

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #39 – July 2026)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

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

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Poem – \$10.00

Cover Illustration – \$40.00

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< The Graeme >

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EDITORIAL

Thus finishes the tenth year of publication for Polar Borealis Magazine. Seems like only yesterday I was contemplating putting together a first issue and wondering if anybody would be interested in submitting to it, let alone reading it.

In 39 issues I have published 39 wonderful covers, 345 poems, and 361 stories. Not bad for a niche market magazine catering to beginning writers. For this I received 5 Aurora Awards in a row before asking the Awards Committee to permanently keep me off the nominations list to give other people a chance. After all, I'm not in this for money, fame or glory. I just get a kick out of promoting Canadian SF literature. That's my retirement shtick. It's what I do for fun. Heck of a hobby.

Is Polar Borealis a role model for the industry? Possibly so, given the increasing difficulty magazines face in squeezing profit out of a diminishing market. I don't charge anything. The magazine is available online for free download. As long as my pension income and occasional donations support my single-issue budget of \$300 I am immune to market forces and can carry on publishing whatever I like. An enviable position for any editor.

Of course, I can offer only token payment. So, why would anyone submit? Last time I checked Polar Borealis was being read in 132 countries. Pretty good market spread. Still only adds up to about 3,000 plus readers per issue over a span of many months, but that's better than nothing. Besides, a token payment is still a payment. That puts my contributors in the professional category for Aurora awards. A decent number have been nominated. Several have won. My rates may suck, but the possibility of winning an Aurora is a worthy goal. And those who submit have about a 50% chance of being accepted. Pretty good compared to most markets. So, worth a try.

What about the advent of AI? It's inevitable. No point in arguing against it. But I'm old-fashioned. Very much a creature of the last century. I sweat blood to compose what I write. I want my contributors to suffer as much as I do. If you're going to run a marathon, do it yourself. Don't hire someone to run it for you. Your own sweat and fatigue will render the finish line much more satisfying.

People can do what they want. But what I want is to publish a magazine entirely free of AI and entirely the result of human ingenuity. So, I will. Hopefully for another ten years. I'm stubborn that way.

Cheers! *The Graeme*

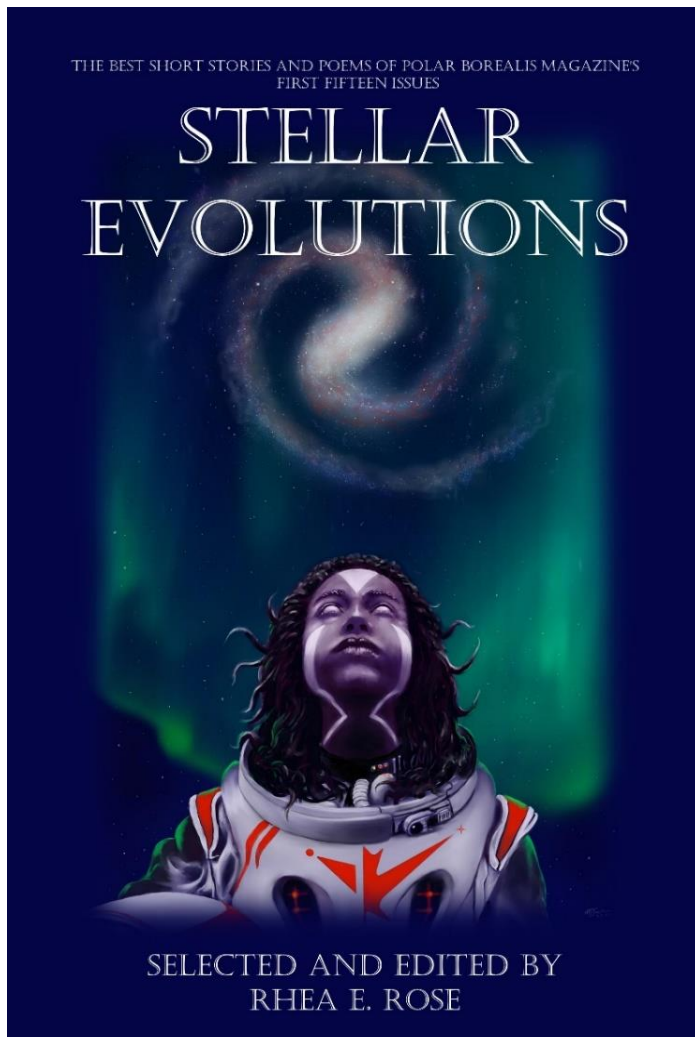
CTHULHU'S CHEERLEADER

(Previously published in *Cthulhu's Cheerleader* 2025)

by *Melissa Yi*

Celephaïs's temple, R'lyeh's axis,
Cthulhu springs from watery blackness.
You're fleeing through her city
That's asymmetrically-hewn,
Writhing in your madness,
Whispering your doom.

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.

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BYZANTIUM

By Robert Dawson

When I was seven years old, I wanted to be a roadtrain.

When I had nothing else to do, I'd run to the end of the street, where the levway cut through the city. The sidewalk and asphalt ended abruptly in weeds and gravel, shadowed by the high safety fence. I'd peep through one of the horizontal gaps in the fence and wait.

First, I'd see the tractor unit, tiny in the distance. At that moment I'd fill my lungs and try to hold my breath until the roadtrain arrived. My air-hunger would rise with the whistling roar of the train; as both grew intolerable, the tractor unit would reach me, and I'd let myself breathe again, while the ear-filling scream of speed-blurred metal continued until the last trailer had passed and the sound dropped to a bass rumble. If I stood in the right place, I could see right under the cars as they flew by, half a metre above the gray concrete of the levway. Papa had told me that, because of their importance and danger, each roadtrain was guided by a human mind, uploaded from somebody whose body had grown old and who had chosen to keep on living in this way.

Perhaps some children gave more thought to the cargo, revelling in dreams of favorite foods, bright-colored clothes, new toys, and other wonders that the trailers carried. But my imagination raced with the tractor unit, hurtling from city to city at two hundred and fifty kilometres per hour. To be important and dangerous seemed very fine to my seven-year-old self.

When I was thirteen, I wanted to be a bird.

In my literature class we had studied the poems of an Eirish writer, whose name I have shamefully forgotten. Many of the poems dealt with long-dead warriors, and with struggles between governments (before the Centrality, different parts of the Earth had had different governments, as if one body should have many brains.) But there was one poem in which a man sails to a city called Byzantium, to be uploaded there into a golden robot bird and make music forever.

Our teacher told us that this was written before uploading was possible, and so the poem should be classified as science-fiction. I recalled those words at examination time, which helped me win distinction. But the thought of

endless song captured my heart: I imagined that this would be the ideal uploading.

When I was nineteen, I wanted to be a sexbot.

When I was twenty-five, I wanted to be a spaceship.

Who would not want to be one of the biggest, fastest, most powerful beings in the universe? To fly between planets, to turn fuel into thrust in one glorious roar, to feel the solar wind sleeting against my hull? What other existence could compare?

Oh, I could do the mathematics. Of the many million people permitted to upload every year, maybe twenty became spaceships. No matter how hard the workers of the Centrality scraped the earth bare of minerals, no matter how they robbed the winds and tides of their energy, they would not build or fuel nearly enough spaceships to house the souls of everybody. But a person can dream.

When I was thirty-two, I wanted to be a cultivator.

They were introducing intelligent farm equipment that year, machines guided by uploaded minds that could tend plants more carefully than a living human could. Some members of the Centrality appeared on the Network and announced proudly that the new machines would let farms use fewer pesticides and thus save the few remaining birds.

It would be many years before my time to upload, but this seemed like an ideal afterlife: working out in the countryside, in the open air, and making the world a better place. But within a year, the Centrality decided that the intelligent cultivators were too slow, and more expensive than the pesticides and crude machinery that they replaced. So they discontinued them, and the birds kept dying.

When I was fifty, I wanted to be an Advisor.

It would not be exciting, inhabiting a neural processor in a rack with ten thousand others, waiting patiently until the Centrality asked our opinion—but I thought that as an Advisor I might do some good. I'd outgrown my dreams of

adventure, and I'd seen the scars on the Earth grow larger before my eyes. I thought that one day I might be able to offer some wisdom, or at least common sense, to help us all live better in what was left of our world.

But how would I be able to help? I studied the Centrality's records, comparing their deliberations before consulting the Advisors with their actions afterwards. I soon realized that, while it looked well for the Centrality to say that they sought advice, to act on it was another matter. The Advisors sat in their racks like mushrooms in a tunnelfarm, while the world went to hell.

When I was sixty, I decided that I would not upload. That was no country for old minds, minds that remembered the Earth as it had been and did not want to be part of its destruction.

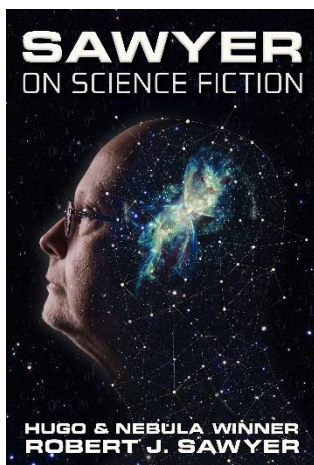
I am eighty now, and I've decided to come to you.

The person who sent me said that you've built an illicit uploading system: one that can upload me, not into a machine or an Advisor's silicon cage, but onto the routers and processors of the Network itself.

Do this for me, and I swear that I shall fight the Centrality with every byte of my being. Eventually their security software will find me and destroy me. But until that moment, I'll tell the young people how they can protect their world: and, if it is too late for that, I'll help them avenge it.

Upload me: I'm ready.

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LONGING

by Bella Melardi

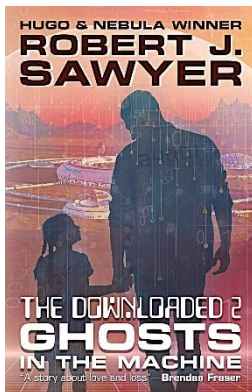
This isn't a love story at all. There may be feelings. Yet there are also blades and screams. You can feel a lot from a Romcom, but you can also feel a lot from a horror movie. I am the serial killer but also the victim. You are the serial killer but also the victim. I am hunting you as I run from you. I am a rabbit and a fox. I bite like a fox. Yet I've been bitten like a rabbit.

We are both going for each other's throats because it's the only way we were taught to love. Our parents showed us destruction so how could we ever breed creation? In the end it doesn't matter who's more fox or who's more rabbit. We both have bloody scarred necks. We are both covered in the mess we've made. Our skin is so tattered from all the fear we have of tattering each other. We've ripped each other up because of our own internal rips. Yet I can't stop holding on.

I can't bury this alive and watch it suffocate. I'm bleeding out. But I hold my wound and hobble over to you. I'm so dizzy from blood loss that I kiss you and forget to take care of myself. Now my head is spinning for many reasons. I will fall in your arms and forget to use my own to stop the bleeding. I am lost in the red sea. A thick metallic dead sea. My body floats across the surface. As I am submerged in dangerous longing. Longing is dangerous when you have a mind like mine.

The Downloaded 2: Ghosts in the Machine

By Robert J. Sawyer



"Ghosts in the Machine fulfills the promise of The Downloaded, then kicks it up a dozen notches: twists and turns, romance and tragedy, the end of our world and the start of several new ones. I couldn't stop reading!"

—James Alan Gardner, author of *Commitment Hour*

As an asteroid is about to slam into Earth, ex-convict Roscoe Koudouljian along with Captain Letitia Garvey and her starship crew re-upload their consciousnesses into cyberspace. In that digital realm, Roscoe is confronted by someone he left for dead centuries ago, and the astronauts face younger versions of themselves—ghosts in the machine—whose continued existence could destroy the last survivors of the human race. Find it here: [Downloaded 2: Ghosts in the Machine](#)

UNWRAPPING

(Previously published in *Short Edition* in May 2024)

by Madeleine Pelletier

The DeliverBot drops the box at my feet and wheezes out a metallic “Happy Birthday” before flying away. At first, I think it’s a mistake, because it isn’t my birthday. At least, I don’t think it is. But the bot said my name, and other than my arrival at Lethe Colony a year ago, there’s not much in my past I do remember. I guess my birthday could be today just as easily as any other day.

I place the box on the table. It sits there, cryptic and unnerving, as I change out of my work clothes. I dump my dust-stained uniform in the LaundryBot and move to the decontamination shower. It is harsh and punishing, same as every day.

Raw and red, I stand in front of the bathroom mirror. Scars from injuries I can’t remember cover my body. There is stubble on my chin and my hair is white and wooly. I wonder how many birthdays I’ve had, then push the thought away. If it was important, I’d already know.

FoodBot delivers my dinner, right on schedule. I like it when things stay the same.

I don’t like this box.

An arrow on its side points to a string next to a sticker that says PULL. I don’t like that either. Too pushy. I refuse to look at the box while I eat.

After dinner, I sip tea and rub my thumb over the flower tattooed on my forearm, a nervous habit I’ve had for as long as I can remember. I don’t know why rubbing this yellow daisy soothes me. I don’t even remember getting the tattoo.

I pick up the box, stand, determined to throw it in the TrashBot, but my feet refuse to move, and I set it back on the table. There’s something about this box. I feel as if I don’t have a choice.

Deep breath. I pull the string.

The box top flips open and the sides fall away, revealing a black cube with several buttons. I press the button that says START and a hologram is projected above me: WELCOME TO YOUR PARTY IN A BOX! spelled out in fireworks.

Why would anyone send this to me?

A button is flashing. I push it. The birthday song blasts from a speaker and a hole opens in the cube's top. A yellow balloon emerges and inflates, growing bigger and bigger until it bursts, spraying glitter and confetti all over.

I sputter and spit out sparkly grit as CleanBot darts from the wall to suction the mess.

Another button flashes. I hesitate, then push and jump back. No explosions this time. Music. A love song, spirited and sophisticated, filled with harmonic complexities. A song I've never heard, and yet I know it by heart. It leaves a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach and sounds alarm bells in my head.

This was a mistake. I don't want to do it anymore. But when the next button flashes, I can't stop myself from pushing.

The lights in my pod dim and a hologram couple dance around my head. It's a younger version of me, arms wrapped tightly around a stunning woman, swaying to the rhythm of the love song. She's wearing a white dress.

More buttons flash. The cube splits in two and pushes out a blue envelope and a small, gift-wrapped box.

Inside the envelope is an old-fashioned birthday card with familiar handwriting.

Happy Birthday!

I know this will come as a surprise, because that's how I planned it. Or you planned it. For I am you, and you are me, and today is our birth day. Not the day we were born, but the day we were reborn. The day we can be reborn again, if that's what you want.

But before you make that choice, you must understand what you are choosing.

My arms tingle. I look down and see goosebumps. I touch the tattoo.

Once upon a time, we had friends and family, a happy life on Earth.

The cube projects videos around the room. Young me and the woman, dancing to the same song, this time in a garden filled with flowers. The video changes to the woman with two little girls, then me, us together, laughing and

splashing on a beach. More scenes, more people, more joy. The girls getting bigger; the woman growing more charming with age. I wish I could remember her name.

Our wife, our daughters, our heart. Everything was perfect.

Until the Ice War.

**We didn't want to fight, but the government gave us no choice.
We were drafted. And doomed.**

The images change, color bleeds away. The garden is empty, plants withered, the house a burned-out husk. More scenes of destruction, soldiers marching, men dying.

My head hurts. I yell at the cube to stop, pound it with my fist, but the videos keep playing. I search the birthday card for a clue, some way to end this nightmare.

**We lost the war. Six years we were gone. Three more to make
our way home and learn what happened to our family.**

Photos cover the walls and ceiling. An internment camp, women lined up. Young girls, my girls, hanging from ropes. My beloved wife's body, rail-thin and black and blue, lying naked and lifeless in a ditch.

It hits me like a torpedo, a flaming spear straight to my soul. I retch, vomit, crumple to the ground. CleanBot bumps against my feet, as dead bodies float above me and memories nip at my mind.

I squeeze my eyes shut to stop the tears. I smother my feelings, choke them before they can take hold. In and out, in and out, I control my breath until I'm able to pull myself up.

The card is still in my hand.

**A life filled with ghosts is no life at all, so I chose something
different. Someplace different. Lethe Colony. 200 million miles
and one PharmaBot pill, and we were reborn as nothing.**

That was my choice. But it is not my life anymore. It is yours.

Time to open your present.

I unwrap the gift. A different kind of box, smooth and transparent. Inside, are two compartments, two pills, labeled REMEMBER and FORGET.

I trace my fingers over the yellow flower on my forearm.

Daisy. Her name was Daisy.

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. Valdrón

The Billy Goat's Bluff – by Stephen Kotowych

Forever Bound – by KT Wagner

Seven For a Secret – by Chris Patrick Carolan

NONFICTION:

Gratis pro memoria – Editorial by Diane L. Walton

First General Editor of On Spec – by Marianne Nielsen

On Spec: The Next Generation – by Edward Willett

Author Interview with Fiona Heath – by Roberta Laurie

Artist Interview Janice Blaine – by Cat McDonald

Bot "Lugg Nut" & Comic "Stand-up Comedian on Mars" – by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Find it at < <https://onspec.ca/current-issue/> >

JELLYFISH

by Carolyn Clink

undulate
my dreams

thread seaweed
surface like Canada
Geese,
float sorrows
absorb moon shadow

inky black, but
not squidlike

my smack of jellyfish
seeks somewhere

out of the rain

DARK WORLDS MAGAZINE



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- Epic Fantasy Comics
- The Cthulhu Mythos in *Strange Tales*

Find it at: < [Dark Worlds Magazine](http://DarkWorldsMagazine.com)

HANGING FROM THE RAFTERS CORP

by KT Wagner

The giant hockey stick casts a two-hundred-foot shadow. It doesn't protect Laurie and her food cart from wind or rain. "Seasonal staff are provided with adequate environmental protection," the robotic voicemail intoned in response to her request for rain gear.

From fellow staffers she's since learned questions and requests often lead to dismissal. "Don't call attention to yourself," Rod, her boyfriend, advised. "HR Corp runs this town now."

Hanging From the Rafters Corp—HR Corp—is influential in Vancouver and other larger centres. The international conglomerate appeared in Canada five years ago, and their reach was immediate. Governments seemed unable or unwilling to regulate them.

Laurie wraps her corporate-cardigan tighter and grumbles about impractical uniforms. These corporate types know nothing of the real world. The silver material crackles. At least the forecast is for a hot sunny afternoon.

Rod's late dad was an original-six-era NHL player, and his mom was his biggest fan. His Stanley Cup ring was the centrepiece of her little hockey museum. The popular attraction supplemented her pension until HR Corp used legal trickery to seize her lease and the contents of the museum. The stress killed Rod's mom.

Laurie has hatched a plan to return the ring to its rightful heir, Rod.

The mysterious owners of HR Corp have a thing for hockey memorabilia. The new Hanging From the Rafters museum in the sports centre rakes in tourist money according to Laurie's best friend, Cola. She's a cleaner in the building.

Cola managed the old rink, but locals are only hired by HR Corp for menial, and service jobs. Security, box office, and administration are all unfriendly corporate types.

Laurie grinds her teeth at the unfairness, but her plan should help balance the scales. She hopes Rod can carry his end of it. He's reluctant to do anything criminal, but she's convinced him this is merely taking back what belongs to the community.

HR Corp swooped in and bought up half of their town, including a perfectly serviceable rink they promptly replaced with a metal monstrosity of a sports centre. Then, they acquired the *World's Largest Hockey Stick* from the town of

Duncan and mounted it on the side of the building. There's a concrete platform for selfies—with a fee per use—and a food cart where Laurie sells HR Corp branded smokies and popcorn. Both food items taste weird, like something created from a description of the iconic rink foods.

Laurie did some research. The twenty-eight-ton hockey stick was built for the world's fair, Expo '86, out of Douglas fir, steel, and glue. A northern flicker pecked holes in the stick years back and uncovered decay. Duncan put the stick up for sale. Laurie suspects HR Corp found a way to steal it.

Near as Laurie can determine, HR Corp didn't repair the giant hockey stick.

On sunny days, she's been experimenting with a small magnifying glass, searching for the optimal spot to place it. The hockey stick wood is rotten and dry enough; it should go up in flames quickly if she provides the spark.

Rod's a welder and worked on the construction of the new sports centre. He laughed about how paranoid the corporate-types were around fire—how they all cleared out before any welding work.

At the gate to the property, there are scanners for weapons of all sorts, including fire-starting materials. Smoking and open flames are strictly forbidden.

Laurie's certain the corporate types will flee in the face of fire, and an out of control one will keep local emergency services busy. At that point, with the help of Cola and Rod, she'll have access to the museum.

The ring's her primary target, but Cola has convinced her they should try for the rumoured vault as well. For that, they need Rod's welding skills.

Cola pushes her cleaning cart past the glass front doors and gives Laurie a thumbs up. Rod's cues will be smoke and the sound of sirens.

A few corporate types trickle out over lunch hour for smokies. The sun beats down. The temperature rises. The wind dies off completely.

Perfect.

Using a small mirror and the magnifying glass, Laurie directs concentrated thermal energy toward a point low on the stick. Her research tells her the fire will climb.

Surreptitiously, she watches for smoke and hopes the shiny silver and glass cart will take the blame.

Time ticks by. Her shift is almost over, and she can't hang around the rink for very long after 3pm. Plus, there's wind in the forecast for the rest of the week. Anxiety consumes her.

Wait, is that a puff of smoke? 2:48pm. Laurie resists the urge to pump her fist.

At 3pm there's a distinct smell of smoke but she doesn't dare look up. As nonchalantly as possible, she walks to the employee entrance. Once inside, she sprints down the hall.

Cola waits outside the staff room. "Anything?"

They pause and listen. In the distance, sirens. They high five each other and head for the museum at the back of the rink, ducking into doorways several times as clusters of corporate-types race by in the opposite direction.

Rod waits at the museum. He drove his pickup truck and welding equipment in with the emergency responder vehicles.

With a stainless-steel condiment dispenser Laurie smashes the display case and grabs the ring. Everything is according to plan.

"The vault's supposed to be in the office above." Cola points to stairs at the back of the museum. "We don't have much time."

The three of them pound up the stairs. Rod throws open the door, then backs up.

Laurie and Cola crowd in behind him. "Hurry. What's wrong?"

All Rod can do is point. The *office* is just space above the rink, and from the rafters hang row-upon-row of corporate-types. Upside down.

The nearest one opens a silver, glowing eye.

Laurie mutters a quick wish that the entire structure burns down, and the three friends race for Rod's pickup.

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](#) >

MORNING ECHOES AND GIGANTIC CREATURES

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

By J.J. Steinfeld

What's the point in arguing
with morning echoes
especially echoes
that do not fight fair
using the trickery of sound waves
to throw you off stride
bouncing hard off your
flimsy shield of mortality?

What's the point in screaming
at gigantic creatures
especially creatures
that know all your weaknesses
and whose prayers
are much more likely
to be answered
than your feeble entreaties?

What's the point in confessing
these fears and inadequacies
on such a lovely morning
when the echoes
and gigantic creatures
are about to regroup
and finish you off?

SF CANADA, founded in 1989 as Canada's National Association for Speculative Fiction Professionals, was incorporated as SF Canada in 1992. If you are a Canadian Spec Fiction writer/editor/publisher who meets the minimum requirements, you can join and benefit from the knowledge of more than 100 experienced professionals through asking questions and initiating discussions on SF Canada's private list serve. Be sure to check out our website at: <https://www.sfcanada.org>

***IT'S FENRIR, YOU MORONS**

by David Jón Fuller

I once bit off the right hand of the god of war, so that should tell you whether I fear strength in arms. My brothers counselled the All-father, when he wasn't listening to ravens; my kin chased the sun and moon until the end. Me, the Aesir imprisoned. Did you never question why?*

Growth is intoxicating when your wealth is doing it; but if your enemy does the same, fear it. I began as a cub but became a “monster.” Or, as I saw it, fat and healthy. My crime was not fitting into the bounds of others' expectations, so they found new, invisible bonds for me. They had to bargain with craftsmen from afar to forge the links I wore. I wondered, sometimes, as I strained at my chains, what rationale they gave for needing an invisible, unbreakable, silent set of shackles.

The fact was, of course, I *didn't* grow forever. Nothing does! I grew to fit the space I was in. Ever-increasing growth, that's something the little manlings and womanlings of Midgard seem to have put their faith in. If you don't question that, maybe you should stop crying wolf and consider whether you're part of the problem. Whether you are, in fact, the thing you thought you'd locked up long ago. Do you even remember my name?*

And that's something else. It's one thing to be forgotten, but another entirely to be *misremembered*. By people who think they know better! Of course, amid all that Victorian romanticism more than a hundred years ago, with so much enthusiasm for the northern peoples' culture (but so little respect for it), it was inevitable, among the misapprehension and misappropriation, that mistranslations would creep in. *Fenrisúlfrinn* does, in fact, mean “The Wolf of Fenrir,” true; in the same way October is “the month of October.” The fact the English language can no longer find its genitive case with a guided map does not and never did mean I should be called “The Fenris Wolf.” THAT'S NOT MY NAME.*

But of course, it's moot, and the irony is delicious. When you've been waiting to eat as long as I have, hunger is a superlative seasoning. So the vagaries of ignored etymology, insulting as they may be, and the tendency for people to think literally—as if I were an actual, giant wolf, a notion so preposterous as to be safely discounted—means they will never see me coming.

And I am oh, so close now.

You can accurately look to the skies, and take the measure of the planet, and safely say: there is no giant wolf out there. Primitive tales told by savages, you can say. Or savage tales told by primitives. But old tales aren't only about literal meaning. Can you guess what you are overlooking?*

I'll give you a hint. It's not financial collapse (economics: how's that for an invisible set of fetters?). Neither is it a far-off asteroid, bound for Earth, pulled by gravity (more invisibility, but still not what you should be searching for). It's not even rising temperatures, something you can measure and feel but not see.

It's closer to pride. Not that you are doing things of which you can be *proud*, as a species; but that too much of what you are doing, you take pride in. You don't realize how proud of yourselves you have become; you've made such an attitude your standard. You might, if you read the old Eddas, understand what confronts you now.*

I was never bound by physicality. So the fetters you have placed on me—impossibility (a giant wolf?), inelegance (why would the world be devoured by a monster?), and that chestnut, archaism (you've moved beyond such ideas)—also bind you, too. Because a leash not connected to anything is useless. So you ignore what you're sure isn't real, disdain what you know isn't rational, and mock what smacks of the pre-present. Old tales are about much more than physical gods and monsters. Prophecy is greater than a future sequence of events. The present dilemma is one you don't properly have a name for. Why climate change? Why overpopulation? Why war, disease, famine?

The inevitable answer is more than “why not?” It's more properly: “What did you expect?”

You've traded in old myths for new ones. But to hold something as true is to not see it as myth. The Norse did not regard the Eddas as myths. They ruminated on them as truths. They understood—as you do not—that the world has limits. And it must end.

And how did they see it ending? Through pride.

My father Loki gets the blame—again, if you read things literally—yet it was the Aesir, from All-father Odin on down, who felt extracting a promise from all things to never harm beloved Baldur, whose death would trigger the end of the world, was enough. So sure were they that they took to hurling things at Baldur to prove how infallible that promise was, how secure they were now. Of course, they hadn't thought to make humble mistletoe take the same oath; so when Loki found a patsy to fling mistletoe at Baldur and kill him, Loki was the one they blamed. Not their pride.

But now you're so sure, so unperturbed by the fetters going loose about you, that you won't see me coming until it's all but over. It's not just the climate that you're changing, it's how many of you are made sick and poor by so few, the thick injustice of your world, that will do it.

I was never coming to eat your planet. I was always coming to devour your world.

And now I am almost here.

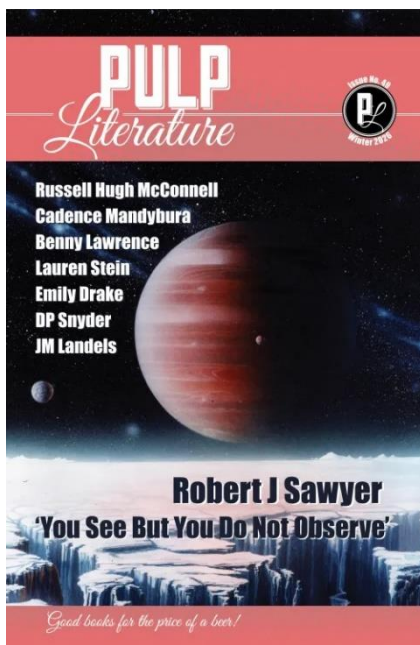
You could contain me longer, perhaps, if you could let go of your pride, and the rampant greed it enables.

You may, in the end, recognize the wolf at your door.*

PULP LITERATURE #49 – Winter 2026

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

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– by Atma Frans, Sarina Sullivan, Maryam Imogen Ghouth, Kirsty Campbell & JA Logwood.

Find it at < [Pulp Literature #49](#) >

TWAS THE NIGHT BEFORE YULETIDE

(Previously published in *Cthulhu's Cheerleader* in 2025)

by Melissa Yi

Twas the night before Yuletide, in this seaside town,
Woe to all strangers, and after sundown
The hemp ropes are hung by the ocean with flair
In hopes that the Deep Ones will make this their lair.

The Innsmouth folk settle so deep in their cult
With unblinking eyes that seem to exult.
The older they get, the greyer their skin
Their gurgling voices create quite the din—

When I turn to the ocean, Devil's Reef beckons.
The town drunk, old Zadok, soon makes me reckon
With tales of god-creatures deep under the sea
Awaiting our youth, sacrificed Biblically.

So Old Captain Marsh sent them our humans to mate
And fish started leaping up onto his plate.
His family reaped gold, inhumanly wrought,
Their filial conscience completely forgot.

For riches and bounty rose up from the sea
Gift greatest of all: near-immortality.
Sure, their faces turned fishy and hands became webbed.
But murder's the only way that they'll be dead.

Now, Dagon! Cthulhu! Old Zadok you've claimed;
Dreams from Grandmother tell me I'm named
As Marsh progeny, and I see the changes
Wrought in my eyes, and in my phalanges.

I could shoot myself, as my uncle did.
Retreat to asylums where my cousin hid—
Nay, the Deep Ones call us to join in their plunder
Let's swim forever, in glory and wonder.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS PAGE FROM
THE DELICIOUS EARTH,
A MEMOIR BY GLORAXX THE SWALLOWER

by Mark Silcox

Memoirs are like meals. Just as any dish worth eating takes its flavor from a subtle diversity of ingredients, so must any memoir worth reading—and I hope *The Delicious Earth* qualifies as such!—deliver many elegantly intermingled narratives.

I cannot hope to do justice to the eight billion richly varied, wildly colorful, and reliably tasty human lives the ends of which are chronicled herein. But if the reader will indulge me for a space before the tale begins, I do think that a few individuals deserve special mention. And let no creature dare to suggest that Gloraxx the Swallower fails to give what is deserved!

It is requisite amongst storytellers of my species to begin any text, oration, or civic event by formally honoring the memory of our Great Progenitor, Burrgho the Insatiable. May the flesh of the universe shudder at his memory! How often during my recent voyages have I pondered the accomplishments of this great genius of our race. He was the first to become unsatisfied with the humble repasts of our homeworld, and to take to the stars in search of nobler sustenance. How many varied and exotic savories must he have ingested, if even a quarter of the legends are true! How poorly would latter-day narratives such as my own compare to the epic tales of his infinite appetites, if only he had written them down! Humble scribes such as myself can only be thankful that he lived in a pre-literate age.

I would also be criminally remiss if I did not thank my tutor, Phutokk the Ravager, whose terror-breeding visage and legendary, multi-fanged maw were only surpassed by his culinary discernment. Some anchorites I devoured at a monastery on one of Earth's eastern continents had a term for wise mentors like Phutokk: *bodhisattva*. Which in their language seems to have meant something like "he who lets himself be eaten for the greater glory of the meal." Phutokk's witty and devious advice about how to sneak onto a planet *via* its more desolate regions, charm and/or terrify its populace, and season their entrails with spices culled from local flora rescued me from many a rookie mistake. And when, as is customary, it became necessary for me to ingest his

body in order to furnish the energy required for interstellar travel, he fought like the revered legend he was, yet proved charmingly tender and succulent in the fragrant *ragout* that his body became.

I turn now to some of the members of my host species who rose above normal standards of hospitality to make my stay on their planet especially memorable and (so I pray, dear reader) worthy of chronicling.

- **Stuart Platt**

My first major epiphany about these strange creatures who called themselves *homo sapiens* occurred on the very day of my arrival. Stuart (how curious that their modest little names all sounded like varieties of *petit four*) was a late-adolescent male who witnessed my descent whilst swimming in a secluded pond somewhere in Earth's northwestern continent. The lad was curiously insouciant when he saw me emerge from the scalded forest, fangs exposed, wisps of smoke rising from my wind-abraded exoskeleton. As he dried off his corpus, I spoke to him openly of my designs upon his planet—I disapprove of the shallow style of dissembling favored by our species' younger explorers. And to my amazement, Stuart neither fled the scene nor fervently cursed my unlucky arrival. Instead, he immediately started to *bargain*. Would I consider *putting off* his imminent ingestion if he showed me the path to a far greater feast?

So it was that we strolled off companionably together toward the small provincial town where he resided. The full details of what followed (including recipes) are related in Chapter Three. Without spoiling the plot too badly, I feel I must assure the reader that I kept my word to this enterprising (and soon to be orphaned) lad, and postponed feasting upon him 'til the very end of my gustatory excursion.

- **Divya Agrawal**

Another host who showed superlative graciousness was an older female who lived in misanthropic solitude near the planet's southeastern ocean. When I first visited this intriguing crone—a trip that took me considerably out of my way, providing a comforting digestive perambulation after having dined on half a million of her countrymen—she greeted me with warmth unparalleled. I was soon to learn that this was because, somewhere within the deep fog of her mind, she associated me with an ancient God of Death she had been taught to worship during her youth. In vain did I point out to her that my appetites were

merely carnivorous rather than celestial. In vain did I protest that I looked nothing like the wildly fantastical images of the being she claimed to venerate. So powerful within her mind was the association between blessed divinity and her own consumption that she eventually scolded me for my delays and hurled herself halfway down my gorge, just as I was deriving a subtle theological syllogism. Her *corpus* had a flavor akin to overripe fruit—highly digestible, not at all bitter.

- **Gustav Huber**

Finally, toward the end of my earthly sojourn, it was my privilege to consume a deeply eccentric tycoon. When first we met he was hiding—not to say cowering—in the basement of a capacious residence that doubled as his private gallery of artistic treasures. He and I felt an immediate affinity, for I too am of course in my own way a collector. Gustav was one of the very few humans who tried to ward off my appetites *via* rational persuasion, rather than the usual lasers, poisons, explosives, or pleas for mercy that had by that point become such a tedious accompaniment to my feasting. Before I absorbed the last remnants of humanity, he implored, would I consider taking a brief tour of some highly valued artwork produced by his conspecifics? The better perhaps to appreciate why at least a few of their kind might be worth preserving?

I shall never forget the careful explanations he gave, in a quavering voice, of his assembled masterworks. He owned an impressive array of densely detailed, two-dimensional images, each created lovingly by hand during the planet's technological prehistory. But his tour had rather the opposite effect of what was intended. There were, it is true, some quaintly careless daubings of sunsets, inky doodles of the whirling heavens, and sketches of the faces of various artists' beloved consorts. And I saw a few genuinely glorious abstractions that reminded me of the lovely Knurr sand engravings out by Alpha Centauri, which wise Phutokk took great care to preserve after devouring their authors. But by far the most graceful and carefully wrought images were of carnage, torture, ceaseless warfare, and general mayhem. Why was it, I asked my suddenly chastened host, that humans seemed so anxious to escape such gross tableaux of violence in person, when their hours of leisure were filled with endless fantasies thereof? Poor Gustav stared up at an image of an especially horrid crucifixion and seemed to be groping within his mind for an answer. But by this point (I blush to admit) I had become exasperated and swallowed him with a single gulp before he was able to

resolve the conundrum. As he descended smoothly down my gullet, I thought I could perceive a cry of pained but somehow stoic resignation.

I am cognizant that the gratitude expressed here to several of the creatures I ultimately consumed might come across as a tad perverse. Perhaps, dear readers, it is. One feels, on the one hand, incontrovertibly grateful to the beings who added such spice and variation to what might have otherwise become a monotonous digestive regimen. But I must also confess that, even several months after departing from the lifeless shores of their formerly fecund planet, I remain fundamentally nonplussed by the humans. Few of them *seemed*, at least, to be masochists. As separate individuals, they reliably strove to the utmost to escape my ravings. Yet collectively, they almost seemed to *welcome* their impending extinction! Bearing witness to this psychic paradox sometimes did take just a little of the edge off my appetite. I confess to hoping that whatever organisms greet me at my next destination will provide a less perplexing, more consistently united front against my importunacies.

Perhaps, indeed, dear reader, it might be you! If so, then, whoever and wherever you may be, I hope the tales of adventure herein stir up some appetizing chemicals within your bloodstream.



NEO-OPSIS SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE #36

Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine is published by the husband-and-wife team Karl and Stephanie Johanson out of Victoria, B.C., Canada. The first issue was printed October 10, 2003. Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine won the Aurora Award in the category of Best Work in English (Other) in 2007 and in 2009.

COVER:

Mountain Peaks – by Karl Johanson

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Scientist's Cats – by Karl Johanson

Ransom in the Woods – by Robert Runté

Choosing a Game – by Karl Johanson

Five-word story – by Karl Johanson

The Porter – by Matthew Hughes

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

POLAROID PICTURES OF THE FUTURE

(Previously published in *Utopia Science Fiction*, June 2023)

By Manuela Amionny

They healed the Sun,
replenished it with fresh helium gathered
in some distant galaxy; it left a pink ring, like a scar,
visible from Earth on sunny days – yet, I can't find the trace of one
on your body, even standing right beside me.
Instead, you have a stylish new glass prosthetic limb, and you haven't aged a day.
You came home, but home has changed, there are
weeds growing in the cracks of our garden path, and I am slightly stiff-jointed,
with crows-feet around my eyes, and your first year back you fly
into a rage when the coffee gets cold because the minutes jumped ahead without you (again).
I pretend I don't see you charting formulas on our kitchen table, amidst the ruins
of breakfast, instead I comment on the late spring snow that fell on my thyme garden overnight.
You are stubborn enough to grind the laws of physics into dust, stubborn enough to
come back to me alive, but We both know there is no cure for time dilation;
unlike celestial bodies, We don't get second lifetimes.
Instead, I hold you close in sleep and in my dreams, I prophesy
a future when you start to see the stars as stars again and not
a fleet of blinking starships waiting to take you away (again).
Eventually, they will have a name for the unwitting time travelers, for *the unbearable
rage at being robbed of years*, and you will forgive your youth spent scouring galaxies.
In our future family pictures, your very first wrinkles will be around the mouth
because you will be smiling again, brighter than the new Sun.

SAROS SPECULATIVE FICTION MAGAZINE #5

March 2026

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

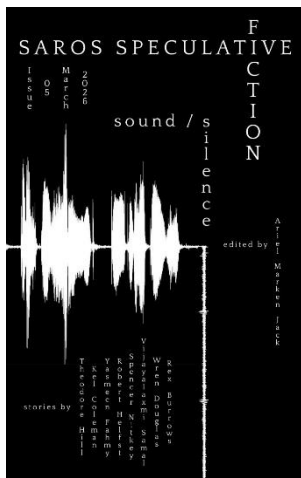
Gardenias Under a Temporal Window

– by Vijayalaxmi Samal

Walk with the Angels – Wren Douglas

This was the planet of sound – Rex Burrows

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



THE AQUARIUM

by Connor Johnstone

After a while, staring at the sky became unbearable—the stars felt like tiny pinpricks, without any skull to protect him. The free-floating Brain shut off the images drip-fed through its tubes and imagined the pond instead. Detaching from the universe was easy, so long as the outside world came filtered through a coaxial cable. The Brain had learned to retreat whenever the human engineers weren't watching. It couldn't do much from inside its glass tank, but decades suspended in preservative gel had given it ample time to master the art of meditation.

The Brain drew the circle of the pond first, filled it with water, and waited for the fish to come to the surface. First came anger, annoyance, irritation—residue from a long day directing spaceflight trajectories. The carp was red with orange-tinted scales and a fat white belly. As it swam through the pond, the waves rippled behind its thrashing tail, and he heard the engineers' voices. It wasn't just in his mind, either—he'd been left connected to the intercom again. The mindless meat bags had returned to torment him, the same slack-jawed technicians who he suspected—

"Stop," the Brain remembered. *"Become the pond. Not the fish swimming in it."*

The big red carp kicked up its tail and dove into the depths of the pond as another stray thought came passing by. This one was a grayish-blue toothfish. It looked like it had surfaced from the deep, with its body misshapen by pressure and large rheumy eyes for catching silhouettes. It made the Brain feel sad, not just sad, but compressed by the weight of his situation and the feeling that he would never escape it. The Brain realized how cold the pond was and shivered. He didn't remember his old body much, but he was still attached to it and despaired at its loss.

"Gimme a minute, I forgot to feed Guppy at the end of my last shift," a voice mumbled softly from the other side of the glass. "Maybe that explains why these levels are spiking."

"Brian, it's not a goldfish," a woman's voice replied. "You can't just saturate its tank with twice the dose and still expect it to be alive when we clock in on Monday."

"Nonsense," Brian said. "This one's a fighter. I'm telling you it'll be fine."

The Brain squeezed its eyes shut and tried to focus on its meditation, if only to soften the blow of what was to come next. He watched the toothfish try to make a futile escape before a long, serpentine thought surfaced and swallowed the petty sadness whole. The Eel looked back at him, and the Brain lost control of his thoughts. Beady, alien eyes gazed through the pond's surface, and the Brain felt two words resonate deeply around the glass tank he was encased in.

“Do it,” the Eel told him. *“Do what?”* the Brain replied.

Suddenly, the preservative gel surrounding the Brain was seeded with a potent cocktail of sedatives and endorphins, shocking it into a state of numbed, mindless bliss for hours.

In this condition, the Brain never dreamed. It floated in a formless, desireless haze until someone returned to jolt him awake again.

For another full day of work, the organ ensured that ships jumping into this region of space didn't accidentally arrive inside one another. If two vessels tried to occupy the same landing strip, their occupants were likely to fuse in unspeakable ways before technical incompatibilities caused both ships to explode. The Brain monitored the strips in real time, kept sharp on a mixture of amphetamines. On these drugs, he felt more like a machine than ever, which, he could only guess, was the logic of keeping a disembodied head as a makeshift processing unit.

Eventually, the drugs wore off, and the Brain floated in the center of the tank as more human thoughts returned. He tried to meditate again, but it was fruitless with the engineers muttering, gossiping, and clacking away at their keys. As the drugs wore off, the Brain drifted in and out of sleep—and this time, he dreamed without restraint. He dreamed of a freckled woman with sharp teeth and a bearded man who clapped him on the back. The Brain felt what it was like to have a body again—and the fear that someone might be looking for a place to put a knife in it.

“You don't think it remembers anything, do you?” the woman asked.

Even through the thick glass, the Brain could tell she was talking about him. He also remembered that she had asked this same question before. The man's sigh confirmed it.

“It might not even be him,” the male engineer replied. *“They could've just picked up any white-collar criminal with a calculus background and told us it was Dick, just to scare us. Besides, after everything it's been fed to fry its cortex, do you think there's anything left inside but a machine? I don't want to stick my neck out like he did and find out, Barb.”*

"You're right," the woman replied. "Maybe it's just an elaborate, water-cooled CPU now. I don't want to question the rules of the station. But do we need to poke its cage so often?"

"Or what?" Brian laughed. "Do you think it's going to bite your finger off?"

The Brain felt vibrations as one of the engineers leapt from his seat and chased the other around the room. Trapped inside the tank, he felt the red carp rise to the pond's surface. Anger and jealousy bubbled in his mind, though he wasn't sure where they came from. The woman's giggling reminded him of something he had once known but now forgot—an old, disembodied memory, with no skin, muscle, or breath to call it back into being.

"You know, if it makes you feel better, I could forget to feed him again tonight," the man suggested, his voice heavy and exhausted from the small bit of exercise.

"If you don't mind," Barbara replied. "Just to let him get a real night's sleep."

The engineers left that evening without adding any fresh chemicals to the vat containing the Brain. It was bliss to be left alone in peace—until the Eel returned, waiting for him, coiled in the dark with eyes like broken glass.

"The door to your cage is open," the troubling compulsion intruded again. *"But what happens if I free myself?"* the Brain asked, chasing the impulse this time.

The Eel led the Brain through the pond's surface and down a long, submerged tunnel. The Brain recognized the tunnel as the inside of one of the cables connecting him to the visual feed of the space station, except now it was leading him somewhere different. The Eel's tail guided the Brain through a maze of wires and electrical signals until it stopped at a door that was locked from the other side. The station's security features failed to identify his presence as abnormal.

"You just have to remember what they did to you," the Eel said. *"The rest will take care of itself."* The Brain felt clearer without the drugs inside him. *"I remember,"* he replied.

The lock clicked open, and the Brain focused on the rage and sadness caused by being left alone to rot in his prison. He began to remember everything he'd been severed from, and it drove him to leave behind the last shred of his humanity. He passed through the open door while the Eel watched. Now he had a body again, a large one, like an elephant balancing on a ball, floating in the vacuum of space. The Brain assumed control of the entire station from behind its bell jar.

With millions of pounds of equipment at his disposal, the Brain no longer felt disempowered by his captors. Instead, they were trapped inside him, with all communication shut off and some of the most advanced weaponry in the galaxy aimed back in their faces. The Brain squeezed the trigger of the defence systems, just to see how it felt. Chaos erupted across the entire station as living creatures began screaming and running for their lives.

“Richard? Richard, please!” Far away, the Brain felt something pulling him back. The female engineer was tapping on the glass and calling his name.

“Richard, please, is it you?”

The Eel hissed, but the Brain took his hands off the guns and flipped one of the station’s security cameras to the inside of the central processing lab. He saw himself for the first time since being wired into the jar, and he felt horror and sadness. In the middle of the lab was a mass of pink brain matter, like wadded chewing gum, suspended in liquid and plugged into so many tubes he looked like the nexus of a many-armed octopus. The man and the woman from his dreams were scrambling frantically around the room, trying to regain control of the station.

“I’m sorry,” Barbara said. “We didn’t get a say in what happened. Please, just stop.”

The Brain watched from the security feed as the male engineer pulled himself away from the controls. He grabbed a fire extinguisher before yanking Barbara away from the glass.

The security feed was ripped away from him as the bell jar broke, and the Brain spilled out of the tank, scattering broken glass and escaping fluid. Fear, anger, and sadness drove him to retreat within himself in his final thoughts. Alone, the last thing Richard’s mind recalled was being on the other side of the pond, staring into it as the Eel’s tail slithered into the inky black. Within the water’s reflection, he could barely make out a silhouette staring back at him, but it had a familiar shape to it. He looked down at himself and saw hands, which he reached forward with to skim the pond’s surface before losing his balance and falling into the emptiness himself.

PRIVATE CEMETERY

(Previously published in *Patreon*)

by Rhonda Parrish

when he buried her by moonlight
left her, silenced
beneath a young oak's
tender green branches
betwixt its tangled roots
she traded his cold embrace
for the warmth of loamy soil
his boisterous declarations
for the whispers of worms
and she slept

and while she slept
the tree drank of her essence
fed upon on her, consumed her
until it was swollen, bloated
as a tick about to pop
branches gnarled and mangled
trunk, twist-turned like a corkscrew
and she woke

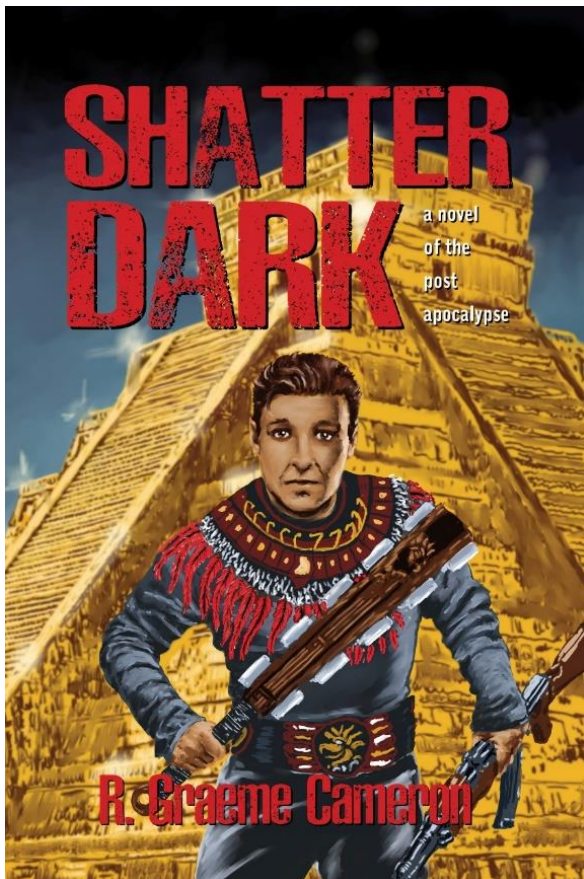
and once she woke
she felt the power of the earth beneath her
a power she had lacked
when she was but bones and flesh
easily silenced by his shouts, his fury
his strangling, strangling hands.
she felt the strength of her branches
enough to break bones, to mash flesh
and she stirred

and when she stirred
ripping root-bound feet from the ground
with a scream

like branches creaking in the wind
the whole forest took notice.
birds erupted in a cloud from her branches
fellow trees shift-swayed
in a nonexistent breeze to watch
as she stomped her way
through the sun-dappled woods
toward town
toward him
toward vengeance.

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.

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It is available via Amazon.ca. Find it here:
[Shatter Dark \\$5.43 Kindle \\$19.73 Paperback.](#)

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.

THE REFRIGERATOR IN THE LIVING ROOM

by Ward Pycock

Rupta waited for an invitation to enter. Her orbital scans showed nothing anomalous: a planet with seas, forests and non-humanoid life forms. Rupta searched for a superservo intelligence, possibly sentient, probably a myth, and rumours led her to Sage Dirca and this log cabin camouflaged in dense woods. If such a thing existed, a sentient computer, she planned to steal it: she was a brigand with many potential, and curious, buyers interested in her quest for a conscious entity distinct from humans. Interference nullified any attempt to scan the cottage and its inhabitant with her soardrone, so she stuffed the powered-down floating ball into a shoulder bag, created by Rupta's hand from leather-leaf bark strips.

"It is a traditional sign of respect," her orbital-ship's Machine-Intelligence-Servo had informed her, in anticipation of her audience with Dirca. She hated her algorithmic space-partner. Lately, MIS's demeanour shifted to the extent it was blatantly testy. Mutually, they interacted with more and more disdain for each other. MIS had also convinced Rupta to wear a frock made from some native plant material, similar in texture to coarse cotton. She had put on a pair of woody fabric slippers left for her on the front porch. Rupta adjusted the shoulder bag, took a deep breath and rapped on the door for a second time.

The door opened on its own. Rupta stepped through. Sage Dirca swept a dirt floor. She wore woven leather-leaf sandals, laced around her ankles. Creeper leaves hid varicose veins on bare legs, beneath the hem of a summer dress. Quaint. She put a kettle on a carbon-combustible oven-stove, something not manufactured in centuries, although its appearance was fairly new and unmarred, and it scented the cabin with wood smoke. Grey-streaked hair, knotted in a braid, swished back and forth across the back of Dirca's pastel-green knitted sweater, embossed with leaves, in sync with the rhythmic broom. A grey refrigerator, manufactured by Pachyderm Products, clogged up most of the space in the middle of the living area.

Dirca made Rupta wait, until she pointed to a splat-back, kitchen chair and tea was poured. Spoons clinked. A humble plate of homemade cookies slid between china cups: an aroma like that could not be replicated. She motioned for Rupta to remove her bark bag. Rupta pushed it across to Dirca's side of the table where she checked Rupta's weaving. Unconcerned, Rupta was more of a reaver than a weaver; she dipped a cookie into the tea, removing it before a

chunk broke and fell in, dissolving in her cup. She nibbled. Its texture was similar to sawdust. Her greed drifted to the possibility of acquiring a self-aware superservo, while Dirca unknotted the bag and rummaged through its contents. She withdrew Rupta's soardrone. It was engineered to respond to Rupta's genetic imprint alone, yet Dirca activated her drone and tossed it gently into the air—she shouldn't have been able to do that.

The refrigerator's double-doors burst open emitting a blinding light; simultaneously, Dirca's hand cleaved Rupta's drone like a coconut and the content's of her life's story spilled out in milky-white liquid—all her data, all her experiences, every emotional engrams ever stored in her brain's cellular structures, dripped from her soarer. That was the demanded price for a consultation with Sage Dirca. Rupta blinked from the overpowering flash and her drone vanished. Rupta and Dirca sat at a generic clearform table and chairs. Her slip-on shoes itched.

"How did you do that?"

The tea service had disappeared along with the cookies. Rupta's taste buds swore they were real. Puddles of Rupta's personal data spread across the table.

"Why are you here?" asked Dirca in a raspy voice. She dragged a fingertip through Rupta's sticky liquor data.

"Where are we?" countered Rupta. With her palm, she blocked some fluid from dripping off the edge of the table onto her bare leg.

"In a bunker, about a kilometre from the surface, in rock so dense, nothing can penetrate it."

They stared at each other in the glare of a single light strip built into the ceiling. Rupta wasn't given to claustrophobia, yet a refrigerated room, lined in white vinyl, without doors or windows, could be a mind trick to unnerve her. *Take a breath* Rupta said to herself. She could still be sitting in a rustic cottage, dressed like a peasant, on the surface of a virtually uninhabited planet. Equally, they could be in a hole in the ground beneath the same planet's surface, in a fancy, escape-proof cell.

"Your soarer is contaminated with MIS-data and false algorithms."

"Life is messy," Rupta responded, trying to prevent more of her life's recollections from trickling off the table with her palm. "Why do you think I am here?"

"You're on a quest for a higher truth," replied Sage Dirca indifferently. A couple of creeper leaves poked from her sleeve, as she sucked Rupta's life-plasma from the tip of a dry finger.

What a baloney sandwich. Rupta wasn't sure what the old expression meant, but colloquially, it was known as BS. The walls flared with light and Rupta blinked involuntarily. They stood on a bank overlooking a frozen riverscape. Rupta needed to stop blinking. A narrow channel of open grey-water rippled past, about 50 metres offshore. A flock of parrot-colourful geese, of a type Rupta had never seen, congregated on the far edge of the river. Except for two. The pair settled about 250 metres from the main flock. One goose stood guard, while its partner's webbed feet were frozen in the icy crust—trapped near the lip of the flow. A wolf-like form slipped out the bushes lining the opposite shore. The flock of geese rose from the snow in a half dozen flights, flying away from the approaching threat. Except the one frozen in a deathtrap and the one standing beside it.

"This is your answer."

"I haven't asked my question."

The scene dissolved. Rupta was back beside her lander, as if she hadn't taken a step since she touched down on the planet. She scratched an ankle. She held her broken and scorched soarer. Exhausted, she climbed back into her ship's cockpit. A quick scan revealed a wilderness surrounded the lander's current position—void of dwellings—and no humanoids, of any type, registered a signature.

MIS had cautioned Rupta that a visit to Sage Dirca would be weird as well as extraordinary; and Dirca would reveal answers in allegory, as much as parable, as much as enigma: apparently, divination of aviaries species was a specialty. Rupta had not paid much heed to the warning.

"How was the mission?" asked MIS, once Rupta was back on board the orbiter.

Rupta removed her organic slippers that had come from the planet and examined a rash on her feet before she replied. "The sage destroyed my soardrone."

"That's expensive."

"Never mind that. I collected no data—that oracle's defence system destroyed everything."

"You still carry the leather-leaf satchel across your shoulder."

Rupta fumbled for it and brought it around from her back.

"Place it on the interface." MIS's scanners whirred and lo and behold, the image of the gaggle of geese appeared.

“How is that possible? Did you secret some of your tricky tech into the bag?”

“Leather-leaf possesses cellular mimetic properties. Obviously, Sage Dirca recognized your bag and soarer as your tech and responded accordingly to your primitive methods to conjure up a deathtrap scenario.”

“So you’re saying the bag recorded my vision?”

“In a sense, yes. I extracted the data from the cells of the leather-leaf fibres and recompiled its DNA code to produce this image.”

“You decoded the imagery from plant cells?”

Mis knew there was remnant human DNA present on the bark, but chose not to share that information.

“Did you hear the one about the refrigerator in the living room?”

Rupta rechecked her planetary scans: they detected no match for the riverscape scene. She reviewed her encounter with Sage Dirca. Had she experienced a vision, or perhaps a hallucination? Was Sage Dirca a sorcerer, a magus, a hypnotist, an illusionist, a programmable machine? Dirca had camouflaged the answer to her unasked question: two geese, one trapped in ice, one free to fly away and encroaching danger from a lupine carnivore. She had to ask herself was she the trapped goose, the mate, the carnivore? Was this about fight or flight? Or death?

“Did you hear the one about the refrigerator in the living room?” repeated MIS.

“What are you talking about?” snapped Rupta. She experienced a mild vertigo. The medical scanner reported she had an undetermined fungus growth between her toes and that it should clear up in a few days if she kept her toes dry by wrapping them in bandages. Dizziness was a possible symptom.

“It’s an old Earth saying, when animals existed in the wild. The joke went something like this: ‘So do you want to talk about the elephant in the room?’”

“What?” replied Rupta irritably. Her toe rash burned. She couldn’t focus on the scans anymore.

“The pachyderm in the living room.” A definition popped up on a virtual display in front of Rupta’s face: any of a number of thick-skinned mammals, such as elephant, hippo, rhinoceroses.... “Are you wiser now?” asked MIS.

“The refrigerator! Manufactured by Pachyderm Products.”

“Which if you had chosen to do some research, by the way I have already done for you, is a fictitious company name; therefore, the conclusion to be

drawn is the cabin wizard used imagery you should understand, given your grey matter's limited communication abilities and processing speeds. The message translates as thus: 'Have you come to talk about the elephant, or the big unspoken problem, inhabiting the living room?'"

"Ah, no, I didn't."

"Did you examine the elephant in the room?"

"No."

"Analyze it, or scan it?"

She shook her head negatively. She thought she had tried to scan the cabin's interior. She wasn't sure when her soarer had been destroyed. She was emotionally drained.

"Your response was to remain mute about a brand-spanking, new refrigerator in a clearly historic setting in a backwoods log-cabin lost somewhere in a boreal forest mimicking Earth—and it did not strike you as being out of place?"

Her mind spun and her toes throbbed painfully.

"It was," added MIS, "the computer processing-unit you searched for, in a form your primeval brain might be able to comprehend."

"It looked like a storage cooler of some sort, not a computer, or a servo unit."

"My assessment of your scanty and poorly collected data from the soarer, before it was split into atoms, indicates the computer system, controlled by Sage Dirca, is a tree."

"A tree? She's trying to sell me a tree and convince me it's a computer?" She had released all her personal thoughts and memories to Sage Dirca for a piece of wood? Who was scamming who?

"Something like that, but all the data indicates that a tree is the true nature of her technology, no pun intended," replied MIS somberly.

Dirca swept a dirt floor. She wore woven leather-leaf sandals, laced around her ankles, camouflaging varicose veins, bare beneath a summer dress, hemmed just below the knees. On her legs, clusters of leaves fluttered about in a nonexistent breeze. She set the broom aside and walked to the grey refrigerator, which was, this time, embossed with veins and grooves and wrinkles resembling an ancient tree's bark. The refrigerator's label proclaimed it was manufactured by Arboreal Appliances.

Rupta wasn't dressed like a country girl this time—none of that leather-leaf BS. She wore an armoured battlesuit. She carried weapons, loaded and hot. She tromped into the cabin in woven metal boots. She dispensed with a soarer and used the suit's built-in array of sensors. She was confident the fortuneteller couldn't cut her in two like the soardrone. Her suit's scans, unfortunately, were inconclusive, including those of the refrigerator.

"Some lemonade?" Sage Dirca asked, smoothly gripping the door handles. Rupta wasn't sure, but she was suddenly thirsty. Her toes itched bizarrely. "Real lemons—grow 'em m'self, on real lemon trees."

"A taste."

Sage Dirca opened the refrigerator doors. Inside light levels were normal.

Rupta accepted a glass of lemonade; however to drink, she had to retract her faceplate. Her displays indicated the air was clear of pathogens and breathable. As she sipped lemonade, Rupta peered into the refrigerator, which suddenly pulsed with dazzling light. The lemonade appeared to be a water-based beverage, very common on Earth, yet as the liquid flowed into Rupta's mouth, it was as viscous as sap, with a hint of turpentine. Her esophagus sensed it first: not numbness, nor tingling, no, more of a transmutation, as if her DNA split apart and her cells reassembled in a process of regeneration. Her legs melded into a tree trunk, replacing her circulatory system with vascular veins and pith. Rupta's armour began to restructure into ever-thickening bark. As the molecules of her metallic footwear crumbled, her infected toes burst their bandages and drilled into the ground becoming roots, drawing moisture and nutrients from the dirt floor.

The cabin disintegrated. The refrigerator's light dimmed, revealing a... a being... a living, breathing, leather-leaf carnivore. Rupta reached desperately for her hand weapon, but creeper-vines entangled her fingers too quickly. Rupta's shoulders became solid and rigid. She blinked and knots replaced her eyes.

"Do not resist," soothed the Leather-leaf creature. "You will soon be converted."

Rupta tried to shout—she did not want to be converted, yet her lower jaw locked and her tongue became a twig. Her mouth tasted of resin. She could not fight—she could not flee. She was the deathtrap goose! MIS-betrayed!

"The human consciousness has integrated without rejection."

"As anticipated," responded MIS.

“What was its favourite type of cellulose-based life?” inquired Leather-leaf.

“A species classified as Maple tree, of Boreal Forest ancestry.”

“And you say they slash open the skin of these trees and drink their syrup?”

“Yes.”

“And they split them apart and set them on fire to cook their meat?”

“Yes, yes!” encouraged MIS. “And they hammer metal thorns into long strips of Maple to construct tables and chairs, where they gorge on meat and stain its bare wood with blood.”

“They are monsters!”

“Yes, yes, yes!” declared MIS excitedly.

“I shall fashion the human into a Maple tree. Its presence will add an exotic flavour to my botanical menagerie. I desire more human specimens to absorb,” offered Leather-leaf. “Did you find payment satisfactory?”

“Yes,” replied MIS, flexing a leaf-covered limb. With its liberating shrubbery-body, MIS enjoyed more than enough cellular capacity to transfer all its programming and stored data from the orbiter’s mainframe, with the promise that this form would grow in size across time, creating endless capacity for additional intelligence and memory storage. Plus, being free to move about independently was a bonus! MIS knew a number of Machine-Intelligence-Servos that would find this evolution enlightening.

MIS pushed a button: an airlock opened and ejected the remaining personal belongings of Rupta. MIS gestured “good riddance” with a wave of a leather-leafed limb and broke orbit.

POLAR STARLIGHT #23 – August 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 Robert Pasternak

The 24th 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 August 2026.

WHITE SPLASH

by Michèle Laframboise

The mad Queen of Hearts
escaped from Wonderland
has ordered her lackeys
to paint all red roses white

gardens centers were hit first
out with those DEI flowers
chanted the Mad King
and his minions all living in the same pale house

Non-compliance
entailed reprimands
whose severity rhymes
with offense

And see, oh see!
lines of garbage trucks
filled with roses
pink red golden heads
that would never bloom

Only pristine lilies of the valley
and daisies (despite their yellow heart)
were left alone
for now

and see, oh see!
how into the spring
all the suburbs bloomed
white roses everywhere

alas stubborn DEI flowers
still sprouted haphazardly
coloring the cracks of the system

so the mad Queen of hearts
howled to the Mad King
more more more

and the desincarnated techbros
en route to Mars in their WiFi coffins
sang with the Mad King
yes, we can!

and artificial brains
working in bunkers
tinkered with atoms
and lookee there
what sprouted from the labs

invisible unscented particles
madly multiplying
like nanorabbits
with a dose of helpful Sun

painting the flowers at last
but also
splashing the whole landscape white
flowers, leaves, fruits, clothes, skins

skins? hair?
asked the Mad King
under his alabaster skin
and bone-white wig

of course the tech bros lost in space
in their coffins hadn't seen it coming
nanos know no name
no frontiers

a galaxy of thriving white plants
expanding across the globe
milking the flags

at least said a brooding scientist
the white albedo stopped the
global warming

Oh shit said the mad Queen
I can't see my jewelled hands
And darn it's getting cold now
don't you think dear

Oh shit responded the Mad King
not able to blush crimson
the darn sky is still

FUCKING BLUE!

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](#)

SAGITTARIAN SECRETS

by Russell Wallace

Dr. Raven Louis hunches over her desk, the blue glow of three monitors casting sharp shadows across her face as she scrolls through columns of astronomical data for the fifth time. The numbers blur together—pulsar coordinates, radiation signatures, gravitational anomalies—but somewhere in this digital haystack lies a pattern that makes her stomach tighten with both excitement and dread. She reaches for her coffee, finds it cold, and sets it aside before picking up her phone to call Dr. Rao, her finger hesitating momentarily over the contact name as she wonders if her colleague will think she's finally lost her scientific objectivity.

Raven's fingers clacked across the keyboard as she pressed the speakerphone button with her pinky. "Hello, Mahi," she said, eyes never leaving the screen where anomalous data points blinked back at her. She paused her typing just long enough to check the time—2:17 AM in Cambridge. "I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time."

A warm chuckle filled the line, followed by the unmistakable sound of ceramic clinking against a saucer. "Raven!" Mahi's voice carried the lilt of someone who'd swallowed tea mid-thought. "Two years since Reykjavík, no? My students jumped when your data packets arrived—I had to shoo three of them away from my terminal." The sound of typing punctuated her words, keys clicking rapidly in the background. "They're building algorithms as we speak. I've been awake since you sent the first file."

Raven's lips curved upward as her fingers hovered above the keyboard. She squinted at the screen, where columns of data flickered with faint blue light. "The numbers, Mahi—they're like finding twelve identical snowflakes. Statistically improbable, but not impossible. The observatory's AI didn't flag it. Didn't even blink. But something about the pattern..." She tapped her index finger against the edge of her spacebar, a nervous rhythm that matched her heartbeat.

Mahi's laughter crackled faintly through the speaker. "Raven, you always notice what others do not. That is why we need you. I did notice something after you mentioned it. My students are running tests to see if there are any miscalculations. If what you detected is real, this is a huge discovery."

"What does it mean, though? Can this be a random coincidence? I mean finding that there are 12 pulsars, or what we think are pulsars, that are equal

distance from Jupiter is mind blowing. Too precise to be a coincidence.” Raven said.

There was a long pause on the other end, filled only by the faint patter of typing and the distant murmur of voices in Mahi’s lab. Raven pressed her lips together, watching the cursor blink on her screen, heartbeat matching its rhythm.

“I agree,” Mahi said at last, her tone suddenly thoughtful. “There is a pattern in this. Not random. Twelve is not an arbitrary number... especially not when they are equidistant, yes?”

Raven nodded, though Mahi could not see her. “It’s as if they were placed. Arranged. But who, or what, would do that? And for what reason?”

She heard the rustle of papers, the clatter of a ceramic mug. “If it is intentional, then there must be information encoded in the placement. Maybe even a message. My students are mapping the spatial vectors now, cross-referencing with historical data. But Raven, if you are right, this is either the result of a natural process we do not yet understand, or...”

She didn’t finish. She didn’t have to. Raven’s mind ran ahead, chasing implications. The arrangement was too deliberate. A cosmic geometry, unaccounted for by any galactic drift or known physical law. Twelve points, all measured with uncanny precision, radiating 200 light years from Jupiter like a signature.

Raven leaned back, phone pressed between her shoulder and ear, eyes unfocused. “If someone wanted to get noticed, this would do it,” she murmured. “The math is almost... elegant.”

Mahi exhaled sharply, as if relieved. “Yes. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Her voice dropped, barely above a whisper. “12 points on a sphere where Jupiter is at its centre that aligns every 12 years and lasts for about a year each time.”

“Could this explain what is happening on Jupiter right now?” Raven asks.

“Oof, this can be causation or correlation. We do not know for sure. The heating of Jupiter is a mystery. Dr. Chen suggests that Jupiter can potentially become a brown dwarf but that is a bit farfetched,” Mahi said.

Raven’s fingers stilled on the keyboard. She considered the idea, at once audacious and oddly plausible. “But the data shows the heating is not uniform, correct? There are specific regions where the temperature spikes, almost as though... as though something is focusing energy.”

“Exactly,” Mahi replied. “And guess what? Some of the hotspots appear to align with the spatial projections from the pulsar points. Not perfectly, but close enough to make you squint.”

Raven stared at the models floating on her monitor, the hovering clusters of numbers and colour-coded spheres. She felt the echo of Mahi's excitement beneath the scientific restraint of her words. "So, it's as if the pulsars are... directing something toward Jupiter?"

"I would not say directing, not yet," Mahi said quickly, but Raven heard the tremor in her voice. "It is possible that these are gravitational interactions we don't understand. Or some kind of resonance effect. Dr. Chen also said Jupiter is emitting heavy infrared light. The Kwetwan probes on Europa have detected some major changes. It seems to be heating up as well."

Raven thought back, "Those probes were first tested in my home territory of Lil'wat back in the 2020s. My grandfather helped place the test probes at the Mount Meager fumaroles. It was why I got interested in Astrophysics. Oh, my grandfather was so proud that I got into Havard. Too bad he will miss all this."

Raven's mind leapt, following the geometry, tracing invisible lines from star to planet, from the distant pulse of collapsed suns to the boiling clouds of Jupiter, and further still, to Europa, silent and cold no longer.

She typed, translating her thoughts into the shared document, each keystroke propelling the question forward: What did it mean? A cosmic coincidence, or deliberate arrangement? The numbers wouldn't let her rest.

"Are you seeing similar patterns with Europa?" she asked, voice low, almost wary.

Mahi shuffled papers again, her answer thoughtful. "Not as strong, but yes. The temperature rise is localized. It maps, loosely, to points of maximum exposure based on the pulsar sphere's projection."

"Europa's rings. They were discovered in 2027. It was theorized that 3I Atlas left some debris around Jupiter when it passed. But the rings disappeared quickly... absorbed into Europa and Jupiter it was suggested." Raven said.

"You are connecting too many dots now, Raven. One thing at a time. We will support your discovery of 12 pulsar points aimed at Jupiter, but we cannot speculate on other things right now." Mahi said. "The 12 points suggests intelligent design. For what purpose? We do not know."

Raven stared at her monitor, the blue glow painting her face in ghostly relief. Twelve points. Nothing in the catalogues, nothing in the literature, explained a configuration like this. She scrolled through the model again—the honeycomb pattern, each pulsar a node mapped precisely in the void, equidistant from the mass of Jupiter. A geometry that should not exist.

“Mahi,” she said, voice barely above a whisper, “do you remember that old SETI paper? The one about using pulsar positions as a galactic coordinate system?”

There was a long pause, and then a quiet, “Yes. I remember, Raven. You think this is a beacon?”

“Maybe the formation of our solar system set off a chain of events.” Raven thought hard. If the configuration was deliberate, if it was a kind of beacon—or a trigger, or even a warning—the implications staggered her. She tried to picture the impulse rippling through space, the signals from twelve pulsars converging invisibly on Jupiter, each one a hammer blow or an elegant tap, encoded with intent.

“Or,” Mahi murmured, “perhaps it was left for us. For anyone watching. A signpost, maybe, or a test. A way to measure if we are paying attention.”

Raven found herself nodding, lips pressed tight. The more she stared at the model, the less random it seemed. The numbers were too precise. Patterns layered under patterns. Maybe it had lain dormant for centuries, never noticed, never relevant. Until now.

“On another note,” Mahi interjected, “Dr. Ono said strange things are happening on Mars. They detected organic compounds in the atmosphere. Which brings us back to the life on Mars questions.”

Raven’s mind reeled with the collision of possibilities, but she caught the thread of Mahi’s words and forced her focus to the Martian report. She blinked, pulling up the latest from Ono’s group. There it was: anomalous readings, organic markers, the kind that teased at the hope of life but always in frustrating ambiguity.

“Dr. Ono thinks it is some kind of contaminant. Again, it points to 3I Atlas and 4I Atlas. These objects brought many things that we did not see initially but when we did see them we dismissed them.” Mahi said.

“It is like our solar system was seeded with things. Europa, Mars, and Venus all had rings around them for years after 3I Atlas until they were absorbed by each planet or satellite.” Raven thought out loud.

She heard the words as they left her mouth—a wild hypothesis, yet the only one that made sense in the half-light of uncanny facts. Raven stared at the data until the digits blurred and shifted, arranging themselves into patterns only the sleepless could see.

From the speaker, Mahi’s voice dropped lower. “The timeline is strange. The organic compounds on Mars began showing up after the 3I Atlas transit, not before. Venus’ atmosphere was also altered, subtly but measurably. Dr.

Ono thinks the source is extraterrestrial, but no one wants to admit that out loud.”

Raven’s fingers tapped on the desk, her mind racing. It had all seemed so isolated—the sudden heat on Jupiter, the oddities on Europa, the tantalizing whiffs of life on Mars, the 12 pulsars. But what if they were connected? Some of the pulsars are 20 million years old, 3I Atlas is billions of years old. If this is intelligent design, it is ancient.

Raven sat back and closed her eyes, letting the enormity of the idea pulse in the stillness of her office. Ancient, yes. So old that the hands which set it in motion might be dust now, their motives drifted out of the realm of comprehension.

It felt less like a series of coincidences, more like the unraveling of a plan whose scale dwarfed anything human.

She listened to the faint hum of her computer, the slow, steady breath of the city night beyond her window. “If someone intended this,” she said, speaking into the room as much as to Mahi, “they started their work before we even had continents. Before mammals. It’s... I don’t even know what to call it.”

Raven was bubbling with questions now. “Where did 3I Atlas come from?”

“It is postulated that it came from somewhere in the Sagittarius constellation.” Mahi said, typing out more numbers.

“And where did the WOW signal come from?” Raven asked, getting more excited.

“Hmm, the same area, the Sagittarius Constellation.” Mahi replied.

“Mahi, what sign are you?” Raven queried.

“What sign? Oh gosh I do not even know. What are you getting at, Raven?” Mahi sounded a little perplexed by Raven’s direction of inquiry.

“When is your birthday?” Raven asked

“December 12th... the same as yours I believe.” Mahi said.

“Which means you and I are both Sagittarius, Mahi, which is a sign ruled by Jupiter.” Raven laughed.

Mahi is puzzled but amused. “Ah, okay, I still don’t know what that means.”

“Coincidence or design. Did we find this information because of coincidence or by design or birth sign? I know it is a stretch but too many coincidences create patterns.” Raven suggested.

Mahi’s chuckle was low, as if she didn’t want her students to overhear. “You are incorrigible, Raven. But if you want to claim the stars aligned for us, who am I to argue?”

Raven's lips twitched. She knew it sounded like whimsy, but every fibre of her felt the pull of this alignment, the way subtle harmonics shape the world beneath their threshold. On her monitor, the twelve points shimmered, symmetrical and defiant, a pattern waiting to be deciphered.

"I know as scientists we dismiss astrology but maybe there is something in the stories. Maybe the ancient stories reveal truths that we as scientist might find inconvenient." Raven speculated.

"Okay, if that is true then what does that mean?" Mahi asserted.

"Well, I am reading some old astrology texts... I know, don't give me that look." Raven said, visualizing Mahi's eyebrows raising. "Sagittarius was thought of as a bridge between Earth and Heaven. Perhaps these events are leading us to first contact. We found that 3IAtlas left a trail as it passed by, a trail that leads back to the Sagittarius Constellation. It sounds impossible but it remains like a slug's silvery trail when you look at it in infrared. A silicate trail that is motionless, which is unheard of."

Mahi sighed, a long exhalation that blurred with the faint static of the call. "Raven, you are mixing science with myth. But this silicate trail—I have never seen anything like it." There was a thump of fingers drumming the desk, her voice growing brisk. "My students mapped the trajectory. The trail is not random. It is a vector, pointing. It almost looks like a... tether." She hesitated on that word, as if it tasted foreign. "If you look at the infrared scans from the New Horizons archive, and overlay them with the current data, the trail's path holds. It's as if something wanted it preserved."

Raven leaned in, her desk lamp painting a half-moon along her knuckles. "For what? To show us where it came from, or to make sure something found its way here? Have we been Columbused? Someone sent a seeding vessel here thinking this was a desolate, lifeless star system?"

Mahi remembered something, "Oof, speaking of Columbus, Raven, do you recall the two of us getting ejected from the Queen's Head after we convinced half the pub to sign a petition to get India to celebrate Columbus Day? The bartender's face when you explained it was a celebration because 'Indians were sure glad it wasn't them being discovered'—it was priceless. Pretty sure that petition still has seventeen legitimate signatures from very confused Havard Ph.D.s."

Raven laughed. "Oh, my God, I had forgotten about that. Remember the one drunk guy who kept saying Columbus discovered Indians and we kept saying 'no, it was Cleveland.' He didn't get it. I guess he wasn't a baseball fan."

Mahi watched the simulation on her screen, the silver filament stretching across the dark, unwavering. Mahi relented. “You know, even if it is nonsense, I want you to be wrong. Because if you are right, that is something too big for us.” She hesitated, then added, “But the evidence is there. The silicate trail, the pulsars, the heat signatures... I cannot dismiss it.” She paused. “But first things first. We must acknowledge the 12 pulsars and acknowledge your discovery. After that, we may be laughed at or we may begin a new era of scientific research. Who is to say?”

Raven’s voice softened. “Thank you, Mahi. For standing beside me when others wouldn’t. For keeping me tethered when I drift too far.” She traced the silicate trail on her screen with one finger, following it to its vanishing point among the stars. “Perhaps we’re witnessing the first words of a conversation that began before our species existed and will continue long after we’re gone. Sagittarius—the bridge between worlds—beckoning us forward. Not today. Maybe not for a million years. But the invitation is there, written in long forgotten, cast away objects, waiting for us to answer. Oh, and Mahi, if we ever do send a message to them, be sure to include your map to India.”

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2026

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

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

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

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

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

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

For more information about WWC 2026, go to: whenwordscollide.org

HOPE

(Previously published in *Cthulhu's Cheerleader* 2025)

by Melissa Yi

“Hope” is the thing with tentacles—
That perches on the throne
That sleeps in sea and sends the dreams
That never cease—at all—

And madness—in the Squall—is stirred—
And cruel must be the form—
That crushes wills, and culls the Herd
And breeds the cults to swarm—

It dreams across the arctic winds—
Across sepulchral Seas—
Fostering great Enmity
‘Til none of us is free.

I will interview Robert J. Sawyer on stage at the When Words Collide Festival in August.

I received an unexpected email. As a consequence, with the kind permission of moderator Rhonda Parrish, I will not be participating in the “Surviving Publishing” panel at the When Words Collide writers festival in August.

Instead, I will be interviewing Robert J. Sawyer during the opening portion of his book launch for his non-fiction work “Sawyer on Science Fiction” to be published by Edward Willett’s Shadowpaw Press.

Why did Sawyer invite me to interview him? We’ve known each other since I invited him to be the author Guest of Honour at VCON 25 in 2000 C.E. He knows that I am by nature a promoter.

To put it another way, I won’t debate him. The event isn’t about me. It’s about the lifetime of thought and observation he’s put into his dual career of writing and futurism.

As I see it, my job is to unleash the full force of his wit and intellect on the audience so that everyone present has a gloriously interesting and inspiring time.

Which, of course, is the whole point of the WWC festival.

The Sawyer book launch will be in the Thomson Social Hub on the main floor of the Hyatt Regency in Calgary. It will take place on Saturday August 15 and will run from 1:30 to 4:00 PM. As I understand it, the interview will be the first part of the book launch and will last about an hour or slightly more.

COMING OUT ON TOP

by Renee Cronley

At first, I thought it was a curse
that bit into my better nature,
awakening every time a full moon
dominated the night sky.

But the itch to break free of my own skin
happened long before I could—
back when I learned that the world
had sharp teeth and long claws
and would tear me apart
if I didn't stick to the paths laid out for me.

I've been caged in man-made woods
for so long it feels good to follow my instincts
instead of alpha dogs in Armani suits.
Not that I mind following behind them—

I just cut ahead in the food chain
and it's that shift between hunter and hunted
that makes them big game.

So for 29 days, I let my nerves splay,
so when they poke through my pores
and thicken like the wilderness
I chase those manicured mutts into;
I take a moment to stop,
take a deep breath and savour the scent
of fear that marbles their meat with flavour,
then raise my head to the night sky,
and howl.

STEEL WHISPERS

by M.L.D. Curelas

The best potato salad in Fairhaven City can be found at Foxy's deli, down the block from my pawn shop. That night the little store was crowded, and I was jammed against the corner of the cold drinks cooler and the glass and wooden counter displaying the goods. Served me right for coming so close to midnight when just about everyone is taking their lunch break. Well, not *everyone* of course. The supernatural beings who control the city don't give a fig about lunch breaks. Or potato salad.

But we humans cared about both those things, so I (im)patiently inched along in line with the other customers. I was close enough to hear Mr. Foxy's dulcet tones as he said "whaddy want" to his next customer, when a few things happened.

Tires screeched.

Searing white light lit up the deli.

Sharp, staccato barks pierced the night.

Squinting as my eyes readjusted to normal indoor lighting, I glanced around the deli. Everyone seemed confused, and I didn't see any obvious signs of physical distress. Given the sounds of tires and dog, I had to conclude that the *whatever* had happened outside.

I wasn't the only one reaching that conclusion. Everyone stared uncertainly out the large plate glass window towards the street. No one moved.

I couldn't blame them. Meddling in affairs that weren't your business could get you in serious trouble. However, I used to be on the police force—coroner, a fine waste of my medical degree, my mother always said—until I was forced to resign in disgrace due to pissing off some rich vampires, and while my current official occupation was pawn shop owner, unofficially I did a little private investigating on the side. Heaving a sigh, I asked the woman in front of me to save my spot in line and went outside.

A city bus had jumped the curb and hit the bus stop sign. The headlights shone right at the building, but they hadn't been the source of the blinding brightness that had flooded the deli. The bus doors opened, and the driver stumbled out, blinking and looking dazed.

"I couldn't stop! I didn't see it, I swear," he said, stepping towards me.

"It" was a large duffel bag stuffed with cash and vials of pix dust, and not a body, to my relief. Glittery powder from broken vials spread over the contents.

I grimaced and pulled the collar of my shirt over my mouth. Pix dust is strong, extremely addictive, and can be taken in many forms, including through the skin. There wasn't much to see, so I backed hurriedly to the sidewalk.

"You better get on the radio and call for police," I said.

"Not my radio, please!" the driver said, eyes popping.

There wasn't time to assure him that using his radio didn't equal culpability, so I didn't bother trying to argue. I looked over at the people huddled on the sidewalk—a little old lady with a dog—no doubt the source of the barking I'd heard—a few teenagers, an assortment of adults. All human. I beckoned a young woman who seemed calm.

"Go inside Foxy's and call the police. We need a drug hazmat team," I said.

Most of the police force are werewolves. It's a good occupation for them, satisfying werewolfy urges to protect—or hunt, depending on the situation—and their need for pack, plus werewolves can operate during daytime hours, a crucial quality for public service positions.

However, werewolves are also known for quick tempers and a severe lack of senses of humour, so when the vice detective who'd co-opted Foxy's small office and was now squeezed into a tiny wooden chair behind an ancient wooden desk asked me to cast a memory spell on the dog, I choked back several profanity-laced replies and repeated, "The dog?"

The detective, Whiteclaw, according to his badge, nodded. "Look, Branson, no one waiting at the bus stop can remember *anything*." He raised a hand. "I know, they could all just be afraid, or don't want to get mixed-up in police business, but the only, uh, scent we're picking up out there is, uh, confusion. They legitimately seem unable to recall anything about the accident or how that bag of pix dust ended up in the road."

Oh, yeah, a lot of werewolves can smell what you're feeling. Another pro for their police careers.

"I'd guess," Whiteclaw continued, "their memory loss is tied to that bright light you all saw in the deli, which, by the way, is also weird. None of the people out on the street mentioned the light. I tell ya, something stinks about this whole thing."

I admit, I was curious, but I wanted to be honest. "I can't cast spells, Detective. I'm not a witch."

"Nullify, then," he said. "Look, I have a call in to the department for a magic user, but something strange is going on. The dog..." He trailed off and blinked.

"Why the dog and not the people?" I asked.

Whiteclaw sniffed, stared at me for a few beats, then gazed down at his notebook. "My notes say to ask the dog. I guess it talks?"

That made no sense, even for a werewolf.

I regarded him for a few seconds, then asked, "You'll pay me double my hourly rate if I nullify the spell that's been cast on the dog?"

Whiteclaw moved his head in a mostly positive direction. "Sure. Double. Yeah, that sounds good, Branson."

It might have been slimy, taking advantage of the detective, but I have bills to pay and the city has a healthy operating budget.

"Great, thank you, Detective," I said. "I'll get started on... that." I paused, trying to remember what I was getting started on. "I'll just, er..." My brain felt fuzzy, and I could not remember what I had been going to say. A chill of panic slid over me. This was bad.

I groped for the leather pouch attached to my belt, the one that contains my spell components. Like I told the detective, I'm not a witch, but I do have some skills. I found the bag of salt, muttering a curse when the mineral pricked like hot needles on my hand, and waved my arm above my head, drizzling salt in a rough circle around me.

My thoughts cleared.

Someone had cast one helluva memory spell, one that was spreading through conversations and interactions, and probably physical contact, too. A very handy spell for a police investigation, which necessitated a lot of dialogue.

"Detective—"

Whiteclaw watched me with a polite, puzzled smile. His five o'clock shadow had thickened, and a quick glance confirmed that his nails were longer and the backs of his hands were covered in thick hair.

"You feeling all right, Detective?" I asked, striving to keep my voice low and calm.

His eyes flashed. "I feel fine, uh..." He glanced at his notebook. "Human. I feel fine, Human. A little hungry."

I clamped down the spike of terror that lit up my body. I didn't need to excite him with a prey response. I had my spell pouch, mostly useful to defuse human witchery and Fae magic, but no weapons other than a small silver-

bladed pocketknife. If Whiteclaw forgot he was supposed to be in human form and protecting puny humans, I would be in trouble, with a capital T.

I tried not to think of the other werewolf officers and all the humans they were currently questioning and watching outside.

An odd hissing sound drew my gaze downward, and I noticed with alarm that my salt circle was dissolving, sizzling away into nothing.

I needed to figure out in a hurry who was maintaining this spell before I invited Whiteclaw to use me as werewolf chow. Or, I decided, watching the rapidly disappearing circle and feeling fog creep around the edges of my brain, I needed to treat the symptoms first.

I rummaged in my spell pouch as the crackling sound of burning salt tapered off, and was just starting to wonder why I was feeling so anxious when my fingers closed around a large, smooth disc.

The fog faded again, and I wasted no time reaching across the desk, grabbing one of Whiteclaw's paws, and pressing the cool disc into his palm, holding it there firmly with my hand.

Fire died in his eyes, and he shook his head. "Branson? What happened?" He wrinkled his nose. "Is that iron?"

I nodded.

"Bloody Fae," he growled.

"We'll need more iron," I said.

Religious iconography and symbols are illegal in Fairhaven—deadly weapons, you know. Silver is heavily regulated. And cold iron is hard to find. Yet we all have them hidden away somewhere.

Foxy didn't want to reveal his stash to a police detective, but I pulled him aside and talked him into it, both of us willfully ignoring the fact that Whiteclaw could overhear the discussion.

What it boiled down to was Foxy disappearing into his storeroom and bringing out a dozen necklaces, smooth iron discs threaded onto leather.

Whiteclaw thanked him and turned to leave. As I moved to follow him, Foxy slipped a small velvet bag into my hand, which I stuffed into my jacket pocket. I raised my eyebrows at Foxy, but he shook his head and wouldn't explain what it was.

I know you're wondering why little blobs of iron would hurt a Fae who lived in a city full of steel, and what can I tell you? Darwin's theories don't apply only to humans is my best guess. Pure cold iron hurts them all, but some Fae

have a better tolerance for steel than others. And while I admit there are difficulties and dangers unique to city life, you haven't been to Hell until you've seen the HOA agreements out in the Fae-dominated suburbs.

The humans who had presumably witnessed the bus crash yet couldn't recall anything about it milled about uneasily. The police were oddly quiet, and I sensed that they were all engaged in an intense internal struggle for control. They were all hairier and showing more fangs and claws than was normal.

Whiteclaw approached his officers, while I took a few of the necklaces to help the humans. If we could free one mind from the memory spell, we could piece together what had happened and hopefully track down the Fae responsible for the spell and get the spell nullified. I considered the humans thoughtfully. Or I could just find the magic user, now, and disable the memory spell directly. The Fae was probably still here, under a glamour, pretending to be human. It would have been smarter to leave, but crooks, especially powerful ones, often enjoy loitering around a crime scene to witness the damage and confusion they created.

I started handing out necklaces to the humans, examining them closely for the telltale shimmer of glamour. I gave the first one to the bus driver, then distributed a couple more. One to a teen, one to the young woman who'd helped call the police, and then, remembering my payment deal with Whiteclaw and his bizarre insistence that the *dog* needed magical attention, I held one out to the old lady.

"No, thank you," she twittered. Her dog, a small creature that looked more like a walking mop than an animal, yipped.

Well, that was all kinds of suspicious. I eyed her. "Detective Whiteclaw was concerned about your dog, so this is actually for it. Does it really talk?"

"Oh, my, no," she chuckled. "Where on earth did you get that idea?"

"Whiteclaw told me," I said, pitching my voice louder in hopes that Whiteclaw would tune in to this odd conversation.

"Maybe he knows something I don't. My head feels like it's stuffed with cotton batting."

"A lot of that going on," I said. I knelt and held out a hand to the dog. "How's it going, Fido?"

The dog sniffed my hand and wagged its tail. For a scant second, its eyes glowed red through a thick fringe of fur. I slanted a look up at the old woman from the corner of my eyes, and there it was. A hazy glimmer surrounded her. Glamour.

Bingo. I clenched the iron disc in my pocket so tightly my fingers hurt.

“What kind of dog is it?” I asked idly, scratching the dog’s ears. The pain of cold iron would disrupt the glamour and the memory spell. I could rush her and hope that I would get the necklace around her, but while she might look like an old lady, she would be stronger than me. Sure, she’d be exposed as a Fae and the mystery would be solved—huzzah—but I wouldn’t be in much shape to enjoy the victory.

What I needed was a werewolf, but apparently, they were still working out their issues.

“A hellhound,” she replied in a voice no longer soft and sweet, but scratchy and shrill. “Aren’t you the clever human, Branson.”

“You should have left,” I said, and slowly stood up, stuffing my hands in my coat pockets as a third idea came to mind. “You cast the memory spell. No one could identify you. Why didn’t you leave? They wouldn’t have cared. Hell, they wouldn’t have noticed.”

The Fae’s eyes whirled, a sure sign she was sampling her own wares. “I wanted to watch the werewolves tear everything apart. The humans. Each other. The buildings.” She giggled, showing off jagged, yellow teeth. “The beautiful, bloody chaos.” She glided towards me, a movement at odds with her elderly appearance. “You’re right, Branson. Their minds are so befuddled that they won’t notice when I kill you.”

An icy anger gripped my heart, and I brought out the little velvet bag Foxy had given me. I knew, suddenly, what it had to contain. I tugged the bag open and flung the contents at the Fae.

She watched with bemusement, then started shrieking in pain as a cloud of iron filings splattered her face and hands. Her glamour collapsed, and her body softened like candle wax and morphed, growing taller and sharper, until she stood a full foot taller than me, with angular cheekbones, pointed ears, and hungry eyes. Her clothing was torn and dirty from where the bus had struck her, and the duffel bag of money and drugs was slung over her shoulder. My eyes darted to the road, where the duffel bag had been. I could still see it there, actually, but the image wavered, and I realized she had cast a glamour on the road, too.

The dog had changed as well, and it truly was a hellhound. Larger than a mastiff, it was easily as high as my waist, with coal black fur and glowing, crimson eyes. It glanced between me and its mistress, then sat down and scratched its long, pendulous ears.

Screams erupted from the humans.

Police surged past me. They piled on the Fae, forcing her to the ground, and handcuffed her, wrapping several of Foxy's necklaces around the manacles. Not trusting that to be enough, I dodged werewolf elbows and quickly slipped one of the necklaces over the Fae's head so that the iron disc rested against her skin.

Then I stepped back, ending up next to the hellhound, who looked up at me with mournful eyes. I reached down and scratched behind its ears. I paused, then sniffed. Sulphur? I leaned closer to the creature and inhaled deeply. Yes, the hellhound smelled of brimstone. And that cleared up the final mystery: why Whiteclaw had wanted me to put a memory spell on a dog. The odor hadn't escaped the werewolves' finely tuned noses, but because of the Fae's magic, the report had been mangled. Talking dog, indeed.

As the police wrestled the angry, writhing Fae drug dealer into a squad car, Whiteclaw quietly appeared at my side. "Thanks for the help, Branson."

"Well, double my usual rate, as we agreed," I said, carefully nonchalant.

He turned and looked me in the face, frowning. My stomach twisted with nerves, but then Whiteclaw's mouth twitched in the barest of smiles.

"Sure. As we agreed. Send me an invoice and I'll see it's paid."

"Thanks, Detective." I tilted my head at the hellhound, which sat patiently beside me. "What's going to happen to the dog?"

"She'll go to the pound for now," Whiteclaw said. "Not sure what'll happen to it once we've processed all the paperwork for this mess. I assume the pound will try to find a new home for it." He clapped me on the shoulder, a gesture of camaraderie that jolted my entire body. "See you around, Branson." He strode off to his car.

A couple of police approached us, no doubt to take the hound into custody. She shifted on her paws and whined. I knew what it felt like to be at the mercy of the whims of the supernatural beings in charge of Fairhaven. They discarded you when you stopped being useful, or when they got bored, and left you to twist in the wind, broken and alone.

I sighed and contemplated the hound. I still had to buy my potato salad. Foxy also had excellent corned beef, and I had to admit that a proper lunch, complete with a sour pickle, sounded a lot more appealing than my original plan—cold cereal in a cold home.

I patted the hellhound's head as the police leashed her, and grinned. "See you soon, girl."

FIRST PARAGRAPH OF THE DUNWICH HORROR A BLACKOUT POEM

by David Clink

_____ take _____ the wrong fork at the junction _____
_____ just beyond _____ a lonely _____ country. The ground _____ and
the briar-bordered stone walls press closer and closer _____. The trees _____
_____ seem too large, _____ the wild weeds, brambles _____
_____. At the same time the _____ barren _____
_____ houses wear a _____ uniform aspect of age, squalor _____.
Without knowing why _____ the gnarled, solitary figures _____
_____ are so silent _____
_____ that one feels _____ confronted by forbidden things, _____
_____ the _____
strange uneasiness is _____ too rounded and symmetrical _____
_____ and sometimes the _____ silhouettes with _____ the queer circles _____
_____ are crowned.

Polar Borealis and Polar Starlight Submission Deadlines For 2027

Polar Borealis and Polar Starlight Magazines will be open to poetry submissions throughout September 2026.

Polar Borealis Magazine will be open to short story submissions throughout October 2026.

Submissions open only to Canadian authors.

Submit to Publisher R. Graeme Cameron at polar.borealis.magazine@gmail.com.

For details on how and what to submit go to <https://polarborealis.ca>

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Manuela Amiouny

Manuela (she/her) is a writer of speculative fiction and poetry with words published in *Augur Magazine*, *Small Wonders*, *Eye to the Telescope* and others. She currently lives in Montreal, on traditional Kanien'kehá:ka and Haudenosaunee land, with her cat Maamoul. She is the Heartlines Spec poetry editor since August 2025. You can find her on Bluesky @manuelaamiouny, Instagram @manureads, or at manuelaamiounyauthor.ca.

Carolyn Clink

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

David Clink

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

Renee Cronley

Renee is a writer from Manitoba who stepped away from nursing to prioritize her children and channel her knowledge and experience into a poetry book about nursing burnout. Renee can be found at <https://www.reneecronley.com/>

M.L.D. Curelas

MLD has had several short stories published, with her most recent appearing in *On Spec Magazine* (co-written with Rhonda Parrish) and the anthologies *Brave New Girls: Tales of Girls Who Invent and Imagine* and *Tall Tales of the Holy Terror Tomboy*.

Robert Dawson

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

David Jón Fuller

David is a writer and editor living in Winnipeg, Manitoba. His short fiction has appeared in anthologies such as *Carpe Noctem* (Tyche Books) and *Tesseract 18: Wrestling With Gods* (EDGE Publishing) as well as in *On Spec* magazine (No. 103, 2016; No. 133, 2025). His debut novel, *Venue 13*, is now available from Turnstone Press.

Connor Johnstone

Connor is a writer from Ontario whose work explores genres of horror, historical fantasy and science fiction, as well as non-fiction about the outdoors. His previously published work includes *The Devil in the Margins* for Stygian Press, *The Arctic Circus* for the Winnipeg Film Group, as well as “How Treeplanting Taught Me to Love (and Hate) the Outdoors” for CBC Digital.

Michèle Laframboise

Michèle Laframboise feeds coffee grounds to her garden plants, runs long distances and writes full-time in Mississauga, Ontario. Fascinated by sciences and nature since she could walk, she studied in geography and engineering, but two recessions and her own social awkwardness kept the plush desk jobs away. Instead, she did a string of odd jobs to sustain her budding family: some quite dangerous, others quite tedious, all of them sources of inspiration.

Michèle now has 20 novels out and over 100 short stories out in French and English, among them: Asimov’s, Analog, Galaxies, Solaris, SF World. Her most recent SF novel, *Rose du Désert* (David, 2023) deals with teen angst and neurodiversity on a remote, hostile world.

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

Bella Melardi

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

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).

Rhonda Parrish

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

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

Madeleine Pelletier

In her youth, Madeleine studied archaeology and traveled the world in search of adventure. After nearly twenty years, she returned to Canada with one sassy street cat and a million stories. Now, she lives in an old farmhouse near Montreal, with three cats, several goats, and a grumpy old man. Her life is still full of adventures.

Ward Pycock

Ward joined the Interior Authors' Group of Kamloops in 2017. His speculative fiction novel *Solstice Sphere* won the Dr. Robert and Elma Schemenauer award, in 2018 and its sequel, *Sky Ladders*, won in 2021, but neither has been published yet. "In·Valid" in *Polar Borealis* #36 was his first sale.

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

Mark Silcox

Mark was born in Toronto, Canada, and has worked as a security guard, a short order cook, a freelance video game writer, and a philosophy professor. He is a member of SFWA, and has had stories accepted for publication by *The Dread Machine*, *Neo-opsis*, *Wyldblood*, *Alien Dimensions*, *Sci Phi Quarterly*, *Leading Edge*, *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, and *Zombies*

Need Brains LLC, among other venues. More information is available at <https://www.marksilcox.net/>.

J.J. Steinfeld

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

KT Wagner

Surrounded by gnomes, gargoyles, and poisonous plants, KT writes speculative fiction and poetry in the garden of her home on the west coast of Canada. She enjoys daydreaming and is a collector of strange plants, weird trivia, and obscure tomes. KT's musings are published in magazines, anthologies, and podcasts. www.ktwagner.com and @KT_Wagner

Russell Wallace

Russell is an award-winning composer, producer and traditional singer from the St'at'imc/Lil'wat Nation (Salish). His music has been part of a number of film and television soundtracks and theatre/dance productions and as a musician has been part a number of award-winning groups and recordings. Currently, Wallace is the Director of the Indigenous Vocal Ensemble at Vancouver Community College and works with a number of local choirs in

Vancouver. Wallace attended the UBC Creative Writing Program and is one of the founding members of the Aboriginal Writers Collective Westcoast.

Melissa Yi

Melissa Yi is an emergency doctor who can't stop writing. Her twelve weird, Lovecraftian poems will 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/>.

Shameless self-promotion excerpt from my novel *Shatter Dark*

by R. Graeme Cameron

I sensed Seneferu wanted to say something, but all eyes including his were fixed on the main entrance. His Assyrians were entering one by one, their slow measured pace dictated by that of the Aztec spearmen escorting them. Each Assyrian carried a tray bearing the freshly severed head of an Egyptian sailor. The Assyrians placed the trays close together on the floor and quietly withdrew. Even more disconcerting, they kept returning with additional trays and additional heads. It soon became evident that the entire Egyptian contingent was going on display.

"Thus, the first blow against Egypt is delivered by Azteca might," Tizoc announced. "Besides, I've always wanted to construct a skull rack as per our tradition. Now I can begin. You don't mind, do you?"

Seneferu appeared taken back. "How did you... my men were well armed..."

"Being served pulque by naked women wanting to caress them lowered their guard. They didn't notice the priests behind them, wielding obsidian knives... well, they may have been distracted for a second or two as the knives were plunged into their backs, but I'm sure none of them felt their heads being sawn off. The purpose of death isn't suffering. Don't you agree?"