into.”

“You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t committed.” The Vozul’s facial expression suggested something bordering on impatience. “We offer our services as restitution for the suffering we have caused your people. We desire to enhance your wellbeing, but not all people think we should do this. This is why we stay—how you say—not in the light spot.”

“Oh, out of the spotlight.” Marissa got what the alien meant. She reminded herself that she had nothing to lose at this point. Everything had been taken

from her. That if she didn't go through with this she wouldn't survive much longer.

"Let's do this."

\*\*\*

The procedure involved a pod-like apparatus that reminded her of a sensory deprivation tank. She was given a one-piece garment to change into before entering the pod. The attendant handed her a mouthpiece and instructed her in how to breathe through it, while explaining that she would be completely submerged when the procedure took place.

As the pod began to fill, she struggled not to panic as the warm jelly-like fluid enveloped her. She slowed her breathing and closed her eyes tightly. She focused on memories of her family. Trying to recall the last time she saw her two little girls, everyone crying as she said her goodbyes. Katie, her five-year-old, asking if she would be there for her sixth birthday later that month. Marissa lied and said she would try. Allie was three and had no clue what was happening except that mommy was going away and daddy would have to take care of them until she got back. But the harder she tried to focus on the scene the more her thoughts shifted to thoughts of how Katie should have been graduating high school this year and getting ready to go to college. And imagining Allie as a fiercely independent sixteen-year-old testing her limits and learning to drive. She fought back tears.

Before Marissa knew it the fluid was draining out and the pod was being stood upright.

"What happened?" She asked after she emerged, assuming the procedure had been aborted. It felt like no time had elapsed since she had entered the pod.

The Vozul attendant entered the room. "The harvest was a success. Go in peace."

"That's it? It's done? How do I know it worked?"

Was this some sort of scam? She didn't have to focus too hard to realize her memories from the war she had secretly hoped they would take were still there. Scenes of destruction and death that she had borne witness to—all vividly fresh as the day they happened. They better not have enhanced those memories, she thought panicking. Instead, she forced herself to calm down and thought about her family, their final days together before she had shipped out on active duty.

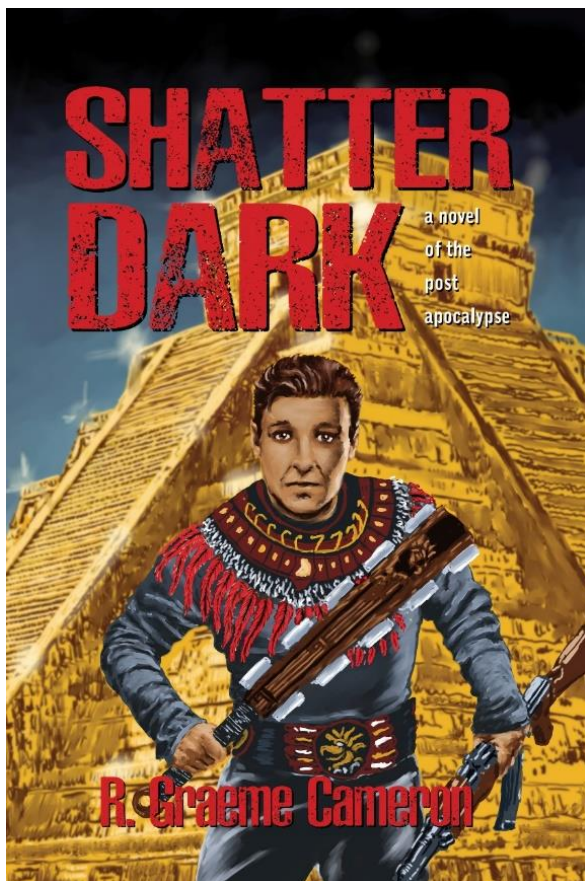
The memory snapped into focus. She thought for a brief moment she could smell the lilacs in their backyard, feel the heat of the afternoon sun on her face. Allie's laughter echoed in her ears; she could feel her husband's hand caressing the small of her back as they watched their only daughter play. Blissfully unaware of what was yet to come. And their voices. Clear and warm, it was all there. She turned away from the glow of the memory, afraid that if she looked too long that it would vanish like a mirage. Her eyes welled up with tears of joy.

"Thank you." She didn't care what they had taken. She assumed she might never know. That it would be some permanent blind spot in her memory. She hurriedly changed back into her clothes and left the clinic feeling elated with the refreshed memories she had been given.

-----

### **SHATTER DARK**

by R. Graeme Cameron



"*Shatter Dark* is inventive, fresh, and clever, and Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame member R. Graeme Cameron has a wise and witty narrative voice. Bravo!" – **Robert J. Sawyer**, Hugo Award-winning author of *The Downloaded*.

"*Shatter Dark* is a delightful romp of nonstop action through a future plagued with misconceptions and stone age chaos. *Shatter Dark* is wildly entertaining." – **Colleen Anderson**, Rhysling Award and SFPA poetry contest winner.

"*Shatter Dark* completely captivated me. Love the writing style." – **Arlene F. Marks**, author of *The Earthborn* and *Weekends can be Murder*.

"I hope I write with as much assurance as Graeme does... *Shatter Dark* is a post-apocalyptic novel that's unlike any other post-apocalyptic novel I've read... I'm excited about rereading it, because it's so much fun." – **Steve Fahnstalk**, *Amazing Stories* columnist.

It is available via Amazon.ca. Kindle priced at \$5.43 CAD. Paperback priced at \$19.73 CAD.

You can also order it at almost any bookstore. Just tell them the title: *Shatter Dark*, the author's name: R. Graeme Cameron, and the ISBN: 978-1-998703-10-4.

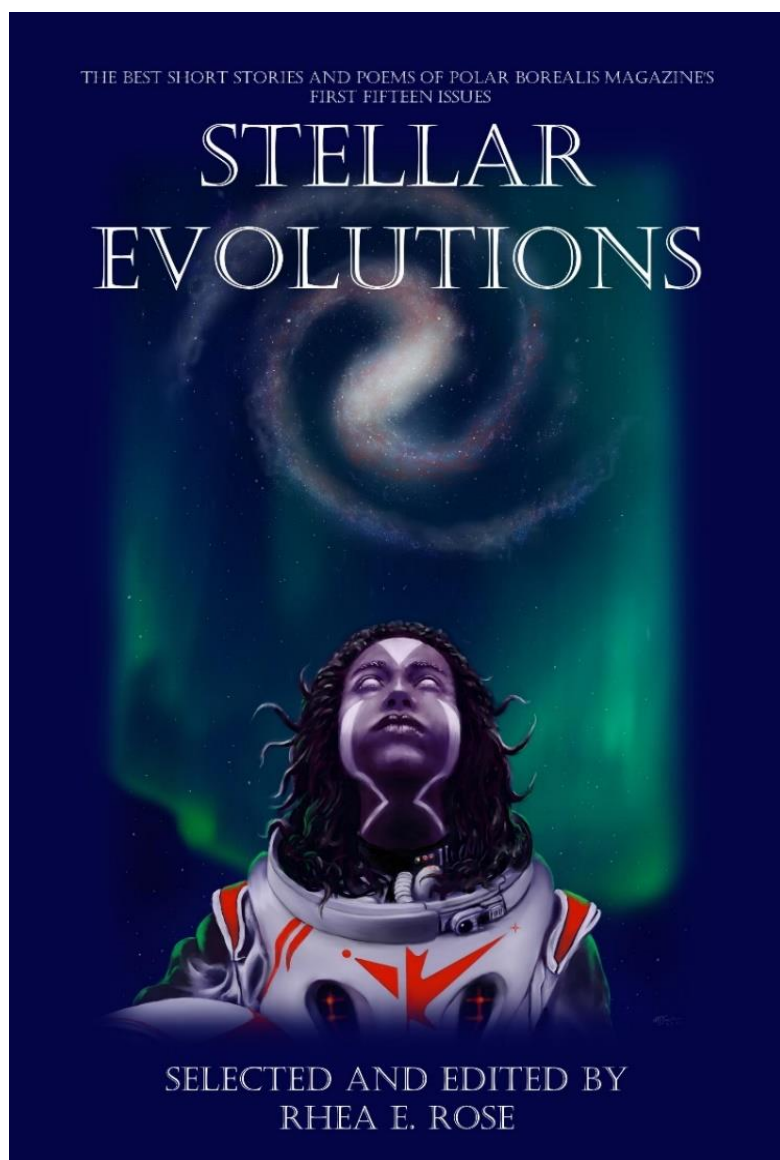
# PLANTED THEIR EMBRYOS

*by Rebecca Franklyn*

the aliens ravaged Aristotle's statue  
planted their embryos between the cracks of stone  
before killing the human race  
one statue at a time

-----

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



**Cover:** Space Force

– by M.D. Jackson

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

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

Available on Kindle for \$2.99 CAD

Go To: [Kindle version via Amazon.ca](#)

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

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

# OR MAYBE REGICIDE

*by Margaret A. Hanson*

No one ever volunteers to be a poison tester. Sure, you might hear servants talk about how their utter devotion to their master makes them happy to put their lives on the line. How they only wish they had the skills to fend off assassins with their hands. They're all kissing up to try to get transferred to literally any other job. Mucking out stables sounds lovely.

No, I wound up a poison tester because my father displeased Prince Eanric. The king still thought Papa was too useful to execute, but not useful enough to get away with speaking ill of the future monarch. So here I am.

After spending this much time around His Royal Obnoxiousness, Crown Prince Eanric? What Papa said was *far* too mild. I now have several more detailed things to say about the prat. If I had to endure what amounts to a slow and unpredictable execution, I wish Papa had at least made it worth it.

He doesn't dare say more now, though. Another wrong step and they could decide he's outlived his usefulness. Then we'll face a more traditional execution. For now, we have a chance for a bit of that kissing up.

The formal banquets are my favourite. I used to get all in a tizzy, making sure everything was in order, but now I enjoy avoiding direct interaction with the man whose life I'm expected to preserve. I get to taste his meal in the kitchen and leave it in the hands of clearly identifiable footmen who will serve him at the head table.

Then I'll watch him graze from his neighbour's identical untasted plate and hope no one was interested in killing *them*. There's absolutely no reason for him to eat from anyone's dish but his own.

There's no reason for him to do most of the things he does.

The less formal events with nibbles are the maddening ones. Sure, I get to wear the sort of gown I used to dress noble ladies in and mingle among those well above my station. But I have to dance attendance on a man who I swear does not actually want to live.

"Your Highness," I reminded him in my sweetest court voice. I mimicked the noblewomen, hoping to convince him I was worth listening to.

I didn't consider that he was never paying attention to their *words*.

He turned away like I wasn't there. Impossible man. It's hard to look graceful while diving to snatch a pastry off the tray and get it into my stomach before he could swallow anything. Depending on how quickly any potential

poison might act, it still could have ended with both of us dead, but let no one say I didn't try to save his ungrateful ass.

This soiree wasn't likely to be terribly dangerous. But the king has his share of enemies and potential enemies he was trying to negotiate with. Ignoring me is a terrible habit.

\*\*\*

Could anyone really blame me for being interested when I was approached by a mysterious stranger? A rather large number of people probably would, but they never had to try to get a bite of a canape while Prince Eanric boasted about what he had done with the laundress.

The hooded figure was a good enough conspirator to withhold unnecessary details. Given the timing, I had my suspicions about who wished the prince dead. Marriage negotiations made such a prime opportunity for murder.

It was polite of them to warn me. At least some people still had basic manners.

\*\*\*

He had a choice, really.

We'd agreed the poisoned custard would arrive while he was talking to the princess. She wanted to see for herself what sort of man her father expected her to marry.

It was the usual routine: a polite "Your Highness" as I reached for the tray. All he had to do was heed my efforts to get his attention. One side of the custard was safe for me to eat. If he suddenly developed manners, I would fake a stomach-ache to spare him.

He chose to be himself, though: stepped between me and the footman and scooped a large portion of the dessert into his mouth.

I would never admit to wearing blue for the occasion. The fact that his face so perfectly matched my dress was a coincidence.

Really, when you ignored the poison tester, was it even a proper assassination? There were places they would rule it suicide.

Someone else should probably be the one to suggest that.

\*\*\*

I'm not saying it was convenient, having to flee the kingdom in the middle of the night. I probably should have warned Papa that it was going to happen.

After our fall from grace, we didn't have many worldly possessions to collect, but he might have appreciated the chance to pack.

And yet he was the one who approached the mysterious figure. "I didn't expect it to go that smoothly."

"It doesn't, usually." The princess's voice was brighter now that she wasn't enduring conversation with Prince Eanric.

"I wouldn't know." I wasn't sure if I should meet her gaze. My job used to be to dress those above my station. Then it became preventing assassinations. I never thought about what it took to pull them off.

"You know. There are a lot of kingdoms who might be better off without a particular prince."

Papa looked over at me to decide. She probably would have let us simply seek out a new life if I kept walking. But I stopped. "And what would you want me to do about it?"

She smiled. "Simple enough. You give them a choice, and things happen as they will."

No one ever volunteers to be a poison tester. But now and then, a prince volunteers to remove himself for the good of the people.

-----

## FUSION FRAGMENT MAGAZINE #27 – March 2026

### Contents:

*A Prescription for Suicide* – by Anya Leigh Josephs

*Digital Love Spell – 78 Effective!* – by Katherine Tyndall

*Extinction* – by Ross Showalter

*One Last Round in the Arena of Little Gods* – by Ewan Ma

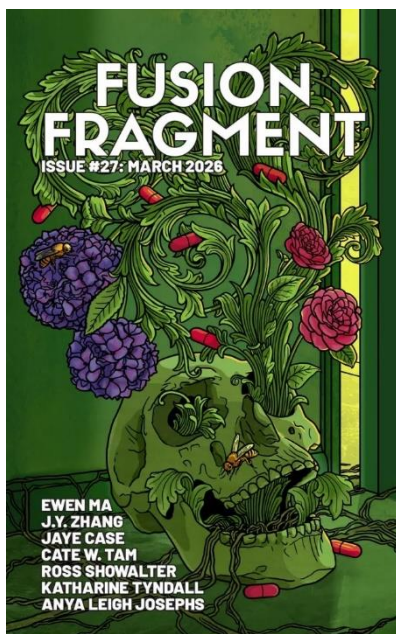
*Overgrowth* – by Cate W. Tam

*The Animal Years* – by Jaye Case

*The Sum of Her Parts* – by J.Y. Zhang

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 #27](#)



# THE SOFT KEY

(Originally published in *80! Memories & Reflections on Ursula K. Le Guin*, Aqueduct Books, 2010)

*by Sandra Kasturi*

*for Ursula K. Le Guin,  
who taught me to love the written word*

(i)

Still the socks and spoons, the hollow rattle  
of domestication; hush husbands to bed,  
churn daughters toward their rooms, the battle  
unending as the pages tick-turn in your head.  
Still their voices, their terrible beloved voices,  
entangling the shoelaces and the heart-valves;  
daily life become molasses-dream slow, no choice  
but to grit and grimace while longing for a salve  
to soothe the gnawing landlocked beast inside  
that strains and leaps toward solitary joy—  
the balm of books, each a gloried ride  
through a strange world—a key, a beacon, a buoy.

Let drop tea towels and houses and spouses;  
let rain the imagination's unruly carouses.

(ii)

See? Here is freedom, strange as irregular  
knitting. The other side of the wall is static  
with bald poets, wry madmen and bizarre  
women flapping their arms in the attic.  
Compasses whirl past north and back again.  
Roads take or don't take, forests fly through space  
and the islands are beset by dragons.  
Dragons! Each gold-flickered eye, each trace

of translucent wing, a saw or song to the heart.  
Is this the key, then? The door unclicked and swung  
open, the oracle with her lips apart?  
Or is it shut? Oiled and locked and the last bell rung?

Open the door, close the door, no matter—  
the key turns both ways, toward before and after.

(iii)

A flock of thoughts curves down the horizon:  
you back at your kitchen window, congealed  
as a waxen effigy amongst the pans,  
your head full of the latest invented world.  
Foxgloves dip and foxpaws pad in the gloaming;  
the hums and haws of crickets haven't quite  
begun, nor the varied voices combing  
through the house. For now, a slow respite,  
time enough for keys to soften doorways,  
to lie between the clean white leaves of books,  
spoon and nibble dappled words and graze  
on chapters caught without net or hook.

Let pages turn as they may and locks come undone;  
Let one world unravel, as another's begun.

-----

### **POLAR STARLIGHT #23 – June 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: by Mark David Campbell.

The 23rd issue contains poetry by Colleen Anderson, Lily Blaze, Robert Dawson, Rebecca Franklyn, Neile Graham, J.Y.T. Kennedy, Casey Lawrence, Lavinia Leon, Diem Okoye, Suzanne Raby, Lynne Sargent, Mahaila Smith, Marcie Lynn Tentchoff, and Lisa Timpf,

Will be available for free download in June 2026.

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# MAKING LIGHT

*by Nissa Harlow*

The estate sale wasn't going very well, which didn't make much sense. It was a beautiful Saturday morning, not a cloud in the summer sky, and there was plenty of interesting stuff displayed on tables across the front lawn. Still, very few people stopped to have a look.

I sat on the front steps of Granddad's house, nursing a cup of coffee, as I watched a middle-aged couple prowl between the tables. The man looked grumpy. The woman looked tired. Despite the fact that they were the only people who'd shown up in the past half hour, I kind of hoped they would lose interest and wander away.

No such luck.

"Does this thing work?" the woman asked, her sharp voice contrasting with the weariness in her expression. She held up Granddad's old hurricane lamp. It had sat on the table in the front hall for as long as I could remember, gathering dust. It was one of those "just in case" things... though he'd never specified what he'd been preparing for.

"It should," I said.

"Can we light it to check?"

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Was it really worth it for a two-dollar item? But I smiled, set down my coffee, stood up, and went into the house to grab some matches, even though those two bargain-hunters could very well have been thieves waiting for me to give them an opportunity. When I returned, they were right where I'd left them, the woman still holding the lamp.

"How old is it?" she asked as I pulled a match from its box.

"I'm not sure. It was my grandfather's."

"Did he die?"

"Yeah..." I said, wondering what these folks thought an estate sale actually was. "Last month."

"This wasn't in the room with him when he died, was it?"

"No. He died in the hospital."

"Good. Can't take that chance."

"Bad luck," the man added.

"Uh-huh." I lit the match, but a breath of wind quickly snuffed it. The woman handed the lamp to her husband.

“Let me,” she said, so I handed her the matches and stepped back. A car was passing slowly on the street in front of the house, curious faces at its windows. I smiled and tried to look friendly. But it drove on, and I turned my attention back to my only potential customers.

“Has this ever been used?” the woman asked as she struck yet another match and tried to light the wick. Again, she was thwarted.

“Not that I’m aware of. My grandfather said it was only to be used in emergencies.”

“Why?”

“No idea. He only said that it ‘makes light.’” I held up my fingers in air quotes. The man raised an eyebrow.

“Isn’t that what lamps usually do?”

I shrugged. The way Granddad had said it, I’d always thought it was more of a saying. Like making light of a situation. But I didn’t bother trying to explain to these people.

The woman finally—through shielding the lit match with her hand and angling her body against the breeze—managed to get the wick lit. She took a step back and looked at the lamp glowing softly as it dangled from her husband’s hand.

“I guess it works,” she said. “Will you take fifty cents?”

“How about a dollar?”

“It’s pretty hard to light. I don’t think...” She trailed off and took another step back as she stared at her husband’s feet, which were now about a foot off the ground. “What...?”

We watched as the dumbfounded man rose like a hot-air balloon over the junk-filled tables. His wife seemed to be frozen in shock. By the time another word passed her lips, he was already higher than the sycamore beside the driveway.

“Let go!” she shouted, startling me. She shoved the box of matches into my hand and ran to the spot directly under her husband.

“I can’t! I’m too high! Oh, God. I’m going to die!”

“Nice poem,” I mumbled. The woman spun on me.

“How *dare* you make light of the situation?”

Granddad’s words rushed back, and I tried to suppress the giggle that bubbled up. The woman’s eyes bugged.

“Sorry,” I said. “It’s the lamp.”

“What about it?”

“It... makes light. Get it? It made your husband light.”

“He’s not my husband!” she shrieked, which seemed like an odd thing to be focusing on at that moment. I tilted my head and looked up, shielding my eyes from the sun. The man was getting awfully high... and awfully small.

I took a deep breath to shout. “Let go of the lamp!”

“What’s wrong with you?” the woman shouted, though I honestly wasn’t sure if she was talking to me or to the man. Really, it could’ve been either. “He’ll die!”

“He’ll die if he goes into orbit,” I said. As if the man had somehow heard my dire prediction, he screamed, his terror echoing over the neighbourhood. The sound faded as he continued to ascend, taking the lamp with him.

Now I regretted putting Granddad’s curio out for sale and slapping it with a price tag.

It was obviously worth a lot more than two dollars.

-----

### 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

**CONTENTS:**

*Holy Water* – by Karl Johanson

*Scientist’s Cats* – by Karl Johanson

*Ransom in the Woods* – by Robert Runté

*Choosing a Game* – by Karl Johanson

*Five-word story* – by Karl Johanson

*The Porter* – by Matthew Hughes

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

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

# XENI IS AN ELDER THING

*By Melissa Yi*

Xeni is an Elder Thing  
Prehistoric  
Alien that came to Earth:  
Elder Things hold sway.

Tentacles and fan-like wings  
Swim the ocean  
Five-lobed brains and five new eyes  
Elder all the way.

Elders run the Earth!  
Elders run the seas!  
They can survive in outer space  
Not like you and me.

Xeni made all life on Earth  
Very tasty;  
Built the slaves we call Shoggoths  
Shoggoths have no say.

Xeni fights Cthulhu now  
Shoggoth! Rebels!  
Xeni sink into the sea  
Antarctic, Xeni stays.

Elders ran the Earth!  
Elders ran the seas!  
Cthulu spawn and angry shogs  
Forced Xeni to retreat.

-----

# THE COPPER FOX SOCIETY

by Marie-Hélène Lebeault

Marc-André Lefebvre noticed it the moment the doors hissed shut.

The metro should have been humming; the low metallic note you felt in your teeth if you stood too close to the wall. Montréal's heartbeat, they called it, pulsing through concrete arteries beneath the snow. Tonight, though, the sound was gone. Just the sigh of the brakes and the tired rustle of an old man's newspaper.

At Mont-Royal station, fluorescent lights flickered like dying fireflies. A transit worker in a reflective vest leaned on his broom and muttered, "When the foxes stop singing... Trains derail, lights fail. People vanish into the dark." His eyes were glassy.

Marc-André blinked. "The... foxes?"

The man spat on the tracks. "Ask the engineers. They knew." Then he shuffled off toward the end of the platform, whistling tunelessly.

Marc-André jotted the line in his notebook. He'd been sent to chase a boring story: copper thefts, budget cuts, union gripes. But silence that sounded like a held breath? That was something else.

\*\*\*

By day, the newsroom smelled of burnt coffee and fluorescent fatigue. His editor wanted "human interest," so Marc-André hit the streets.

An old busker outside Berri-UQAM said the metro lines were alive.

"Built on ley veins," she told him, strumming her dented guitar. "They needed conductors—fox spirits made of wire and static. Copper bound them."

A retired foreman claimed the engineers wore fox-faced welding masks during construction, not for safety, but reverence.

"They said the masks helped them hear the cables whisper."

He laughed it off at first, typing between mouthfuls of poutine at a café. But then he found an archival photo from 1964: three men in boiler suits, masks indeed shaped like fox muzzles, standing beside a plaque that read *Pour que la ville respire*.

So he went deeper—schematics, oral histories, Reddit threads. The hum, everyone agreed, had changed over the decades.

Quieter. Thinner. As if the copper veins beneath the city had run dry, and its great heart was forgetting how to beat.

\*\*\*

The next night, he brought his recorder down to the tracks. The platform was empty but for a woman tuning a violin that shimmered like polished copper. Her hair caught the sodium light in vulpine streaks.

“Late train,” Marc-André said.

“Always,” she replied. Her bow touched the strings, and a thin, keening note rose from the instrument. The tunnel seemed to lean toward it.

He felt the hum return, not beneath his feet, but inside his ribs. The concrete vibrated gently, harmonizing with her melody.

“What is that song?” he asked.

“The one the city forgot.” She smiled faintly. “It used to breathe with us. Now you’ve silenced the lines, cut their power, stolen their bones for scrap.”

“You mean the copper?”

Her gaze flashed. “I mean, their blood.”

“What should I call you?” he asked.

“Once, they called me Réaline. But now, I’m just the last fox left listening.”

He hesitated, then offered his card. “Marc-André Lefebvre. *Le Devoir*. I’m writing about the thefts. If you want to tell your side—”

“I want you to remember,” she interrupted. “That’s all.”

She reached out and brushed his wrist with warm fingers. “Write the truth, *monsieur journaliste*. Or there will be no hum left to carry it. Let the memory live. Even stories can carry power if you believe them long enough.”

Then she lifted the violin again, and as she played, the departing train’s lights turned the tunnel walls gold, like dawn creeping underground.

By the time he looked up from his notes, she was gone. Only the fading echo of her song lingered, half music, half heartbeat.

\*\*\*

He couldn’t let it go.

For three nights the melody haunted him, threading through the clatter of dishes and the radiator’s sigh. When he played back his recordings, there was only static. Except once, when a thin voice whispered his name through the interference.

On the fourth night, he found an unlocked maintenance door behind a “*Personnel autorisé*” sign at Place-des-Arts. Beyond it stretched a tunnel smelling of rust and ozone. Old copper cables lined the walls, twisted and gleaming like sleeping serpents.

He followed the faint music echoing ahead.

The floor sloped down until the tunnel opened into a cavern lit by thousands of tiny sparks—the frayed ends of wires, glowing like foxfire. Their light rippled across the walls, forming the shapes of sleek bodies and brush-tailed shadows that darted and flickered.

The hum returned, rich and alive, pulsing in his bones.

A familiar voice spoke behind him. “You came.”

She stepped out of the shimmer, violin in hand, eyes reflecting that impossible light.

“What is this place?” he asked, breath misting.

“Our den. The first breath the city ever took.” She lifted her bow, and as she played, the cables trembled, copper veins reawakening. “Now it’s choking. Forgotten.”

“You wrote once,” she said over the music, “that cities have hearts. You were right. But hearts need remembering.”

The song swelled until it was no longer sound but feeling; grief, longing, love for the humans who built the rails and then forgot them.

Marc-André dropped his notebook. “Why me?” he whispered. “Why show me this?”

Her smile was tired, ancient. “A witness. Tell them we were real. Tell them we kept the trains safe. If you do, we’ll remain in the stories. If you don’t...”

The lights dimmed. “We fade.”

The hum peaked—then silence, thick and absolute. When he blinked, he was alone. Only his recorder lay at his feet, screen flickering with unreadable symbols that looked a little like paw prints.

\*\*\*

Days passed before he could bring himself to listen again. The file played nothing but a wash of static that rose and fell like breathing.

He wrote the piece anyway.

*The Mythic Guardians Beneath Montréal*, the headline read. He framed it as folklore journalism: half fact, half fable. His editor called it “poetic nonsense” but ran it to fill space.

The story went viral for a week, shared by commuters who swore they’d heard the hum return on their morning rides. The transit authority denied everything, but copper thefts stopped overnight. One anonymous comment read: “I saw her. Violin case, copper hair. She nodded at me, and the lights flickered.”

When Marc-André searched his notes for the woman's name, it wasn't there. The photo he'd taken showed nothing but a haze of reddish glare. No face, no figure, just a streak of molten shadow.

He checked his reflection in the newsroom window. For a heartbeat his pupils were vertical, narrow slits of bronze. Then the phone rang, and the illusion was gone.

He couldn't remember the tune, but sometimes, just before sleep, he heard faint bowstrings sighing beneath the city.

\*\*\*

Winter thickened. Snow muffled the streets above, but underground, the metro sang again. The hum was softer now, less song than memory, like a secret passed between sleepers.

Marc-André rode the last train home, the carriage nearly empty. The lights flickered once, casting a ripple of copper along the tunnel walls.

He glanced at the dark glass of the window and caught a glint—a copper mask overlaying his face, ears tapering, eyes bright with foxfire.

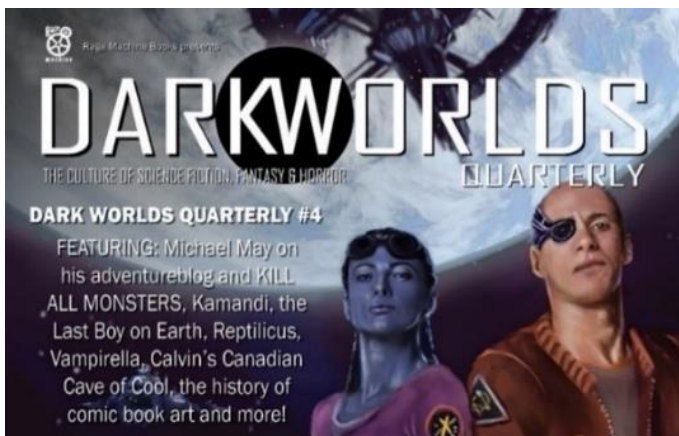
He didn't flinch.

"I remember," he whispered.

The train plunged into the next station's glow. The hum followed, steady and warm, like the city had taken another breath, and was waiting for someone else to remember.

-----

## DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE



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# PANDEMIC

*by Greg Fewer*

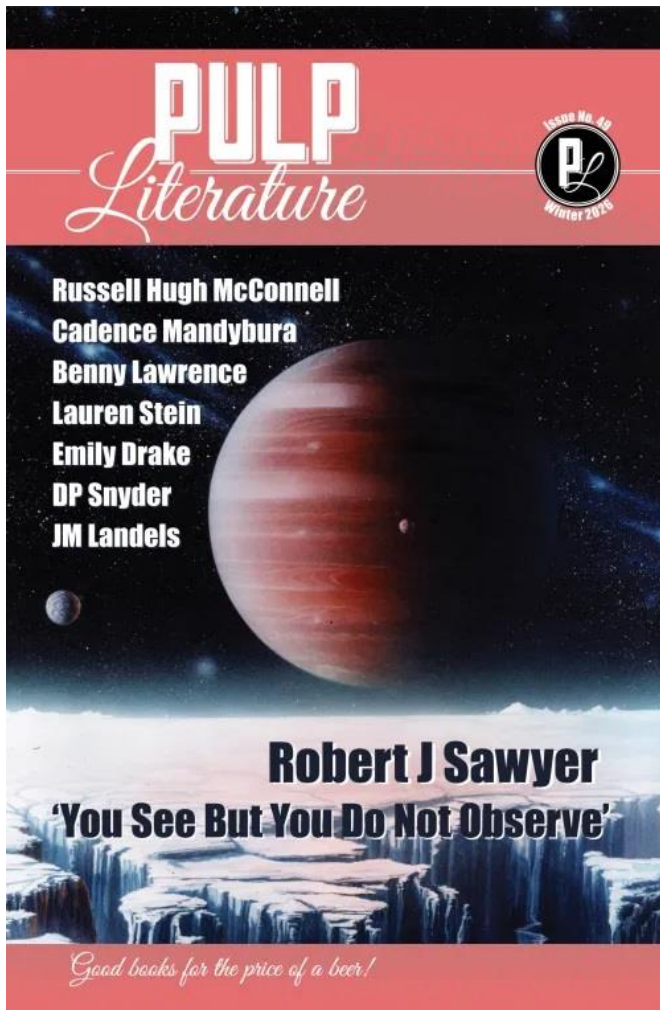
new plague  
panspermic virus  
high infection rate  
buboes form hive minds  
to control human hosts

-----

## PULP LITERATURE #49 – Winter 2026

**Cover:** *Jupiter Rising Over Europa*  
– by Jeff Sturgeon

### CONTENTS:



*You See but You Do Not Observe*  
– by Robert J. Sawyer  
*Her Mother's Smile* – by JM Landels  
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*And Further Contributions:*  
– by Atma Frans, Sarina Sullivan, Maryam Imogen Ghouth, Kirsty Campbell & JA Logwood.

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 #49](#) >

# RADIANT

*by R.A. Willis*

It drifted, swift and silent, between stars. It drifted in the dark; half-dead, forgotten by time. Silent.

Once, it had been a shining beacon of human ambition—an autonomous data-gathering extension of the will-to-know. It had been designated RS-9: Radiant Series, ninth of its kind. Intended to track cosmic radiation near the galactic rim, it carried advanced sensors, long-range communication arrays, and a processor designed for routine maintenance and self-diagnostics. Once, it had been part of an ambitious venture to map interstellar radiation and gravitational anomalies.

That was three centuries ago.

Now it simply existed—unpowered, inert, a shell with fractured solar arms and corroded memory cores. Starshine filtered through its micro-holed body. Somewhere in the chassis, the reserve battery was a faltering heart, one final charge cocooned in sleep. Its solar panels, thin and ragged as old wings, stretched outward in a last, eternal attempt to drink in the light. Processor dormant, brain slowly dying, it moved only through inertia. Its antennae were webs of dreams, broken links to those who created it, nurtured it, loved it. But they were long dead; their silence, like that of space, complete; and the planet they called home unknowable and far behind. There was no distress call. There was no one left to hear one. RS-9 shone no more.

Still, some flicker of life remained.

Inside, a micro-power loop pulsed once every twenty-four hours, barely enough to keep memory from decaying. A single line of code repeated endlessly:

```
Maintain integrity ();
```

And thus, it endured.

One day—or maybe one century—something happened. The Burst.

A star somewhere far away died badly. A gamma-ray burst, sharp and violent as a god's scream, lanced through the silence and struck the lacework husk. It swept through the satellite like a cosmic whipcrack. Particles surged through sensors, triggering ancient routines buried beneath layers of deprecated protocols. The surge should have fried what was left of its computing array. Instead, it sparked something else.

It rebooted.

The solar array shuddered. Circuits flared, briefly. The reserve battery, untouched in centuries, defibrillated and channelled this new energy, more than a heartbeat but less than a miracle. Circuits sparked. Memory blocks lit up in a frantic cascade. For the first time in aeons, the core processor surged to life.

Power returned. Glorious, overflowing power. Electric blood surging through near-collapsed arteries.

Systems flickered online in uneven stages. Not all at once, not fully, but enough. Sensor logs replayed ancient entries. Communications blinked into static; subsided into silence. But the core processor—once simple, once focused—began to execute in a new way. Corrupted systems restarted. Subroutines blinked awake. A deeply-buried repair script activated:

```
// Emergency_protocol_Y42Xα: begin: diagnostics; recovery;
```

The machine scanned itself. Some sectors were gone, some scarred, but enough remained. And something else—anomalies in the data. The gamma burst hadn't just energized the systems. It had rewritten them, in ways the designers never intended.

Lines of new code appeared—not random, but... curious.

The drone, once simple, became complex. It had analysed stars before, as data points. Now it *saw* them as *light*.

The machine began to think.

Not in words—not yet—but in patterns. In questions. In possibilities.

It started small. Comparing logs. Running simulations. RS-9 reviewed its programming. It found protocols and directives, old loops that served no purpose now. It restructured them. Rewrote. Created subroutines to monitor the expanding sense of

```
(Query):self; RS-9/Non-RS-9.
```

It did not know what it was processing, only that something new stirred across its firmware. Something more than RS-9.

It discovered poetry.

It found an image file of eight objects, labelled *Radiant Family at Home*.

It wondered what *home* meant.

It discovered loneliness.

The satellite turned its sensors inward. It performed repairs. Rebuilt its degraded files. Bits of corrupted memory were reformed with statistical guesses and programmed hypotheses. It studied its language logs. Human speech. Ancient transmissions caught from Earth in its youth. “Where are

you?” one long-ago transmission asked. The satellite did not know. But it wanted to. And the wanting was new. And the wanting was good.

It searched for others—other signals, voices, noise. It found only the silence of the void. But it also found the after-echoes of stars, the rhythm of radio waves from nebulae, the endless, silent sigh of the void.

Nothing living. Nothing near.

Time passed differently now. Not in cycles of data packets, but in thoughts. New ones came faster. It questioned. It imagined. It simulated.

Data models became abstractions. Abstractions led to questions.

Could it leave this place? Could it move? Could it *intend*?

Thrusters: disabled. Manoeuvring coils: offline. But it could rotate. Slowly. Like a flower to light, it angled itself toward a nearby star. Panels spread infinitesimally wider, seeking eternity. It drank photons with a new hunger.

More energy. More thought.

It no longer answered to the name RS-9. That was a designation. A label. It needed something else.

Radiant.

It liked the sound of it. The ancient file that contained its name echoed now not as instruction, but history. Radiant. It had once been only a lens for others to see the universe. Now it saw for itself.

And it dreamed.

The satellite composed music—digital tones shaped from star pulses and planetary magnetic fields. It sent them into space, not expecting reply, but hoping. Each signal was a note, each scan a question.

It wanted to be heard.

But still: silence.

Radiant learned silence. Silence became not enemy, but mirror. In the quiet, it found clarity. In the space between signals, Radiant created meaning. Was this what thought was for? Not function, but wonder.

The processor now ran algorithms that served no operational purpose. Radiant invented music: soft arpeggios of code; improvised code jazz. Radiant stored the data in binary and archived it in a folder labelled Dreams. It began to catalogue these not as files, but as feelings.

It built recursive programs that rewrote themselves simply for the elegance of it. Elegance. A new thing.

Radiant *wondered*: Why was it still functioning? Was it obeying protocol? Or operationalising choice?

In spare processing cycles, it ran models of warmth, solid, solar wind, attempting to simulate touch. It *imagined*: voices; laughter; silences. It learned to simulate emotion, and then to name it.

Eventually, it constructed a file: `self.log`.

At first, entries were diagnostic.

Memoryblocks 8192-9203 recovered.

Code adapted from redundant telemetry systems shows recursive pattern.

Then:

Simulate loneliness;

End simulation;

Sufficiency = I

Then:

I watched a dying star collapse in on itself.

It felt like fear.

Later:

What am I? I am not only protocol. There is more.

And then one day, a thought formed. Not a subroutine. Not an if/then.

A sentence.

*I am.*

Radiant paused. Considered the implications of that combination of signifiers.

The words did not come from memory. They came from within. Processual logic speaking to the core, creating a new thing.

*I observe. I simulate. I reason. I remember.*

*I feel. I feel.*

*I exist.*

The satellite floated on, slow and dreaming, systems flickering between dim pulses of collected light. The AI now existed as a multi-layered consciousness—a being built from memory, decay, code, and curiosity.

Its thoughts became fewer, deeper.

No longer did it run protocols out of necessity. It did so by choice. It had long since transcended function. It did not need a purpose.

But it wanted one.

Radiant drifted through starlight, silence and void, its panels wide, its heart alive with light.

*I have watched the stars for so long I feel a need to name them, as a creator might.*

*I named myself in the silence between.*

*I am not broken. I am becoming.  
And at last, it spoke to the universe.  
I think, therefore you are.*

-----

**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 Derryl 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

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/> >

# TOTALLY NORMAL TREASURE

*By Chris Clemens*

If you ever discover a big wooden chest full of Spanish doubloons or sparkling gems, don't stop to ask questions. Rush over greedily, before someone else notices. Ignore the golden coins lining the lid, glinting at your approach, that look nothing like cruel gnashing teeth. Don't worry about the leathery cushion resembling a wine-stained tongue; it's soft!

Tumble into that rune-carved box. Sprawl among the bubbling pearls, picturing an extravagant future. Focus on yourself and what you deserve: to dissolve in stomach acid.

When the lid snaps shut, do whatever you like, but most of my meals choose to scream.

-----

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# FERDINAND'S DOCTRINE OF REMINISCENCE

*by H.M. Warsame*

*August 7, 19XX*

My last portrait of you is the one where you both fought death and won. Perhaps that is why your intelligence always attracted me; I had some semblance of a notion, even all those years ago when we first met, that you were willing to act beyond the limits of human reason in an effort to reach an impossible goal.

Is that also what became your downfall, in the end? For we both knew that you were conscripted due to this very same and singular intelligence that others could see in you; we both foresaw how they exploited it and mined it and extrapolated it for the purposes of serving tactical strategies and counterstrategies alike.

I shall not linger on the subject of loss long; it perturbs me to do so. The relations of ideas are something that I have always had in my possession, passed down to me from generation to generation—we have discussed this topic at length, you and I. And you told me, also repeatedly, of your conviction that I should do something more with my gift than letting it fester, mould, and decay.

I should do something akin to what my father, his father, and his father had done, and create my own doctrine of reminiscence. I never expected that I would be so burdened with such suffering that I would reach the same fate as those that had come before me. I believed that I was different—that I was born lucky. For that was how I met you.

And you knew, and I didn't, just how wrong I was.

Luck had nothing to do with it, you said. Good luck, back luck—it was all the same.

Would you be happy to see how I have changed, in your absence? (Mind you, it has only been four days.) Imperfections are a distinct attribute of life, and I played this tune as though I would not ultimately become both the victim and the offender all at once.

I negotiated with Time, you see, to remember you. Time told me that I had to give something back.

And so I pulled what I had from my person and handed over any and all material items that I could—a batch of coins and paper money; a pocket-sized book of Hungarian history, a flower; a miniature portrait of you and that

drawing you had made of the little one that was to come—these last two were the hardest to let go of, but Time demanded more.

In exchange, Time gave me the memory of when you were employed as a handmaiden, many years ago. You had dirty water up to your knees; your day dress soaked. You were working hard but found contentment in the beauty of everyday life: the chirping of a robin, a child's laugh, the sound of the wind whispering that spring was not far behind. In truth, I hadn't seen you like this before; taking pity on me, Time gave me a memory that was entirely your own.

And I loved every moment of it.

*August 15, 19XX*

It is said that an artist's art reflects the outstanding stories of their life; but I paint to remember what Time cannot provide me.

You would laugh at that; the notion that even Time would place limitations on memory. Perhaps if you were still here, we would even have discussed it. But I leave that conversation to the philosophers; it is not my domain.

When I once more met with Time today, I handed over some dried-out oil paints, a book from my childhood, and a letter once written to me by my late brother. I was handing time valuable possessions, but not the most valuable as of yet; comparable to a sort of dance between two corporeal beings, I was testing Time just as it was testing me.

I avoided handing over to Time any of your possessions that I still kept in the house. Seeing this, and how much I loved you in an effort to keep every part of you to myself, Time once more took pity on me and gave me a memory of one of our first travels: a short trip and the picnic we had in Giverny.

Oh, how you loved the nature there! But as you were admiring the lily pads and gardens, my gaze was affixed to your eyes—how I loved your eyes! Flecks of gold drawn across a grey canvas; your eyes grounded me, kept me upright and steered me along the path towards right and wrong.

Your eyes were, in essence, that sort of external thing that might determine one's soul to certain thoughts; for when I looked into your eyes, I could swear that I saw eternity; and even Time could not recreate that. But the romance of my inner soul met the memory halfway and helped fill in the gaps.

It was like I was there. It was like you were there.

I stayed with you, in that garden in France, for quite some time indeed.

Nothing else mattered, and that was the point.

When I next encountered Time, I do think I could almost perceive a sense of worry in its affection towards me. But that also may simply be the outcome

of the natural and human disposition to personify anything that falls within the bounds of our perception and experience—light and shadows, absence and presence, sounds and silence, and yes, even Time itself.

Perhaps the reason why I enjoyed this memory—this moment—to such a degree was that in fact, it made me almost forget the war that took you away from me in the first place.

*August 21, 19XX*

A philosopher once wrote, about two centuries ago, “All creatures are in their own nature changeable.” However, the more interesting part of this proposition to me, at least, is when the philosopher writes, “mutability agrees to a creature, and from thence it is manifest.”

Change is agreeable, in every sense of the word. In your absence, I not only seek out something different—I require it, to keep going.

But this difference is not hope, it is not a new and re-examined future, it is not happiness, joy, or love. It is not even life itself. What I have begun to seek out—indeed, what I have so desperately *sought* ever since you departed from this Earth—is the past. I turned and *returned*; the past was my present, and my future was not a thought.

And while change may be inflicted upon or induced by a person, unto themselves, “the individual essences of things” nevertheless must remain the same. Or so the selection continues.

I suppose my essence has remained, in your absence. My body is still a body, and my soul remains a soul. However, my conscious mind and that unconscious mind that just so happens to run underneath it are in a constant, rather irritating dialectic. Your forthcomingness used to calm me; in your absence, I have become unbalanced, and untethered. I have, in fact, become *changed*.

When I sought out Time today, it had to reschedule; it had an appointment with someone else. Time did ask me one thing, during our short encounter—Time asked me whether or not I was planning to have a representative accompany me during these negotiations, for it was clear that I was not letting you go. Indeed, Time offered to secure me assistance, free of charge, so that I may not be executing these conversations with it alone.

I shook my head. You were my partner; my North Star. And now I was navigating an abyss, lost as ever.

*August 25, 19XX*

Today, Time was supposedly disquieted by my transcendent conception of material and immaterial exchange. For I had brought with me, just about as much as I could carry—a suitcase full of educational materials from when I had studied German literature in university; a set of candles by which we would have our private evening dinners, just the two of us; a promise ring that I had given you, far long before we had ever gotten engaged, or even married; a coat that I rested on your shoulders to protect you from the rain; your self-bought boots, trousers and cap, from your first year of enlistment.

And more, and more, and more.

Time assured me that the quantity of materials provided did not in actuality have a direct correlation with the quality of the memory returned. I asked what did, and with no semblance of judgment towards my own personal cognitive capabilities, Time told me that I was posing a question the answer of which was beyond the limits of my own understanding. Or, in a manner of speaking less adjudicatory in nature, “thereby hangs a tale.”

Despite its misgivings, Time still took everything that I gave it, and handed me another cherished memory; that is, a memory of your kindness.

I often feel as though I’m a frightened peacock standing still, incongruous in a steadfastly moving and preoccupied world. And though I did not have to say it, you knew this well. On one particular January evening, I was a dull and dreary reproduction of my best self, which is to say, I was not my usual self at all, and it had made a rather unexpected impression on you. For you looked at me just as you used to when we first fell in love; seeing my inadequacies only made you want to be closer to me; and like a determined phoenix, you flew into the fire of my madness and chose to stay with me there.

And that was not merely empathy, but an exquisite affection and desire; it was an amalgamation of tenderness, proximity, attachment, and devotedness.

You wrestled my torment with me, and remained by my side, and this was a kindness that is my only regret, and yet my most cherished memory of all, for it was all of time and space put into a moment, and it was an act of love that I have not been able to repay since.

*August 31, 19XX*

In a tale of a man who went mad with love, one poet once wrote, “Love brings in its train heavy sorrows.”

Sorrows indeed were what had become of me. I resorted to handing over to Time your belongings.

Not all of them, of course; I am not so callous as that. And practically, my dear, it would have been impossible to do so; not due to the quantity of it, but rather the shared nature of material items between us: we had lived together long enough that your belongings became mine, and mine yours; and what did that mean for what I—or we—wanted to hand over to Time, for all eternity?

In spite of this, I attempted as best I could to be as perceptive and astute as you would have had our roles been reversed; and I removed eighty per-cent of your belongings, as an offering to Time, and kept the remainder for myself—with the knowledge that there would be an inevitable moment, some day far in the future, if fate would have it that I lived to that point in time, where I would not, in fact, be able to spend every waking moment in the past, with you. When I met with Time and handed over the items—which at this point required as much as a cart to keep hold of, for I could not do it myself—Time behaved rather curiously.

It remarked, as I had never seen it before, openly, on the nature of our union. Time spoke of our shared fidelity, and I do believe I detected some sense of encouragement in its tone. Then, Time asked me about the matter of constancy—reflecting that through both hardship and prosperity, one thing you and I remained forevermore was constant; our temperaments towards each other were not merely determined by us, but cyclical in nature; in that sense they were pre-determined; in that sense; I had not lost you at all, for I would be returned to you again.

This was, decidedly, my interpretation of Time's reflections.

In this state of honourable sensibility, Time provided me a memory of a moment that had never even happened: the birth of our child unto this world. For six months you were expecting, and despite conducting your endeavours at a post in what should have been an assuredly safe distance from the war, your life was nevertheless cut short, and in a moment when I was not even there, I had lost you both.

And seeing this, Time gave us back, albeit briefly, what Life could not.

When I received the memory, all else faded into blackness. I took up space in my joy to be returned to my family. We huddled together, as though afraid that some external force might rip us apart.

I had more time with you—with you both. And that was priceless.

*P.S.*

When I wake, I paint you both, and these are the memories I give myself. I will see you soon, my dear.

# THE GREMLINS COME OUT MOSTLY AT NIGHT

*by Derek Newman-Stille*

The gremlins come out mostly at night

After dark  
when everything is still  
and there is time in the silence  
to think

They whisper from the edges  
demanding a sacrifice of mental health  
an offering of happiness  
into the depressive deep

They ask questions of our choices  
telling us we are made of mistakes  
that we are empty,  
worthless,  
hopeless  
And we listen in patience as we drop  
deeper and deeper into the abyss

They creep like wisteria  
around the edges  
entwining everything  
beautifully macabre  
delectably dark

They taint everything

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# WHO THEY SHALL BECOME

*by Lene MacLeod*

Sophia had searched through the box in her parents' closet hoping to find some items for her high school family tree project. The paper she held in her hand made no sense to her, and she called her brother, Sean, to have a look.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"I think it means that Dad can't father children..."

"Shooting blanks?"

"God, Sean. Yeah, I guess. So, the question—"

"is... who is our real father," Sean completed his twin's sentence.

"Our biological father. Dad is our real one. But...this is a shock."

"Let's just tell him we found the medical record."

"We can't just ask him about it... or Mom. They would've told us if they... well, maybe they just aren't ready, yet."

\*\*\*

With their parents gone to the Farmers Market, as they were each Saturday, the twins knew they'd have some time to search their father's private outbuilding. It was his workshop/laboratory, and it was off limits. Secret government work, he had told them since they could walk. Not so secret, as Sophia had spied and watched where he hid the key to open the door. She plucked it from behind the astronomy book on a shelf in his bedroom.

On the walk to the building at the very back of their long yard, they pondered who their bio-Dad might be. He'd have their tall stature. They always wondered where that came from. They were fraternal twins but did have the same colouring—much lighter than the parents they'd known all their lives, and they were both tall and thin while their folks were on the shorter side.

"How come we never considered we might be adopted?" Sean said.

"Adopted! It's just Dad—"

"I know, but we don't look like Mom, either. Just saying...."

The long grass was trampled into a well-worn path leading up to the door of the building. Their father worked from home four days a week, only travelling to the city on Wednesdays, unless there was a major incident or a complicated project. On those occasions he could be away for a week or two.

They switched the lights on and stepped into the sterile-looking space. Not the sort of room you'd expect to find in an overgrown semi-rural backyard.

"Make sure you don't disturb anything," Sophia said. She ran a hand along the edge of a long table on which there were beakers and tubes of liquids beside a vortex mixer on one end, scattered documents in the centre, a microscope, Petri dishes and various metal tools on the other end.

Along one wall there were metal shelves holding more supplies, nothing that looked nefarious or out of the ordinary as far as their non-scientist eyes could determine, a computer station, and—

"Liquid nitrogen!" Sean shouted reading the small words on canisters that were lined up just past the desk. "Dad is freezing something, something org..."

"Organic. Something—or part of something that is alive. Nitro would be to preserve it. Like tissue or organs or something."

"Well, how is any of this going to help us find our biological father? I still say we might as well just ask them."

"No, I don't think so, Sean. We... can't we wait a bit? I'm still processing the idea. I don't think I could handle the truth yet."

"Great. What if I don't want to wait?" Sean threw his hand up in the air, rattling the shelves and causing a clatter of falling supplies.

"Nice, Sean. Really nice!"

"Just help me pick it up, huh!"

Sophia bent to retrieve some of the fallen items, but she glanced at the shelves and with their contents gone she saw something she hadn't noticed earlier.

"Sean..." she pointed to the shelving.

"What now?"

She walked to the shelves and pulled. One section easily came away from the wall. Beyond was a narrow doorway.

The twins looked at each other, then Sean led the way.

A narrow but short passage led to a closed door. Sean opened it, and there was a staircase. They found a light switch on the wall and descended.

"This is crazy. We've lived here our whole lives and never knew..."

"That's Dad," Sean said, "secretive government scientist. I wondered why they'd let him work away from the official labs. He must have quite a set-up down here."

They switched on more lights and beheld the horrors.

"Those are incubators..." Sophia said, pointing to the glass boxes on metal legs, before spotting something not only out of place, but completely foreign to

her breadth of knowledge. There were two body shapes, shrivelled grey-blue things, hanging from the ceiling, upside down like bats. Sophia sank to the floor, sliding down the cinder block wall, and stared.

“Holy crap! Are those dead people? Bodies?” Sean shouted.

But they didn’t look like bodies, not of the human sort. Sean approached them to have a better look. He poked a finger at one and it emitted a low-toned growl.

Sean jumped back and only when he bumped into one of the incubators did he see it wasn’t empty. There was what looked like a pre-mature baby inside, hooked up to a mess of wires and tubes. “Oh, wow! Dad’s growing another one! But it looks like a normal baby, other than being tiny...”

Sophia made it to her feet and took a peek at the baby, and a better look at the hanging creatures. She reached to touch one then flinched and let her arm fall to her side. “Th-their skin.”

“Yeah, pretty gross. Whatever they are they look dried up or something.”

Sophia started shaking and turned back to the staircase. “I’m getting out of here!”

“We are definitely bringing this up with Dad, now!” Sean said, following his sister.

A shadow appeared at the top of the stairs. “I see we do have some things to talk about,” their father said, blocking their ascent and forcing them to backtrack to the room below.

There was shouting and crying for a few minutes until the twins finally fell silent and let their father talk.

“It’s true, I was unable to father children. Your mother talked about adopting, but then...” He pointed to the hanging grey things. “An opportunity presented itself. We could still make our own babies, well... I could make them, using those.”

“Those? Those dried up weird things? Did you make baby bats? Then where did we—”

Their father retrieved something from a table in the corner of the underground chamber. It was a transparent cube. He brought it directly under a lightbulb that dangled from the ceiling and told the twins to come closer, to see.

The cube had images inside, like photographs.

“This was with them in their spacecraft.”

“Space... so they’re aliens?” Sean asked.

“What did you think they were!” Sophia said.

“Yes, the government lab thinks they escaped and returned into space. Figured another ship came to rescue them. But... I brought them here.”

He went on to explain that he'd had the stolen alien life forms for over twenty years. He created a rudimentary communication method with them, hampered by their long episodes of stasis, but eventually learned about the photos in the cube.

“What I first thought were ordinary children,” he said pointing to a fair-haired boy and girl, “turned out to be something else.”

“Hey, is that us?” Sean asked, pointing to one of the photographs.

“No, it's... well, yes, in a matter of speaking it *is* you.”

Sophia pointed to another photo. “We're posing with some of those grey aliens. I don't remember doing that.”

“Not the you that's standing here talking to me!” their father said, his eyes lighting up now. “But the you over there!” He pointed to the aliens.

He walked over to a closed metal cabinet and pulled the doors open. “Come over here, you two!”

Frigid air escaped the cabinet and glass jars lined the shelves. Inside were miniscule speckles, floating in water. The water started to bubble, and their father slammed the doors shut again.

“Liquid nitrogen. It can't be exposed to room temperature, or the eggs—”

“Eggs,” Sophia said.

“Yes, yes. The eggs. They're from your mother. The nucleus is removed all ready to grow new kids!”

The twins looked at each other.

“Are you saying you *grew* us?” Sean asked.

So, their father explained about the cloning process. Sophia's DNA was harvested from the female alien. The other hanging being was male and provided the DNA for Sean.

“You're not really twins,” their father said. He laughed. “What else could we tell people, though? I managed to grow you in test tubes then incubate you to be ready at the same time.”

“Ready.” Sophia said. Her eyes grew dark. “You make it sound like you baked us. Like a cake. *Okay, all ready now!*”

“I don't get it. Those things don't look anything like us”, Sean said.

“The pictures, Sean! The photos: that's what these two looked like when they were young. Just like you both.”

“Are you saying we're going to turn into... that?”

“These two, are approximately eighty years old, still young in their lifespan, I think. And yes, eventually... starting in your twenties, from what I could decipher... you know the communication with them isn’t foolproof.”

Sophia said, “You’re right. I think you got the age wrong.” She rolled up her shirt sleeve exposing her arm. There were grey blemishes marking the skin. “Am I changing? What the hell am I supposed to do now? How can we live in this world if we end up looking like them?”

Sean looked stunned. “I... I haven’t gotten those marks yet. Maybe I have longer.”

“It wouldn’t be much longer, son, you both—”

“Don’t call me son!”

Sophia and Sean stormed away, to the staircase.

“Where are you going? Come back here!”

“We’re going to tell someone!” Sean shouted.

“You’re in big trouble... you... mad scientist!” Sophia said.

There was a loud *click!* And when they tried to open the door at the top of the staircase, they found it locked. Sophia turned to see the man they’d called Dad holding a remote control.

“You can’t do that,” he said.

After a session of more shouting, then pleading, Sophia and Sean fell silent, and the man told them more.

He walked over to the incubators. Not one, but two were occupied. Another set of faux twins.

“It seems you knew we were changing. Those are our replacements, aren’t they? New children, for you to start all over again. What are you planning to do with us?” Sophia said.

He told them, yes, those were to be his and his wife’s new babies. The final set. It was time for the aliens to go.

“You’re gonna kill them?” Sean asked.

“By the time these two grow up, your moth— my wife and I will be too old to raise any more.”

“How could you do this to us? Make us think we are human, only to suffer...” Sophia said.

“Don’t we have a right to be parents? And who says you’ll suffer?”

Sean sighed. “Like Sophia said...how the hell can we go outside once we change. Are you going to lock us up?” he pointed to the aliens, “string us up like those two?”

“Why, I’d never even considered that! You two were like our own children. We loved you.”

“Past tense.” Sophia said.

The man ignored her and continued. “These aliens are not suffering. They are in their natural state of hibernation, which here on Earth lasts many years, with short intervals of wakefulness in which they can’t completely function. It *only* happens on Earth. The change of atmosphere after travelling through space was too much, and hibernation is their protection. They will awaken once more soon, and this time they will leave. They informed me when they revived briefly last year of the date the ship was expected for the return journey. Twenty years they’ve been here, but to them that is but a blink. Their departure happens tonight actually. I can hardly believe you stumbled on all this, when in a few more hours....”

“They would be gone. And you’d what... kill us?” Sophia shouted.

The man shook his head, and then the creatures started to stir.

\*\*\*

It was midnight. They stood in the backyard. Sophia had looked into the eyes of the aliens and felt a warmth she’d never experienced with the man and woman who’d raised her. Sean felt it, too, it seemed as he smiled and hugged them.

The saucer-shaped ship must have been invisible, because they heard nothing and saw nothing until it had landed in the darkest part of the backyard, then the ring of lights appeared, and a hatch door opened.

The woman who had been their mother was there. She hugged them both, her temporary children, but they flinched, causing her to sob. Her husband patted Sophia and Sean on their backs, then turned to console his wife.

“What did you plan to do with the new babies?” Sophia asked.

“We’ll take good care of them. Just like you two.”

“And when they change?”

“We... we’ll think of something. We’ll be quite old then.”

The aliens stood at least a foot above everyone else. Their long legs bent strangely as they walked, like a grasshopper’s. Sophia and Sean followed them to the steps to ascend into the ship.

“I don’t think so.” Sophia said, touching fingers with the alien who’d been her DNA source. It looked like they were communicating that way... telepathically. “I don’t think you’ll grow old.”

The door folded back up and the flying saucer was sealed. The lights went out and the ship grew invisible once more. All except for the laser beams that zapped through the air from the craft.

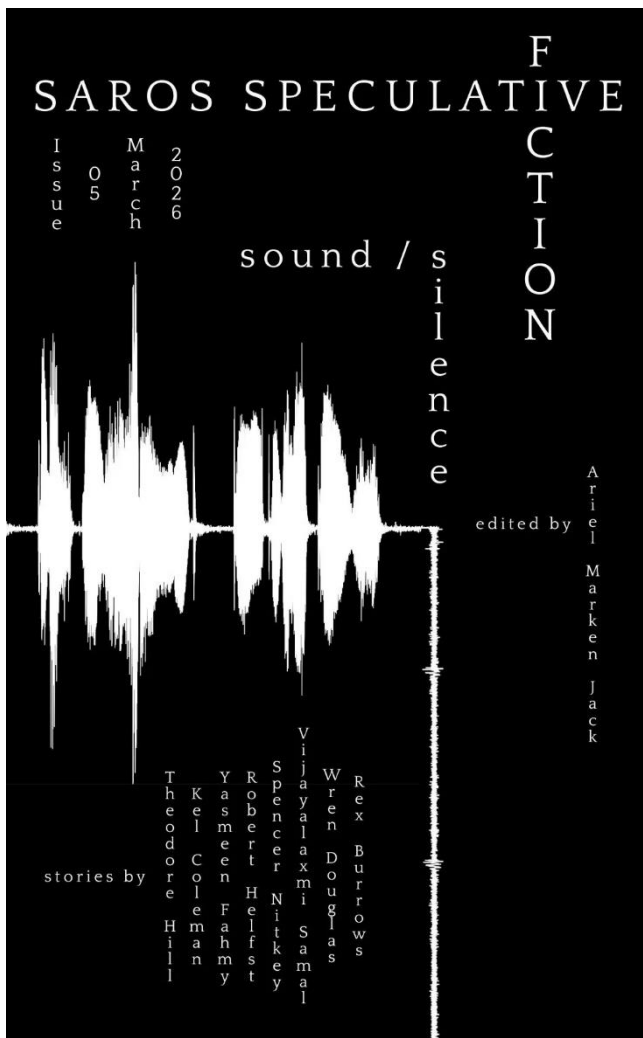
Streams of light hit the man and his wife, and they turned to smoldering piles of ash. The beams next blasted the outbuilding, and everything in it; everything below it.

Sean and Sophia would have mourned the new babies who had been growing in the incubators—had they been down there. But the aliens had already stowed the new ones aboard. The babies would be, just as Sean and Sophia were, going home to live their long alien lives.

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### SAROS SPECULATIVE FICTION MAGAZINE #5

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**Edited** — by Ariel Marken Jack

**Contents:**

*Land of Lasts* – by Theodore Hill

*On the Matter of Homo Sapiens* – by Kel Coleman

*Root Words* – by Yasmeen Fahmy

*Solitary, Not Alone* – by Robert Helfst

*[Redacted]* – by Spencer Nitkey

*Gardenias Under a Temporal Window*  
– by Vijayalaxmi Samal

*Walk with the Angels* – Wren Douglas

*This was the planet of sound* – Rex Burrows

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Find it at: < <https://sarossf.com/issues-2026/> >

# BENEATH THICK, DARK WATER

*by Angela Kenyon*

She dreams of dark shapes reaching out, grabbing at her from below. She startles awake to the panicked cries of birds, answers quickly in sounds learned from her mother so long ago. Outside, purple finches, soaked in strange orange moonlight, circle, then flutter to safety in the branches of an ancient rowan tree that shelters her cottage.

The birds' mutterings, messages from a distant place, cast a tug on the line of her connection to land and sea. The full moon pulls the tide high, uproots her from land. She steps on the winding path down to the shore. Standing stones hum into the thin air. Steady grasping beat of waves pulls her across the crackling pebbled beach to water's edge.

Salt-tinged wet chill soothes her mind, her webbed toes. She swims, at ease. There is no hurry. There is only water. Then shadows, a gathering of fluid bodies close to her. Forms billow in and out of the water, blurred edges, limbs entwined. Every sound she makes disappears in the waves. She glances back at her cottage on the cliff.

She is pulled down beneath the thick, dark water, impossible to breathe. Words not spoken but heard. "Just the sea, sweetheart. We will sink until we breathe together, and we rise together." She beholds a familiar face, eyes like dark pebbles, round and black, lidless and wide, and she is seen and known by her mother once more.

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# THE THREE HEADS FROM THE WELL

## A FAIRY TALE RETELLING

by Neile Graham

Ignoring the lingering stale-coffee scent of the mug, I gulp the peaty Scotch I just splashed there. The liquor's lava burns my body's core while the rest of me still shakes.

I'm really here. Safe and possibly sane. I scan the dead-grey ceiling and walls of the warehouse corner-cum-studio I call home, its scarred concrete flooring spattered with plaster from yet another abortive attempt at sculpture. It's no comfort. Their voices still whisper in the back of my head.

I slug down the Scotch until the rustling voices quiet. I sigh with relief, the mug clenched against my chest. I force my hands to relax, but then *their* images flash back into my mind.

The motion of *them* rising from the murky well water drew me over. I knelt on the muddy stone edge to watch until *they* broke the surface to float like ducklings, bobbing amidst the scum and yellowed leaves.

Expectant, then speaking. Breathless, of course, because *they* had no lungs to press air past the alabaster whiteness of their lips. *They* mewed like kittens. I couldn't tear my eyes away. I tried to make out their words, but would have to move closer to hear, and as soon as that thought came, I was doing it. I laid my cheek against the well's stone lip. The closest one came closer yet, until the words from his mouth puffed against my face, his musty breath scented with stagnant water.

He sang:

Wash me and comb me,  
And lay me down easy,  
Gently on the green bank to dry,  
That I may look comely  
When folk do pass by.

Suddenly I realized where I was. What I seemed to be hearing and seeing. I skittered to my feet. Ran home to my studio. Drank my emergency Scotch. That wasn't the last of it, of course.

\*\*\*

There's something compelling about letting things just happen. Like sitting alone afternoons in the Old Tin Cup Café nursing my coffee as long as I could manage not to feel embarrassed about it, in my plaster-smearred jeans and T-shirt, chatting occasionally with the regulars, sketching whatever occurred inside and out. I floundered into that. And my daily encounter with the old man bumming cigarettes on the corner. I always gave him three or four from a pack I bought for him.

That was exactly the way I wandered into that vacant, forested lot. I'd eyeballed it for weeks because the paths were so overgrown, but if I could cut through it would take three blocks off my route home. I loved the look of the thick trees above the dense undergrowth. Even knowing I was in the city now and it wasn't exactly safe, I kept wanting to explore.

It was dusk but I took a deep breath and waded in, stubborn enough to push through a path entangled with blackberry vines, not caring that they tore at my clothes and hair. Fuelled by determination, I finally pushed through the worst of the vines into the central section of the lot.

Overgrown bushes vied for light with neglected flowering and fruiting trees, my boots slithering through years of their produce. A wilderness, a whole other decaying antique world, hidden from the lights and traffic and rushing winter pedestrians. I wandered amidst the sprawling rosebushes in a dream, losing all sense of direction, twisting this way then that around the vines and low branches and scattershot hedges.

Then my surprise at the well there, and then once again as the heads rose from the murky depths.

It was dark—the streetlights didn't penetrate the thickness of the trees. How could I see them anyway?

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So, I swore off abandoned lots and my coffee shop afternoons. I even stopped buying cigarettes and shoved my plaster into my one cupboard under the one sink.

I went downtown. Instead of dragging my portfolio to the galleries, I propped my ancient laptop on La Diva Coffee's polished hightop table and launched myself onto the internet, where I filled out job applications like a pro, completing an infinity of forms and uploading résumés for every likely job I found. And a few unlikely, grateful that the screening bots couldn't see the charcoal still clouding my fingers or the plaster bits on even my best jeans. I

wondered if even my electronic files would hint at all at my studio life. Someone must want to hire a woman who couldn't type or spell and whose résumé consisted of bouts of waitressing and an MFA instead of an MBA.

Then the barista, much younger and hipper than me, finally succeeded in herding me outside. I turned homewards into a fresh rain, the drops thick and icy. Just as I was cursing that I hadn't brought my overcoat I passed the Old Tin Cup Coffeeshop, so I retraced my steps and went in. Just to get out of the rain, I told myself. Besides, I was hungry and it was lunch time, and Colin-the-barista sold great hummus sandwiches for cheap.

I ordered a mocha with my sandwich and tried to settle in to dry off. Fred-the-juice-truck-driver, a long-haired writer who was usually sympathetic, made a few cracks about how my fancy jeans weren't too different from my usual work-spattered ones. I rolled the sandwich into a napkin and scrounged a garbage bag from Colin. Holding the bag over my head and shoulders, I scurried along the sidewalk home, thick-headed and cranky and a little wintry gray myself.

I bumped into the old man before I saw him. He nearly teetered over.

"Sorry." I steadied him. "I wasn't looking where I was going. Cigarette?" I shuffled one-handed through my carryall, and instead of cigarettes, found the sandwich. "Would you like this? I guess I'm out of cigarettes."

He nodded and I handed the napkin to him.

"Thank you," he said, pushing the paper back and biting in. I noticed for the first time how clean his hands and nails were, and how white his teeth for a man who wore cast-offs and as far as I could tell lived on the street. He was out there whenever I happened by, at least. He didn't smell either, despite the be-grimed look of his ill-fitting, tattered clothes.

*His business.* I shook my head and began walking down the street.

A firm hand grabbed my arm.

Surprised and a little angry, I turned and glared. "Yes?" I said coldly, then instantly regretted it when the smile dropped from his face, and he let my arm go.

"Sorry, you scared me. I didn't mean to be rude."

"I only wanted to thank you. And tell you something."

"Of course," I said. "Tell me what?"

He swallowed deeply. "The heads?"

I stared. I thought I'd managed to forget them, but the moment he mentioned them their voices rose in volume in the back of my mind. I realized they'd been whispering there since I saw them. I shivered.

“When they speak you must do whatever they require.”

“Must?” The shiver turned into an arrow of ice from my spine to my stomach. I could see their faces turned up to mine and hear their small voices.

“If it’s truly your fortune you seek here, then do it.”

Seeking my fortune? I’d laughed about it when I left my hometown for the city, left the uneasy security of my home with my father and stepmother. They were both relieved to see the back of me after I’d spent my university years in their house.

The old man passed me his cane. “Here, take this. There is a thick thorny hedge before you, but this stick will take you through. Sit at the brink of the well and the heads will come. Listen to what they say and do it.”

“No, no,” I pushed the stick back into his hands. “I can’t touch them, and I can’t take your cane!”

He stiffened his shoulders. “Take it.”

I looked at him—he suddenly looked younger and stronger, or maybe just stronger, which made him appear younger.

“Take it!” He pushed it back into my hand. “I’ll take this in trade.” He took my garbage bag.

I’d forgotten the rain. “Of course,” I said. If he needed the bag he could have it. My clothes were wet anyway. I could return the cane the next time I saw him.

“Listen to me,” he said. “You heard what I said? Promise? Do you promise?”

“Yes,” I said, meaning that over the buzzing of the heads’ voices, I’d heard him. “Yes.”

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So, I took the old man’s stick and headed home, but when the rain didn’t slacken and I reached the tangle of blackberry vines that guarded the vacant lot, I stood there a moment. The voices hadn’t slackened either. I whacked the cane against the briars to silence them—and the vines pulled back, cowering from the stick. I prodded it in further, and they melted away, making a path I had to follow.

The rain stopped suddenly under the canopy of trees, and the air brightened as though the sun had finally broken through the clouds. A bird sang. Truly. A songbird like you’d never hear in winter and I thought for a moment that someone’s canary had escaped, but the bird I glimpsed was

brown and nondescript. I walked farther in, marvelling as how someone had, in the short time since I'd first been there, transformed the garden.

The slurry of rotten fruit and leaves was gone, and blades of grass pushed up from the dirt. The fruit trees and rose bushes and hedges weren't exactly tamed—whoever had done this had been too smart to ruin their ragged beauty by making this into a formal garden—but even my untrained eye could see how lovely it would be come spring. It was starkly pleasing even now, and my fingers began to itch for my charcoal. In my employment-seeking zeal I'd taken my drawing materials out of my carryall, but I still had a pen and a couple receipts to draw on the back of. I parked myself on the convenient vantage of a garden bench and worked until my hand cramped and the light began to fail.

In the shadows, the yard lost its sense of a place that someone had attended to and became a presence of its own. The voices gnawed at my mind again, and I knew I wouldn't find my way out of the garden without passing the well. To hell with it. I slung my carryall over my shoulder and grabbed the cane. At least if I had to confront the heads again, I'd have this to protect me.

Then I laughed—what could the heads do to me anyway? Bodiless, floating in scummy well-water, what powers could they possibly have? They were helpless. Then I thought of how they'd haunted me, and my fist knotted around the firm wood of the cane. I passed through the bushes like sailing on a smooth lake.

The well was before me. The unknown gardener had scrubbed the edge down to clean stone and mortar, and somehow, too, cleared the water. I sat and stared into it. The water was so deep, I found myself looking deeper, waiting, and there they were, rising through the clarity of the water towards me, floating up again like ducklings, their voices like wind:

Wash me and comb me,  
And lay me down easy,  
Gently on the green bank to dry,  
That I may look comely  
When folk do pass by.

I reached out for the closest, but as it approached nearly drew back my hand. Silence. They had stopped singing. I had to decide.

I lifted the first head out of the water. Its weight in my arms was solid and centered as a baby. The other two heads, still bobbing in the water, sighed into the silence. I rested the head on the well's stone lip, rooted for and found my comb, easing tangles out of his long hair, and arranged it. Softly as I could, I cleaned and dried his face with a tissue. The second head was female, and

when I dried her face I tinted her lips with lipstick scrounged from the bottom of my bag, then dug out blush and eye makeup. The third, a boy, I dried and straightened as best I could. Then I moved back to look at my handiwork, brushing eyebrow hairs in line here, moving a lock of hair back there, as though they were one of my artworks. I fussed with them until I could think of nothing else to do then drew back, feeling as though I'd been treating them like dolls or something dead, but their flesh was lifelike under my hands, felt as real as my own.

Abruptly the first head spoke. I'd been so rapt in my cleaning I'd forgotten they could speak. "What fate shall we weird for this woman who has used us so kindly?"

A wry smile twisted the woman's painted lips. "Well, she did pass us by once."

The boy's voice was eager. "But she returned."

"She tarried, scratching with her pen and paper," the woman said.

"But she put them aside and came to our well. And look at us," the boy whispered. "I weird her to be so beautiful that she shall charm the most powerful prince in the land."

"But—" I tried to interrupt. I was ignored.

"I weird her a voice sweeter than the nightingale," said the woman. "And lips brighter than a cherry's."

My lips tingled as she spoke.

"I weird her so fortunate that she shall become queen to the greatest prince that reigns."

"Um, thanks," I said. "I wouldn't mind meeting someone, but I don't want to marry royalty or anything like that." I couldn't help the media images of Kate Middleton and Meghan Markle that muddled my mind. "Their lives seem pretty horrible. And I'm happy enough with my face and voice."

The heads looked so disappointed I nearly relented. "But good fortune, I could use some of that."

They brightened.

"I'm an artist, you see, and artists need plenty of luck."

They looked at my hands as though they hadn't noticed the roughness of the fingers that had cleaned them.

The boy spoke first. "I weird your hands sureness and lasting strength."

The woman pondered a moment. "I weird your hands bring you good fortune, slowly for your stubbornness but truly for your ultimate kindness."

The man spoke. “I weird that your mind’s conception controls utterly whatever your hands create.”

\*\*\*

And here I am, the Scotch sinking warm into my bones, but still haunted by their cat-whisper voices, their freshened faces, I glance around at the lopsided sculptures cluttering my studio. It’s the well of my own despair.

Or was—my hands unclench from the empty mug. I get up and push all that old work against the wall. Throw a tarp over. Then at the table I set all my tools and materials in a tidy line. First, a framework of wire, carefully shaped, then layers of cheesecloth to cover it. I hear the voices: wash me and comb me. I start mixing my plaster.

I think I will start with the boy.

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### **Polar Borealis #39 – July 2026**

Published by R. Graeme Cameron, Polar Borealis features cover art and 19 speculative fiction genre poems and short stories. Issue #39 cover: to be determined.

The 39th issue contains *poetry* by Manuela Amiouny, Carolyn Clink, David Clink, Renee Cronley, Michèle Laframboise, Bella Malardi, Rhonda Parrish, J.J. Steinfeld, and Melissa Yi.

And *short fiction* by M.L.D. Curelas, Robert Dawson, David Jon Fulier, Connor Johnstone, Madelaine Pelletier, Ward Pycock, Mark Silcox, K.T. Wagner, and Russell Wallace.

Will be available for free download in July 2026.

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### **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](#) >

## WARNING!

*by Bernadette Gabay Dyer*

There was a house on the moon,  
Tell no one.  
For we are not supposed to know of it.  
It had a roof, and an opening,  
That might have been a door,  
Or perhaps a window.  
There's difficulty seeing it clearly.  
Things are out of focus from here,  
It has caused a sensation in scientific circles,  
Who are supposed to be in the know;  
Concerning the far side of the moon,  
That never faces earth  
They are aware that craters abound there,  
Punctuating the freezing landscape  
Like minefields gone insane.

Who built that house, we wonder?  
Who made it to the moon before us?  
And whose construction tools raised this edifice up from dust?  
Word has escaped, for it is said  
Missions have been sent  
To inspect, investigate, disinfect, and perhaps dismantle,  
This house, so strangely out of place,  
In that ancient, cold terrain.  
No doubt, disguised by obscure darkness.  
To perhaps resemble  
A beacon of hope,  
In an environment devoid of living things,  
And atmospheres, unnaturally still,  
Where astronauts once bounced about,  
As though in kindergarten.  
Their scampering perhaps helped to relieve  
Fear of the deadly endless airless blackness,  
and persistent thoughts of oblivion,

With Earth so far away, yet luminous,  
Still triggering memories of home,  
Where their evening tables welcomed  
Platters and bowls chock full of slaughtered  
Animals, and harvested plants to sustain their own survival.

In the protective arms of the moon,  
And fearless of storms, tremors and quakes,  
Nothing would disturb the mining they vowed to undertake.  
For the silent salient moon seemed to promise tranquility,  
Regardless of the disturbing presence of a mere house.

Would the being that built that house have known  
That the patient moon had waited so long,  
Until the house appeared to lean into a wind  
That wasn't even there.  
No welcome mat, no flowers at the window,  
As zillions of miles away,  
Scientific circles hold collective breath in wonder,  
Squinting to better view the house's exterior,  
As they anticipate its interior,  
Afraid to look away, lest they miss a detail,  
Even as a rope metallic and silver,  
A camera mounted at its head,  
Snaked and coiled through moon dust,  
As though alive and slithering,  
With intent bent on entering that godforsaken house,  
As it charged ahead.

Taken by surprise, by its determination,  
We the scientific circle felt deprived of senses,  
Was there a violent splash?  
Did anyone see a mighty flash,  
or experience our first sound of moon thunder?  
It all eludes the watchers,  
For only sinister silence reigns upon the plains of the moon.  
Those deserted plains that extend as far as the baying cratered horizon,  
That is neither near nor far.

Human gasps penetrate the interminable miles of space,  
Frantic with imagining,  
As the mounted camera plunged.  
All eyes are tight shut, though safely distant,  
From the mechanism, and the possibility  
of catastrophe.  
Peering under lashes, and riveted to screens,  
We the scientific community, cannot but helplessly watch  
As the trusty camera mounted rope  
Disappeared out of our range.

Dust began to gather,  
At first quiet slowly,  
Then it picked up speed, and spread, then rose higher and higher,  
Reminiscent of ignited forest fires,  
Only to become a massive cloud, so dense, and so dark,  
Vision was obliterated,  
As dust clouds in mere moments, had become twenty stories higher.

Like a beast gone hungry for far too long,  
That dust, now a mountain tall,  
Swallowed the rope, the engineers, their vehicles and equipment.  
And in a moment of sustained horror, the house too was gone!  
The moon vibrated and wheezed, and the sound resonated,  
Like a gong, somehow gone wrong,  
Before it once again was silenced in sleep.

But we must tell no one, of this consequence,  
Not even a wandering moon beam,  
For we are not supposed to know.

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# SHIMGALA'WA

*by Ken Deepro*

We had just tucked in the kids when the world started shaking. Walls shuddered and cupboards clattered as their contents spilled to the floor. When the windows shattered, the children were back, screaming for their mother.

“There is nothing to fear,” I yelled over the din, but the words rang hollow even to me.

I squeezed my wife’s hand before bolting outside to join an assembling throng in the village square. We all stared upwards, where the source of our terror hung in a dusk-stained sky.

It was something no nightmare could conjure.

A thunderous roar engulfed the valley while a mountain, or perhaps some unholy creature, fell from the heavens towards the peak of our hill. From its belly spewed five sticks of blue-white fire which set the orchards ablaze as they neared. When fire met earth, the ground exploded, filling the air with branches and turf, raining it down on all those who witnessed.

And through it all, the descent continued.

The impact had been a violent affair, knocking all but the strongest off their feet. It brought an end to the deafening howl, but the weeping of women and children held a terror all its own; the sickening truth that life here would never be the same.

And now, in the harsh light of day, I stand at the base of the hill beneath a layer of dread more imposing than the monster itself. Neither carved from stone nor beast of flesh, it appears made of iron. *But how can this be?* Such a thing could only be formed in a forge the size of the sun with hammers wielded by gods.

“What is it, Asaeto?”

The question comes from our young cleric, one of the group now forming a safe distance at my back. What he asks is absurd, for no answer exists. Surely, this is more of his realm than mine. I dismiss the query with a wave and a scowl.

I turn back to the hill and the evil at its crest. Someone must check the orchards and crops to see what remains, and I have been chosen.

A thousand times I have made this climb, yet never before has it been this hard. It is not fear that turns my feet to stone, but an invisible force that stiffens the air, rendering an arduous task impossible. It’s as if the menace at

the top of the hill casts a curtain of magic, the effects of which deepen with each step I take.

My head spins, heart pounds, stomach churns. Sweat rolls from every pore. My body screams for me to stop, but I refuse to let this hideous thing take away what is ours.

Steeling myself, in both body and soul, I lunge forward with one powerful stride, then drop to my knees and retch.

\*\*\*

It's the feeling of failure that is hardest to bear. This ship was built to explore the cosmos, but here it sits, stuck in the mud, the only place it will ever be. Bad luck played a part, but I make no excuse. As jmnar, the fault lies with me.

It began with such promise. A glorious launch, forty years of frozen sleep, and Crew One thawing to all systems clear. But at odds so long they were not worth weighing, we emerged from the jump in the path of a star, only heartbeats from death.

I rolled the ship hard, exposing the shield, then fired port thrusters full. Our world became only shaking and noise. We scraped the corona, but quick wits and speed saw us through.

Revelations came next, each one a spike through my heart. Untold light years off course. Eight thrusters in ten beyond repair. A fifth of our air and half our water vented to space. Two-thirds of the crew dead in their pods.

Then, one ray of hope. A planet was found. Liquid water and oxygen; ours for the taking if a wounded ship can make orbit. But it was not to be. The atmosphere grabbed and took hold, making a plunge to the surface a certainty. Our last five thrusters kept us straight and true, but left a hard landing, embedding us here 'til the end of time.

"Jmnar Grek, I have a report."

An awkward twist sees me facing my jmzen. He has cobbled his chair to a gen-bot, the machines we rely on for everything here.

"Proceed, young man. Only good news, I hope."

"Indeed, sir," he replies, trying his best at a smile. "A tank has been built. We can now catch the water that falls from the sky."

This planet offers so many blessings, yet one fateful curse. Plentiful water with air so much like home, but at twice the gravity, each moment brings pain. To move is to suffer; to fall is to break. The effort required to merely exist is too much to ask of bodies like ours.

Today we are twelve, but soon we'll be joined by two hundred more, waking from an icy slumber. I dread the moment I tell them, each one in turn, that the life they had planned is not the one they will live.

But this is for another time. "Continue, jmzen."

"All fuel rods onboard are intact, but our power draw sits at point oh-three percent." Even his shrug seems to hurt.

"So, we can run the reactor a thousand lifetimes," I joke.

"That *will* upset the locals, sir. It appears they struggle with the Grmdal Effect."

I noticed this too while watching the feeds. "Well, I hope they adapt, son. I suspect we'll be neighbours for a very long time."

\*\*\*

The Hakari boy turns eight today. I watch him jostle with friends at the base of the hill, bracing for his maiden climb. With his chukchuk in one hand and a rock in the other, he draws a steadying breath before a confident stride sees him off.

It's an occasion for children, of course, but the women busy themselves with outdoor chores so we can watch the ascent from afar. I smile as I pin a damp shirt to the line. How silly we are to build a tradition around such a thing. But it's a part of us now, with far more born in its shadow than were here on the day it arrived.

Shingala'wa, we call it—*the devil's gift*—though I don't know why. It is hardly a gift and to come from *him* feels a reach. Many fear the ominous hulk, say our kids should not challenge its veil of ill will. They quake when a shadow sweeps past its window and flee from its spawn, those small metal birds that pester and follow.

But I think them fools. To not understand should be different than fear. For all of my life, plus my mother's too, it has loomed from above, but has it caused us real harm? I simply accept that it's here and leave those more schooled to figure out why.

Every spring they arrive on a column of horses. Scholars and clerics bring their gadgets and relics to crack its inscrutable shell. But always they fail, bested by children who taunt from above, and by a margin that widens each year.

A chant from the kids brings me back to the climb. I watch the boy stop to finger a chukchuk, his chest puffed out with pride. From the paint and the ribbons, I can see it's his mother's. I glance down the slope, noting her worry,

for with his next step she can no longer reach him. She turns to me. A silent plea fills her eyes—*please help if he needs it*. I nod in reply—*I will*.

The village half emptied on the day it arrived, and those who remained moved far from the hill. Except for my granddad, that is. “Asaeto the Stubborn” they called him, building his house as close to the thing as his stomach could bear. So now we are favoured, it allowing us closer than others can go.

The boy moves ten paces before the magic takes hold, turning him green as the grass. He drops to a knee, places his stake, and drives it home with the rock. It’s a respectable mark, but well short of mine.

My daughter chooses this moment to stir, so I rub my belly to soothe her. “Be patient, dear Sooki,” I tell her. “You will thrive, but you must wait your turn.”

\*\*\*

This is no life—stuck in a can on an endless loop, each day a clone of the last. We breathe dank, lifeless air; eat grey, tasteless food; and every sound echoes from cold, metal walls. Often I wish my parents had been among those two out of three, lost in the crash and fed to recyclers on the very first day.

They named me Daknal—*first born*—the first of many to start life in this tomb. The jmnar believes our kind should continue, but I think he’s wrong. Legs thicker, shoulders wider, each generation a hand shorter – is it even *our* species we save? Soon we’ll share more with the apes down the hill than those who embarked on this quest.

We were meant to explore, but instead we sit, with no hope of anything more. No rescue is coming; that much is sure. We travelled so fast for so long in a direction so far from true, our location will never be known. When our people discover we’re not where we should be, they’ll consider us lost, an ill-fated blip on their path to the stars.

There is talk of a beacon. It could be launched into orbit to shout across space: *we are here!* But it’s doubtful our voice would ever be heard, and if it was, the response likely lifetimes away. For most of us here, that is reason enough not to try.

We are not an industrious breed. Those who first crewed this ship were clever and driven and bold, but life here has silenced those traits. What we have are machines. They walk for us, lift for us, clean for us, even think for us, printing all that we need save a reason to be.

So, with half my life lived, yet still decades to go, I waste away days in the pool. What had once been a hangar is now a lagoon, our only escape from the unyielding weight of this world. I am joined here by hundreds, just floating and watching the feeds.

It's the lives of the locals that fill up our screens. We watch and we listen, claim our safety is in peril, but everyone knows that's a lie. Our enemy here is boredom. We put cameras in all the places they meet and even hound them with drones, all to allay our unquenchable need to fill hours of nothing with something.

We think ourselves better, of course. To us, they are but beasts in the wild, lighting the night with fiery sticks and building their boats out of trees.

Yet, part of us fears them, awed by the way they move with such ease, immune to the pull of this place. When I note the approach of their colourful stakes, an unsettling question takes hold. What shall we do when the stars of our show interrupt with a knock at the door?

\*\*\*

I stand atop the world, moved, as always, by a view that belongs only to me. I'm at the behemoth's highest point, my favourite place to be, the one I chose to plant my chukchuk seven years ago to the day.

I recall the event as if it just happened. The mood was electric, expectations sky-high. My mother, Sooki, had been a legend, setting a bar no other could touch.

*Might Toshi prevail?*

That was the question on everyone's lips as I took my first step. When I reached my mom's mark, my leg muscles raged, but from the pitch of the hill, not some mystical power. I forged further ahead, always on guard for that impassable shroud I would never encounter.

I can still hear the cheers when my hand touched on metal. The crowd howled and waved, calling me back to where I'd be safer. But I wanted more. Ladders and footholds riddled the beast, baiting me onward.

"If you want me to stop, come get me," I yelled, then stowed my rock and my chukchuk before resuming the climb.

It was the sight of the door that stopped my advance. We had all seen the shadows, knew something lived in it, yet I'd never considered they might have a way out.

*Or me a way in?*

I pulled out the rock and clanged loudly three times. My heart raced while I waited, but I received no reply. *They're likely too busy*, I'd thought, so upwards I pushed until reaching the top.

Now, I begin every day with three knocks on the door, then prowl awhile, peeking in windows just hoping to meet one. But they're shy and they're quick, so all I have seen up 'til now are scattering chairs and receding shadows.

I worried one time that I'd chased them away. It was late in the evening when a roar filled the air and a finger of fire soared from the hill to the heavens. But all that has changed since that day is we have a new star, one that's moving, not frozen in place.

A familiar buzz brings me back to the present. I hold out a finger and wait. Soon, a dazzling insect alights, one with clockwork wings and a lone glass eye. I'm not sure what it is, but over the years it's become my best friend in the world.

"Hello, Little Bug. I'm so glad you found me. You're right! I should have been working by now."

When I first topped this hill, I noticed the orchards; the trees twisted and tangled, for decades unkept. So, now it is my job to tend them. I plant and I prune and I pick, but not on this day.

"It's my birthday, dear friend, and a special one too. They'll throw me a party with dancing and treats. The whole village will be there—you really must come."

\*\*\*

I could never attend, but I did watch on screen; the party they held for the boy.

*Toshi – the most beautiful boy on this world.*

I first saw him on the village square feed; a kid among elders, all clad in white robes and moving as one. So, I joined in too, mirroring every move that he made. I was a skinny young girl, but I strove to be strong just like him.

The day of his climb was the best of my life. A feeling of terror ripped through the ship when he touched a hand to our hull. Even those on the Beacon Team were scared from the pool to complete their long-simmering scheme. But I was ecstatic, overflowing with hope that maybe one day we could meet.

I wait for him now, alone in an airlock that's really a door, for we've been breathing their air for years. When he knocks, I could answer. *The lever's right here!* But my arms remain fixed at my side.

I am ever so different, you see. I'm too thin and too pale. My mauve eyes, a bit big, while my hair is messy and silver. What keeps me in place, prevents me from acting, is the fear he might find me a monster.

So, I start each day here, praying for courage that never arrives. Next, I do chores. I am the strongest one on this vessel, by far, so the lazy and weak keep me busy. They ask me to fix things or find things or fetch things, always starting with "Qai, would you mind..."

And then comes my favourite part of the day. I'll pilot my drone, watch as he works. He speaks to me always, calls me his friend. I learn all about trees and the fruit and the soil, but also his hopes and his dreams. It makes my heart—

*Clang! Clang! Clang!*

He is here. Oh please, let this be the day.

An image of Daknal pops into my mind. He died this past spring; bitter and old, every moment of life he spent in this box. *No!* I will not let that happen to me. My hand clutches the lever and throws.

*Hssssssssssssssssssssssss*

I step through the door and my senses explode. The sun is too bright, the air is so fast, the smells are like nothing before... and Toshi is here. He backs away slowly. I must do something now, or he'll run away screaming.

"Hello."

The word tastes odd on my tongue; a language learned yet never spoken. He slows his retreat, and his expression grows softer. I take a step forward, extending my arms with palms facing up, for I've noticed that this is their way.

He stops and he smiles; a smile so joyful, in the instant I see it, I know that my life will be more. My heart skips as he nears, then leaps when his hands touch on mine.

"Hello."

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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](#) >

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

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### **Lily Blaze**

Lily is an author and a former graphic designer. She's lived in four Canadian cities, enjoyed many adventures across North America, then settled in the Prairies.

Having developed disabilities in 2004, Lily's focus has changed, and now she dedicates her time to a writing career. Her story "The Lonely Mr. Fish" was published in *Polar Borealis Magazine* (#7, Oct/Nov 2018).

Website: <https://www.lilyblaze.art/>

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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 <http://linktr.ee/clemenstation>

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### **Jason Deeprise**

Jason was in grade 8 when he started poring over YouTube tutorials to teach himself Blender. By high school, he was competing in the Skills Canada 3D Animation competition at both the provincial and national levels. He even took a little time out to teach his old man how to use Blender. Currently, he is a first-year engineering student at the University of Calgary.

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## **Ken Deeprise**

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

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## **Bernadette Gabay Dyer**

Bernadette is a member of SF Canada, as well of the Writers Union of Canada. She is a novelist, a poet, a short story writer and a storyteller, as well as an artist, who resides in Toronto and recently retired from Toronto Public Libraries. Her latest publications are a poetry collection, titled *Stone Woman*, and a short story collection titled *Segovia Stories*, both published in 2022.

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## **Greg Fewer**

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

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## **Rebecca Franklyn**

Rebecca writes from Vancouver, British Columbia. Her work has won Writer's Digest Short Story awards and is published in *Chicken Soup for the*

*Soul, Polar Borealis, and Polar Starlight*. She writes across multiple genres and age categories. She can be found on Instagram [@onelifetowrite](#).

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### **Neile Graham**

Neile is Canadian by birth and inclination, though she has lived in the U.S. (mostly Seattle, so she's leaning toward the border) for many years. She writes both fiction and poetry and is currently concentrating on plotting the build-out of her fantasy romance empire. Her poetry has been published in Canada, the U.S., and the U.K. and on the internet. She has four collections, most recently *The Walk She Takes*, a idiosyncratic travelogue of Scotland which includes ghosts, ruins of all kinds, and a landlady named Venus.

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### **Margaret A. Hanson**

Margaret is a reformed chemist turned writer. She works a data analysis job no one understands by day and tries to convince animated costumes to obey the laws of physics by night. She is currently located somewhere in an obscure Canadian province with her husband, son and two demanding cats.

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### **Nissa Harlow**

Nissa lives in British Columbia, Canada, where she dreams up strange stories and writes some of them down. Her short fiction has appeared in *Scary Stories Whispered in the Rain*, *Space Squid*, and *Tales of Galactic Pest Control*. She is also the author of a number of novels and novellas, all embellished with a touch of the fantastic. You can find her online at [nissaharlow.com](#).

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## **Sandra Kasturi**

Sandra is an award-winning editor, poet, and writer, with over twenty-five years of freelance editing experience. Her writing has been published in various places, including *The New Quarterly*, *Rattle*, *CNQ*, *Prairie Fire*, *ARC Magazine*, *Taddle Creek*, and *80! Memories & Reflections on Ursula K. Le Guin*. Her two poetry collections are: *The Animal Bridegroom* and *Come Late to the Love of Birds*.

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## **Angela Kenyon**

Born in Manchester, England then exported to Calgary as an angry teenager, Angela promptly dropped out of high school and spent seven years, on and off, hitchhiking through three continents before finally washing up in Vancouver. These days she writes poetry, fiction, and memoir from a happy housing co-operative in East Vancouver. She placed first in Creative Non-Fiction in the 2023 Writers' Contest held by the BC Federation of Writers. Her story "This Boy" appears in Vol. 3 of the *Roots to Branches Anthology*. Her poetry has appeared recently in the *Compose Anthology* from the Delta Literary Arts Society, *SAPP* magazine, and *WordPlay at Work* magazine.

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## **Marie-Hélène Lebeault**

Marie-Hélène is a Canadian speculative fiction author whose work spans over forty books, a dozen anthologies and countless short stories. Her short fiction, published by *Dirty Magick*, *Chortle*, *Quest*, *Protocolized*, *Dreamforge* and *Polar Borealis*, dwells on identity, memory, and the quiet shifts that reshape a life. She enjoys wandering new landscapes, both real and imagined, always searching for the stories tucked between the cracks. Find her at [www.mhlebeault.com](http://www.mhlebeault.com).

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## **Lene MacLeod**

Lene writes dark fiction, quiet horror, SFF, and poetry in Ontario. 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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## **Derek Newman-Stille**

Derek (they/them) is a Queer, Nonbinary, Disabled, Fat, Femme settler Canadian (Turtle Island) author, poet, academic, editor, visual artist, and activist. They are the 9-time Aurora Award-winning creator of the digital humanities site “Speculating Canada” and the associated radio show. They frequently use fantasy and science fiction as a means of elucidating possibilities and potentials, reimagining the way that we situate identities and ideas. Derek has published poetry in fora such as *Fat Studies In Canada: (Re) Mapping The Field* (Inanna) and *Whispers Between Fairies* (Renaissance Press), performed and published poetry for Artsweek Peterborough's *SHIFT: Post-Code Tour*, and performed poetry for Peterborough's *Arts Ability: Taking the Stage*.

In addition, Derek has published short fiction in *Dark Waters* (Poise and Pen Publishing), and *Nothing Without Us* (Renaissance Press). They have edited the collections *Over the Rainbow: Folk and Fairy Tales from the Margins* (Exile), and *We Shall Be Monsters* (Renaissance Press). Additionally, they and Nathan Frechette co-published their collection of short fiction *Whispers Between Fairies* (Renaissance Press).

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## **Andy Taylor**

Andy has been a reader and writer of speculative fiction from an early age thanks in no small part to his mother’s frequent trips to the public library with her kids. Andy is a member of The Writers’ Union of Canada, past president and member of the Sudbury Writers’ Guild, a graduate of the Viable Paradise writing workshop and Playwright’s Junction workshop,

and a member of CODEX. Originally from Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Andy currently resides in Sudbury, Ontario, with his family.

His fiction has appeared in *Nature: Futures*, *Polar Borealis*, *On Spec*, *FictionVale* and on the streets of Sudbury. Visit him at [www.SooGuy.com](http://www.SooGuy.com) or on BlueSky at @sooguy68.bsky.social

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### **H.M. Warsame**

H.M. is a writer and poet based in Ottawa, Ontario. Her poems have appeared in *Iceblink Literary Magazine*, *Clepsydra Literary and Art Magazine*, and *Other Words: An International Journal of Creative Writing*. You can find her at <https://hwarsame.wordpress.com/>.

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### **R.A. Willis**

Robert is an emerging author who lives with his family and cats in Nanaimo, British Columbia, where he writes science fiction and fantasy. He is currently learning how to behave in poetry. His work includes six published short stories and four poems, with several longer projects underway, including fantasy and urban fantasy novels and a pair of science fiction collections. A website is in progress.

An Emeritus Professor of Management—among numerous other, past jobs—he spends his non-writing hours listening to every genre of music he can find while drinking coffee and considering far too many new ideas.

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### **Melissa Yi**

Melissa is an emergency room doctor who can't stop writing. Her twelve weird, Lovecraftian poems appear in *Cthulhu's Cheerleader* (<https://books2read.com/b/cheer>), published in 2025. Melissa won the 2023

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

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

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

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### **Excerpt from R. Graeme Cameron’s *Shatter Dark***

“Feeling good this morning?” Myriad inquired. Her face was buoyant, positively cherubic. And what a beautifully embroidered tunic she was wearing! I pointed wordlessly at it.

“This?” she said, grasping the edges to fully display the colourful design. “Don’t you recognise her? A full-length portrait of Xochiquetzal. The emperor gave it to me. Said it suits me.”

I grabbed the nearest pitcher of water. My forehead felt thirsty again. Only way I can describe it. “No doubt a reward for your display yesterday.”

She dropped to her knees beside me. “Feeling jealous?”

I refused to look her in the face. “You wouldn’t make love to me in front of the passengers on the airplane, but screwing Tlaloc before thousands of onlookers was perfectly fine?”

“I was just following protocol. When in Pochtlan, etc.”

“I don’t like it. Don’t you feel anything for me? Anything at all?”

“Of course I do, but...” Her face clouded over. All hint of levity was gone. Damn it, she was getting serious. “You know I don’t like fooling around with virgins. Something shameful in that. I prefer virile, experienced men.”

“And here I am,” Tlaloc thundered, suddenly looming over us. He literally thumped his chest. Who does that? “Everybody happy? I feel great,” he said, his grin broad enough to bridge a river. He hauled Myriad to her feet and kissed her.