



MMXXV

Excerpts & micro-fiction
by 13 Nova Scotian writers of
sci-fi, fantasy, & horror



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The Angles Above

by Jude Mire

Everyone said that it was the sea that took Molly away, but David never believed it.

David knew it was the sky.

"She was always down there, on them black rocks, with her do-dads and contraptions," said Carlin McCain. "Girl was right smart, I'll grant, but she lacked the common sense. Shoulda known better." His voice traveled across the bar, too loud for someone speaking ill of the dead.

"Hush, Carlin," said Toby. "He's right over there."

The old sailor turned to look at David's table in the back. He shrugged and muttered, this time keeping his voice lowered. It didn't matter. David had heard it all before.

It had been two days from their three-year wedding anniversary when Molly had vanished.

"There's something up there, but I can only detect it when the air is ionized," she'd said. "It doesn't make sense."

Back then, David had no idea what Molly was researching. He'd been raised as a fisherman. She'd gone to some fancy university. They'd met on the water, just off the coast. He was pulling mackerel. She was doing some sort of science. Something to do with evidence of an unstable quantum curvature. She'd spent years working on how to stabilize it. All through their time dating, and even after they were married, the science of had been beyond him.

But now, on what would have been their fifth anniversary, he'd sorted it out. Since she'd vanished, there at the edge of a sunset sea, he worked the puzzle of her disappearance. He'd quit fishing, obsessed. David dove into her books, her notes, and her equipment. He understood now. She'd been studying a theoretical tesseract: a fluctuating door in space and time, wildly swinging open and shut, depending on the light and lightning.

It only appeared with a big storm.

Like the night she'd vanished.

Like tonight.

If he'd been there to see David rowing his dory into the blustering tempest, Carlin McCain would have called him a fool and Toby wouldn't have stopped him. David had attached a generator into the boat, powering odd antennas and tracking gear. He knew the vertex. He'd set the prow lantern to the right intensity. He'd angled the bait beam. David heaved on the oars, fighting choppy swells as the cold rain pelted his face. Lightning crashed around him, and the air was a constant churn of thunder. Dangerous waves clawed on every side as the dregs of a hurricane tried its best to sink him.

David remained afloat, matching the squall with his own fierce determination.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up as the sky turned green. A bolt of ember lightning struck his lantern, fizzing and cackling with power. The electric arc stayed there, attached to something above, like a line hooked on a fish.

As the boat lifted from the sea, rising into the air, David smiled.

He knew that, soon, he'd see his wife again.

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Jude Mire (judemire.ca) writes sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. Across genres, his work has an emphasis on exploring the atypical, on expanding diversity, and on unexplored creativity.

Trash Mountain

by Lindsey Harrington

Cyrillia unfurls one vertebra at a time. She slides her face shield up and her nostrils flood with the verdant odour.

A few kilometres over, it's choking black smoke and sweet and sour rot—even through her protective gear's filtration system. Yet Cyrillia has come to like that too. It smells like home to her now.

Her aching body takes on the contours of the boulder, like a carpet of moss or colony of lichen, things she only read about before being exiled.

Outcasts were cautionary tales embedded in school lessons on the inside. The proverbial boogeyman of their brave new world. But those dark fables omitted the beauty glimmering amid the derelict.

"I'd rather spend five days out here than fifty years in the Compound," Sundari spit the last word like a slur on Cyrillia's first night.

Cyrillia paused her choking sobs to cock her head at this strange stranger.

The next morning, Sundari demonstrated breaking down a cellphone, cracking the case, separating panels, and hooking out precious fragments. She tossed pieces into a series of buckets. "Nothing's wasted, but the main attraction is precious metals. Cadmium. Lithium. Tellurium." She counted them off on her fingers.

Trace amounts were trapped in the disposable technologies of their forefathers, and the Compound needed them for the batteries that fueled their sterile existence.

Sundari guided Cyrillia along the compacted paths of Trash Mountain. A living entity, it shapeshifted and transmuted, creating sinkholes of sludge and pockets of methane, ready to explode.

At the end of Cyrillia's first week, the Outcasts gathered, roasting rats over garbage fires and playing tin bucket drums.

“What’s the occasion?” Cyrillia thought of the rare, solemn ceremonies inside.

“Surviving another week on Trash Mountain!” Sundari popped a bottle of murky brown sludge.

The ragtag crowd cheered as it fizzed over her scabby knuckles. She brought the bottle to Cyrillia’s lips, who gagged.

“You get used to it.” Sundari smiled, tucking Cyrillia’s hair behind her ear.

Now, at the end of each day, Sundari and Cyrillia head to the wilderness and shed their protective layer like twin snakes. They weave daisy chains and forage dandelion and goutweed, juniper and crowberries. Things resilient enough to survive and thrive here, like them.

Someday, Cyrillia will fall into one of Trash Mountain’s sinkholes of sludge and drown or fall victim to one of the daily avalanches and be buried alive. Trash Mountain will eat the flesh from her bones. She’ll become Trash Mountain like all its other inhabitants.

But here on the boulder, her belly expands with each inhale. Her ribs unknit and spine lengthens. The cool breeze lifts the stench from her skin.

A twig snaps nearby, but Cyrillia is unafraid. She stretches from her tiptoes to her fingertips before turning to see Sundari, helmet on hip, long matted hair enlivened by the breeze.

Sundari smiles with what’s left of her teeth, Trash Mountain backlit behind her; Cyrillia has never seen something so beautiful.

Lindsey Harrinton (lindseyharrington.com) explores societal issues through a personal lens in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. She reads and writes a lot of spec fic in preparation for the imminent apocalypse.

For Emily, Whenever I May Find Her

by Sunil Sarwal

The sky twisted in agony. Long purple flashes tore through the clouds, making Sheena scrunch lower in her seat. As the train groaned along, her fingers began to worry the edges of a small piece of paper she had pulled from her pocket. Turning her eyes from the window, she took the sheet and folded it in half, and then half again. Folded and creased it until a tiny yellow crane lay in her hand. She held it a moment, then let it fall to her lap.

Another flash of light sliced the belly of the sky, painting the inside of the cabin in lurid shades. This part of town had been hit hard by the Shattering and the air was roiling with menace. Below, scarred buildings cluttered up to the edge of the tracks like a dead forest. The mangled shopping carts and rotten couches that sat at their feet were the underbrush, she thought. Peeling murals gave the only colour, as if colours had been banished under the violent sky. In the distance she could see Fiore Tower, which once glared over the city. Now its top was curtained by clouds of silver and purple. She jumped as another flash spilled overhead, and was she grateful that her path didn't take her closer to the parts of town that were hardest hit, the ones still blocked off, where entry or exit was forbidden.

Her aching fingers had plucked another square of paper from her pocket and she found herself again holding a small crane, tender and joyful. She thought of the ones she had folded while sitting nervously in Vito's office. She hadn't taken a single sick day since Emily. He understood, he told her. This company, he said under the din of bending metal, is all about family. Three years is nuts, he told her solemnly, but if I lost my kid—he looked down at his feet—I don't know what I'd do. Sheena said nothing. She signed the papers, emptied her locker, and headed for the train, leaving nothing but a pile of golden birds for the cleaners to find in the morning.

Sheena left the train when it reached the outskirts of town and wound her way through emptied streets, where houses slumped and cars were burnt to rust. In the distance stood the crumbling tower of a cathedral, its bell long silent. She made her way past tumbled shop displays under skies that flashed with menace, a thin bundle of sunflowers in her hand. The last house sat just at the edge where the town gave way to forest. Crooked and tired, its roof lay crumpled over empty windows. She grunted as she pried open the front door

and stepped inside. In the kitchen the roof had fallen in and raindrops and sunlight made the space look surreal, like a photograph of itself. A cluster of skinny lemon trees sprouted through the broken floor and she gazed at them a moment before heading upstairs.

This excerpt is from an unpublished short story structured around the lyrics of the Simon & Garfunkel song of the same name. The story is about loss, grief, and the selfishness that sometimes sits in the heart of parental sacrifice.

Sunil Sarwal (sarwal.ca) is a brand strategist in the food industry. He writes short genre stories that capture his experience growing up as a neurodivergent visible minority.

excerpt from

The Patch Project: The Complete Omnibus

by Brittini Brinn

Living in the woods was a lot harder than Pinot had anticipated. On the wasteland, things were clear-cut: you either had water or you didn't. The figure on the horizon was either a blood-thirsty Grafter or they weren't. But the way of life in the trees was more nuanced. The animals were cheeky and dangerous all at once; a plant kept all of its toxins in one place, its fruit in another, and some parts of it existed all on their own outside of human need or interest. What a change it was from the bleak and flat lands Pinot had lived through.

She camped in the green buffer zone between the wasteland and *Ulway's Restaurant*, moving locations each night. She learned to live in the lush silences of the forest, where something was always happening past the screens of leaves, under the branches strewn across the ground. She got to know where birds nested, their calls and routines. Using what little knowledge of plants she'd picked up at *Ulway's*, she determined which berries and mushrooms to avoid and how to identify stinging nettle and poison ivy. The creek was never far in this part of the woods, and she came to it daily as if to a cherished friend.

A bear lived deeper in the forest. Pinot occasionally came across tracks and had once seen it down the creek, its underbelly shaggy and dripping water. The bulk of it, the sheer presence of its size was breathtaking. An awe-inspiring giant. She'd crept backwards, holding her breath. After that, Pinot and the bear kept out of each other's way in a season-long dance, turning aside when too many signs of the other appeared.

Pinot's diet was better than it had been in a long time. She caught rabbits in snares, killing them with a sharpened piece of thin copper pipe she'd found discarded in the woods. As the spring bled into summer, Pinot became a bona fide predator. She felt a grim satisfaction that her knowledge of violence, her experience of it as a teenager, now had application.

Grafters sometimes crossed the line between the wasteland and the forest. If the Grafters were merely cutting firewood or were regulars, Pinot let them pass. If they were heading towards the restaurant with bloody intentions, Pinot dealt with them. No one would threaten the people up there again. Not if she could help it.

And during the long, dark nights wrapped in her tarp, sometimes with a fire to keep her company, she'd think about Ed.

She gave up too easily after he went missing. She'd never found a body, and there were definitely people responsible for his disappearance. But the trail had gone cold after about a day, and she'd had no choice but to return to the restaurant, to pass on a message for Ed to stay there, a place of safety, of community. A place she was no longer part of.

This excerpt from *The Patch Project: The Complete Omnibus* (Adventure Worlds Press, 2025) is republished with permission.

Brittni Brinn (brittnibrinn.com) writes from a tower and a cottage in Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia. They are the author of *Misplaced* (Little Ghosts Books) and the *Patch Project* series (Adventure Worlds Press).

Like Roman Legions against Hannibal

by Joshua Elliott

John, surrounded by the broiled corpses of his shipmates, felt his hands and feet start bubbling and smouldering in his space suit. His suit's life support systems had finally been overwhelmed by the ambient heat of his ship, and there was no bringing back the ship's cooling or his ten thousand shipmates.

"Final directive fulfillment, quick response." He grimaced, and the ship's computer brought up the Mission Failure report prompt on his suit's HUD. "Cooling system ran dry. Crew voted to replenish with life pod systems. Engineering pushed engines to compensate for reduced system longevity, shorten travel time. Wasn't enough. Recommend redundancy for future missions. Send report."

John began screaming.

—

Terry spilled his favourite coffee on his favourite keyboard.

"Goddamn it!" He gingerly placed it face-down under the room's heating element, hoping it would drip-dry and not fail. He hated using voice typing. Then his computer beeped at him.

"Of course now. A new ping from Ship 372?" Terry opened the attachment from the current longest-lasting ship, blinked, and sighed. "Damn, thermal overrun again. What a rough way to go." The ship's diagnostics were attached in an Excel sheet. It usually copied fine, but management still wanted human eyes to check for errors—after enough reports got tabled for discussion filled with gibberish data. Besides, after traveling for over four hundred years, some entries were bound to get garbled. He gave the system time to receive the fifteen incoming duplicate files, enjoying a glance of his view over Florence 3122's ship assembly field, and his computer began running comparisons between the copies, picking whichever entries aligned most.

He started going over the diagnostics while John's message played back in his ears. He listened to not just the words but the background noise, interested in

anything that might be learned from this last signal. After nineteen years of data validation, his last addendum got a shout-out from the meeting-driver for ‘concise and insightful value-adds!’ in the meeting summary slides. He wasn’t about to miss out on another chance for validation like that.

“Computer, copy data to email.” He sighed, giving up on a real keyboard for the moment. It copied the black box data from the email, and he began voicing the Executive Summary tagline:

“Ship 153, named by crew as *Yggdrasil*, 4th of her name, confirmed failed. Travel year 374 of estimated 463. Revised estimate 433 years, given last course and velocity. All hands confirmed lost. Total life support coolant system failure despite radical intervention by ship crew.” His tabby jumped into his vacated keyboard space, and he began stroking her ears. “7358 hands, 74% of crew, voted to siphon life pod coolant to ship main systems, hence all hands lost. Recommend new vessel design revise life support systems, given 14% of mission failures are due to life support failures. Computer, end entry.”

He watched his ship swarming with welding drones, wrapping up final revisions. “We were gonna name it *Yggdrasil* too.”

Shitty End

by Cole Martin

“Hold up, rewind.”

“No, no, no—you don’t get to scrutinize the damn tape. You watch it once, then you make your guess: those are the rules, kid.”

Lorenzo squinted at the monitor. He had three veterans from the Bureau of Sudden Disappearances breathing down his neck, giddy to see the new guy shit his pants. They were testing his mettle.

He tried to focus on the video, but the resolution was so poor he felt like he was going cross-eyed. They said they recovered the tape from some peephole camera in a gas-station bathroom. The angle of the shot certainly checked out: Lorenzo was having a staring contest with a janitor’s ass crack as he endeavored to unclog a stubborn toilet. The tape’s audio was just as muddled as its video; it was nearly impossible to discern the man’s disgruntled remarks as he went to town with the plunger, the sloshing akin to a discordant, howling wind.

Lorenzo turned and raised an eyebrow at one of the vets, but his eyes were urgently redirected to the screen.

The clog let go with a gurgle, but the plunger appeared stuck. The janitor hauled on it, his back visibly straining, yet it refused to budge. Lorenzo heard him swear when, suddenly, the plunger began to gyrate erratically within the toilet bowl. Vexed, he moved to grab its handle, but before he could get his hands on it, it disappeared down the drain. He shook his head in disbelief. Then, as if an invisible hand had reached from the bowl and yanked him, he jutted forward violently, bracing himself on the toilet seat as he wrestled with the intangible force.

As the janitor’s head inched towards the toilet bowl, inevitably entering it, Lorenzo covered his mouth. The man’s torso contorted unnaturally as it corkscrewed into the narrow orifice.

The grotesque sounds—muffled screams; violent sloshing; a symphony of snapping bones—proved too much for Lorenzo. The newbie lunged for the nearest bin and dispelled his lunch atop a mound of discarded tapes. The vets

erupted into laughter behind him, flushing his cheeks with shame.

But, just as fast as they began, the guffaws simmered. Lorenzo pulled his head from the bin just in time to see all three men share a sober look, a dark realization creeping across their faces. It took only seconds: the three of them snapped together, imploding into a conjoined cord of matter, their bodies instantaneously wrung out in a gory tidal wave. Through the screen, the toilet slurped up their amalgamation like a long piece of spaghetti.

Lorenzo's eyes widened as he, too, began to feel the gravitational pull of the toilet. It yanked him off his feet—

The BSD instructor paused the security footage, freezing the frame on an airborne Lorenzo. He rose from his chair and slapped the projector with his metre stick. "And that," he said, smugly eyeing the auditorium of recruits, "is why you ensure all traces of anomalies are neutralized—even recordings." He smirked as one of them ran from the room, clutching their stomach. "That is, unless you want to get the shitty end of the stick."

Cole Martin (asilaytrying.substack.com) is a writer from Atlantic Canada. He has a chapbook through Dogleech Books (*pulp.*), and his published fiction is linked in his blog.

Warm Meat

by JS Sarick

His muscle fibers were densely packed like the strata he worked in, deep in the borewells where the gravity and heat cooked them to perfection. Core mining was the ideal environment for developing both fast-twitch muscle fibers and the young hotheads that grew them. And as with most dangerous labour, despite excessive overtime and hazard pay, mantlejacks seemed to be disproportionately in debt. Give a man a fish and he'll eat, but give him one fish after another while he's stuck underground and eventually the fish just pile up and rot. A tired permutation of the same old details and new slang: drugs, gambling, failing relationships, rent, and remittance. I looked up from my microscope and turned back to the sob story sitting on my table.

"That sounds rough. Anyways, you've got two kilos of muscle I can harvest, maybe three if you take some time off to recover. Only scraping your limbs, the primo stuff. You've got good enough mitochondrial density that I can offer above market price, so you're looking at... a little over eight cred per gram." I punched some calculator buttons until they matched my guesstimation and then read out the number. He went through every phase of grief in record time, offering to part out his lungs before I even had the chance to respond, and we settled on three kilos of distributed Type II muscle and a thumb-sized chunk of liver. Two hours later, the young man limped out my door less muscle-bound but richer for it. I'd have felt worse for fleecing him if he hadn't lied about being on cycle.

I wasn't surprised to see the cops later that week. Never am. It's a nice part of town, my medical degree is framed and all my neon signs work, but we all get visits. "Okay, Dr. Igor, you know the drill. We've got a dead mantlejack and you've got pieces of him. All your paperwork and samples, let's go." They were right about everything but my name. Igor's a cute diminutive, though Frankenstein would be more fitting and closer to my real name: Dr. Hackenshaw. Alas, asking for literate cops would be like asking for responsible clientele. We go through the usual paperwork together. Yes, I told him to take time off. No, I didn't know he was selling elsewhere. No, he hadn't disclosed that he was using steroids. Yes, all the material has already been sold.

Scoff at my bussiness, call me Igor or Ripper, but I remember. I've watched mothers wail when we could not get life-saving stem cells for their children.

Sons waiting outside morgues with cash in hopes of finding a matching kidney. I remember when the donation clinics closed because the prices rich folks were paying for immortality made charity unprofitable. Give a hungry man a fish, he'll eat for a day. Teach a hungry man about autocannibalism, he'll eat himself alive. But it's not my fault the man was hungry in the first place.

JS Sarick used to work at the blood factory downtown.
It was a weird job. Sarick prefers writing.

Earth and Quake

by Brenna Thibodeau

Have you ever thought about the earth spirits?

I don't mean the ones that live in the first couple of kilometres or so. Everyone knows those. They're the flashier ones, the exciting ones that spend their lives moving, millimetre by millimetre, over the centuries, tracing the paths of stones. They tangle and seethe in the roots of plants, dance along ancient riverbeds. The mischievous ones wrap around bone, singing songs in their rub-rock voices, or play peek-a-boo with unsuspecting archaeologists.

Nor am I talking about the ones much deeper down. Even the spirits of the upper mantle, a mere forty clicks below, are unknowable. They don't move at all, spend their long, long lives compressed together, a hive-mind beyond hive-minds, individual in ways we can only imagine (so I've been told). Creatures of heat, formed from the dying grasps of stars. Sometimes I wonder if they're earth spirits by name alone.

The earth spirits I'm talking about (the ones I'm most familiar with) are the ones that live, let's say, about six kilometres down. Movement is, for them, something possible but rarely aspired to. Humans are even more rare, and honestly, not worth dreaming about. They know the worms, have heard tell from their cousins about the quick things upon the earth and in the air, flitting about like we're on a time limit, hearts beating, blood rushing like a racecar on a track.

Have you ever thought about muscle spasms?

I don't mean accidental movements, your elbow knocking over a cup you didn't realize was there. I mean a spasm, the contraction you have no control over. The sudden jut of your shoulder to one side, the muscles contracting quick and plastic to slap a cup of water out of your mother's hand. Like a reflective inhale, sharp and biting, followed by your vision turning black from a mascara wand in your eye or the wet, gooey yolk of an egg dripping down your arm. It doesn't hurt, not always, but that doesn't make it pleasant.

Don't do me the insult of asking me to control it. I can't control the sparking of my brain anymore than you can. Go on, try. Tell your neurons to flash in this

pattern, tell your neurotransmitters not to release till you say go. The brain is as unknowable as any deep spirit, we just like to admit it less.

Maybe that was the connection. Some doctor in a lab thought that by combing two mysteries, we could get mastery. Kind of a bad plan, if you ask me, but I try my best not to complain overmuch about the results. Don't want to appear ungrateful, you know how it is. People prefer their medical miracles smiling, especially if they donated to the fundraiser to get them to Sick Kids.

And it worked. I can't deny that it worked. I cried the first time I picked up a glass of water, and just held it, afterwards.

We all did.

Brenna Thibodeau is queer, ND, and Acadian writer of fantasy and historical fiction. Everything Thibodeau writes is a love story.
Sometimes you just have to dig for it.

excerpt from

"Dragon's Cradle"

by Nailah Tataa

Something was not right with her forest.

A sound, *loud* and *incessant* danced between tree branches. Caught by the spring air, it travelled through the skies until, finally, it dropped into the ear of the last forest serpent.

Where the thicket hummed a symphony of sounds, blended seamlessly by her meticulous authoritative claw as she conducted the choir, this strange sound disrupted the euphony.

Nothing but the green foliage was permitted to live within her large domain. She had scared off all the warm blooded creatures and waved off the cold ones, leaving her alone with the trees and shrubs that had watched her grow for millennia. She wanted nothing to disrupt her corpse once her final sleep began.

Her death would trigger the end of the dominance her and her kin had spearheaded for eons, allowing her to finally rest and end their bloodline.

All that was left for her to do was die.

But this *sound*.

Heaving her body up, the trees bowed out of the way, bushes shrinking to allow her excellence an undisturbed walk through her forest. Too many of their children had felt the careless trample of her kin over the centuries and quickly learned to prostrate to her kind, knowing that, death willing, they could feast on her corpse in due time.

The dragon, ignorant of their plotting, focused on tracking down the thing that prevented her from a restful death.

There, nestled in the tall grass, bundled and fussing in its covering, laid the baby of a human.

Even closer, the sound was even more grating. A low growl escaped her mouth as she flattened her ears and drew closer to the horrid thing. Peeling back the cloth carefully with a taloned hand, a brown ball of plump fat and soft skin

peeked out.

Her tongue, extended to lick the air above it and taste its scent, touched the creature slightly, causing the wailing to pause as two big, shiny, brown eyes turned to stare up at her. For a long, swollen silence, the two stared at each other taken aback by each other's form.

The dragon traced the round pudgy face that stared up at it, noting the softness of its flesh, watching its chest rise and fall with each small breath.

The child barely skimming one moon.

As it looked up at the giant that towered over, it noted the mass array of too many teeth that dripped saliva down onto the ground with each heavy breath. It shrank as the multi-eyed beast hissed, its eyes narrowing and flickering with a hunger the brown bundle could not place.

Not a moment later, the child held its breath, opened its mouth, and let out a wail that penetrated even through the dragon's fortified ear folds.

If the binding magic put on her had been any weaker, she would have punctured the child with a tooth and silenced the ear-piercing noise forever.

"Dragon's Cradle" is a short story that follows a dragon who is near death and what she must do to keep a human child alive.

Nailah Tataa/Nailah Moon ([instagram.com/nailahmoonkjipuktuk](https://www.instagram.com/nailahmoonkjipuktuk)) is an artist and writer of speculative fiction based in Mi'kmaki. Their work explores ritual-based art, Afrofuturism, and Afrocentric motifs. From the Didigna Hills, South Sudan.

Danny and the Raccoon

by Baleigh McWade

Danny liked to be outside when the day traded places with the night. One melting into the other felt real, for all the pretend sunshine and noise in the human dens.

Danny felt someone beside him. He looked down to see the raccoon he had given his bannock to the other day.

“Good foraging,” Danny greeted her.

“Mann’rs, eh? Oooi! Don’t get tha ’ere, eh? G’furage, y’say? Mann’rs! D’ye lyke feesh?”

Danny blinked and shook his head. The raccoons here spoke more quickly than the ones from his part of the forest and he couldn’t make out the question. The raccoon tried again.

“D’. Ye lyke. Feesh?”

“Fish?”

The raccoon rolled her eyes, “’ut I say, din’I? Eh? Cum’un ye.”

Danny followed, understanding he had been invited to dine. Raccoons weren’t big on sharing with strangers, so Danny must have impressed her with his willingness to share earlier.

Danny followed her to the water’s edge. They were behind Simon’s house, Danny realized. He’d forgotten to see the village as he had learned it and instead saw it as the raccoon probably did, with buildings as odd not-trees that broke up the clearing. As places for food to be found and dangers to be dodged. Now, in the blurry twilight, Danny could see the place as both. Then it was gone. Danny caught up to the raccoon who had waded a little way into the water. There was one light on in the house, but no sign of movement.

The raccoon was struggling with something in the water. She wasn’t losing a fight so much as trying to do a difficult task in the dark. Danny crouched

down to help her.

It was Simon's minnow cage, the one he used to keep fishing bait. This raccoon was treating it as her own cache. And sharing her treasure with Danny.

Danny froze, half bent toward the wire cage, caught between etiquettes. It was wrong to steal from someone who had brought him into this community. It was rude to refuse food from another, especially when the raccoon was sharing her special dinner.

"Well?" the raccoon asked, "Sti-a finner in."

Danny hesitated. The raccoon held up one digit, bending and extending it.

"Finner. Sti-it in." She pointed her nose at the cage that occupied her hands. With a struggle, she could open it herself, but Danny saw where an extra hand would open the door for her tinier paws to slip in and grab the minnows. Danny sighed and reached for the cage. This social situation was more pressing. There was a chance he could explain himself to Simon, who was very understanding. There was also a chance of replacing the minnows tomorrow.

Sitting in the moonlight with the little thief, Danny felt a thrill of delight as the cold fish tickled down his throat. He'd never had so much fun getting food before. Perhaps the raccoons were on to something. Still, Danny made sure to count how many minnows they ate.

This excerpt is from an unpublished, loving re-make of *The Jungle Book*.

Baby Danny was adopted by a pack of feral dachshunds in the boreal forest. Here, 7-year-old Danny has joined a remote human settlement in an attempt to learn what it means to be human.

Baleigh McWade loves how speculative fiction tweaks common perceptions, changing how we see the world. She asks readers to rethink their view of nature and what it means to be human.

excerpt from

Behind the Beneath

by Peter C Church

At the center of the plaza stood a towering clockwork tree, the golden branches of its crown glittering with jingling jewels. It stood tall as an ancient oak, its bark gilded gold, and its trunk divided into six sections, each set with an ornate clockface measuring a different unit of time, from the year to the minute. Pickwick tugged at his beard in awe; even as he watched, the top-most section of trunk turned a notch with a great *tick-tock*, slicing off another moment and setting it adrift on the tide of time.

Between them and the Clocktree was a labyrinthine hoard; a maze of junk; a pasture of paraphernalia.

"It's garbage," shrugged Marial.

"It's messy," moaned Willifurd.

"It's treasure!" exulted Pickwick.

"Told," said G'Nob.

Pickwick could see it was not simply disordered rubbish. It was a curated collection of too much. Haphazard paths snaked between the piles of goods, each teetering dangerously high, all leading toward the central Clocktree. He looked sidelong at his hyperventilating brother in the cart. Where order-loving Willifurd saw waste, Pickwick saw potential.

G'Nob shaded his eyes and peered suspiciously into the shadows. There were far too many places for a monster to hide in here. The *whys* prodded him to investigate, but he hadn't lived this long by rushing into new experiences. "*Curiosity killed the goblin*" was an intensely literal expression among his clan. He raised one hand to signal the gnomes to stay still.

"Stay out of hoard. Where hoard, there monster. Scout first."

"Oh! Let's go see!" said Pickwick, sprinting past the goblin to paw through the nearest pile. G'Nob stood dejected with his arm raised uselessly. What was the point?

Marial looked at G'Nob and shrugged; she was feeling better now that they were getting somewhere. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"Gruesome death? In three hundred forty-two nasty ways? Counted," offered G'Nob.

They watched as Pickwick, clad in a new oversized pink bathrobe, climbed a tower of crockery.

"Where did everyone go? Maybe the Makers are shy?" said Marial.

G'Nob pointed to the ransacked buildings. "Not shy. Question is. Why?"

"Maybe they got overenthusiastic on a sharing day?"

“Sharing? What that?”

“Oh, back home, we gather on Danderroot Green to share what we have, so everyone has what they need.”

“Why?”

Marial didn’t quite know how to answer that without sounding preachy.

“Well, let’s say I have a tomato.”

“Tomato?”

“It’s a fruit?”

“Fruit?”

“Like a vegetable but squishier.”

G’Nob tapped his ample nose sagely. “Mushroom.”

“*Er*, sure, so I give my mushroom to Pickwick.”

The goblin stared at her unblinking, his brain almost smoking with the effort to grasp this give thing. “Poisoned?”

“Poisoned? No, of course not.”

“Oh.”

Marial felt she was losing the battle.

“Then he gives me a pastry he made.”

“Poisoned?”

“NO! Look, you’re missing the point.”

“Poison way to go. Steal stuff while sucker hurls. Funny.” G’Nob smiled, recalling a devious memory.

Anvil Mountains

by Richard Levangie

Erasmus pushed Alfred hard, for the light was fading, and he wanted to rest in a ramshackle inn on the coastal road to Greysport.

It was his tenth night from Aldsmouth, and the journey was taking a toll. He had run out of daylight and bivouacked below a rough pass in the Anvil Mountains the previous night and, though he built a lean-to and tended a roaring fire, it was a damp and dreary affair, the fingers of frigid winds grabbing at this clothing and probing for frailty all night. He awoke famished, aching, and annoyed. He could be a crotchety old man when the mood took him, but today only Alfred endured his cusses. As he descended the mountain pass, drizzle turned to heavy rain so, when they rejoined the wide road, Alfred cantered for long periods, with only short respites at the River Sloane to regain his strength.

The commotion ahead was the last thing Erasmus needed. Two ruffians harassed a young woman, who awkwardly carried a small basket. They grabbed at her breasts, and forcibly kissed her. He dropped from Alfred, unsheathed his long sword, and approached at a clip.

“Unhand her,” Erasmus said, “or I will cut you. Don’t let a few grey hairs boost your confidence. Better men have fallen to this blade.”

“Two against one, old man,” the heavier thug said, drawing a massive but badly nicked broadsword. “Blood flows, won’t be ours. Go back to your old hag ’fore I carve you into pieces too small for a coyote to bother with.”

As threats went, it wasn’t bad, and the wizard smiled as the smaller man drew a long sword with a better pedigree. He would be more of challenge.

“Run along, good lady. These scoundrels won’t bother you.”

Erasmus circled. The woman, maybe eighteen, looked like a frightened doe.

“Make haste!” His command broke through her fear, and she clutched her basket tightly and finally persuaded her legs to move. She limped, but Erasmus knew he could delay these two long enough. He wanted no blood spilled this day.

As expected, the bigger man attacked first, all brawn, his thunderous broad strokes forcing Erasmus to backpedal several steps before he parried and punched his assailant in the stomach. It knocked some wind from his sails but just enough to slow him as the smaller man pressed forward with great confidence. The clash of metal on metal was fierce, and Erasmus took great care. He was not a common thief.

Erasmus was so occupied by the attacks from this surprising swordsman that he didn't hear the footfalls behind him, and fell to one knee from the blow.

He saw stars, and vaguely realized that a fist-sized rock was arcing again at his head, wielded by the young woman. He fell hard, then nearly unconscious, as heavy kicks and punches rained down upon him, until all was black and sickening and he tasted something like his own death.

This excerpt is from *Red Tiger* (forthcoming from Galleon Books, 2026).

Richard Levangie (richardlevangie.com) is the author *Secrets of the Hotel Maisonneuve* (Nevermore Press, 2020), a middle-grade mystery.

With Two Eyes Made out of Coal

by Gus Doiron

Their love was damned, and he cursed himself for bringing her into his world.

Night was almost upon them. Once darkness fell, they would have been free. But free to what. Her world, of buildings and rules and heat wasn't his, and his world—of ice and snow and nothingness—certainly wasn't hers.

He could have pushed the sled dogs further, and would have, but he knew she was cold—too cold to continue. He stepped on the brake and brought the sled to a stop.

"We need a fire," he said as he looked around the tundra.

"No. Please. They'll see it," Mrs. Claus begged a weak plea.

"They won't. Not out here," he lied.

He looked down at her in her blanket. She had stopped shivering some time ago. She was not cut out for this clime and was dying.

Their attempt at a life together—a life at all—was over. They were done running. He untethered the dogs and chased them away, then smashed the dog sled into kindling. His corn cob pipe caught spark from his flint, and he threw it into the woodpile. Soon, a flame grew before them.

It was a good fire but no match for the cold that had already set into Mrs. Claus's bones. With a blaze crackling in front of them and arctic cold at their back, his core temperature now rose as hers had dropped. Too warm for him and still too cold for her, they awaited their fate.

With blue lips that barely moved, her last breaths no longer steamed with heat, she pleaded with him to save himself. He still had a chance.

"Never," he replied as he held her close. He remained vigilant her clothes didn't catch fire, and he could feel himself melting under his own layers of clothing.

With her eyes closed, her last words were weak. “I love you, Frosty.”

He didn’t know the exact moment she had died, only that she had. And with this knowledge he hugged her closer and kissed her face. Melting snow and tears dripped to the frozen ground, becoming one.

By the time her husband and the Christmas Magi caught up to them, night had descended. The flames that had been their beacon had spent themselves into embers, barely bright enough to illuminate her bundled-up corpse.

He gave himself time to look at the remains. To look at his Truly and Forever; pale, stiff, and still as beautiful as the day they married. He had taught her to hunt, read the stars, and decipher the Lists, but not to stay with her own kind.

“Santa?” One of the magi brought him back to where they were.

“Take her. Her place is home. The elves can say goodbye.”

“And the abomination?”

“Leave him. He wanted the ice. The ice can have him.”

Under and around her, empty clothes had been wet then frozen in bent shapes where a man—a snowman—once sat.

And loved.

About the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia

“Writers helping writers.”

This collaborative philosophy has been the foundation of the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia (WFNS) since its creation as a non-profit arts service organization in 1976.

Today, the same philosophy informs our wide array of programs, events, and resources that support the craft of writing, the business of being a writer, and the promotion of Nova Scotia writers as integral to the province's cultural life and creative economy. Our 800+ annual members, come from all career stages and parts of the province and engage in a diverse range of forms, genres, and writing practices.

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General Membership in WFNS is open to anyone with an interest in writing, regardless of writing experience or place of residence. General Members receive access to support services and members-only programs, discounts on submission fees and workshop registration, and subscription to our weekly newsletter, full of literary news, events, and opportunities.

Writers' Council membership is a special, permanent designation for WFNS members who have produced professional bodies of work. Writers' Council members are eligible for numerous competitively compensated opportunities through WFNS programs.

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Visit writers.ns.ca to learn more about member benefits, discover WFNS programs and awards, browse upcoming events, register for workshops, and access our free public resources.

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The Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia is based in Kijipuktuk, in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People. This territory is covered by the Treaties of "Peace and Friendship," which Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) Peoples first signed with the British Crown in 1725. The treaties do not deal with surrender of lands and resources but in fact recognize Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) title and establish the rules for an ongoing relationship between nations.

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