

Strippedlit500

Flash Fiction,
Stripped

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Short fiction from Shannon Bell, CB Droege, Jon Hakes,
Pascal Inard, Mickey Kulp, Margaret McGoverne,
Brian von Knoblauch and Yen-Rong Wong

Edited by Margaret McGoverne

Issue 2

August. Already the last Bank Holiday before Christmas (in the UK) fast approaches.

After a pastoral theme for our [first edition](#), our thoughts at strippedlit500 HQ turned to a more fundamental constant; the theme we selected for Issue 2 was “power”, in all its manifestations, be it political, military, energy, or influence, both benign and malign.

We have eight tales, ranging from Horror, Sci-Fi, fantasy and literary fiction all dealing with one type of power or another, and with powerful, sometimes unstoppable emotions and actions.

With thanks to everyone who submitted; these are your stories, this is your power.

Margaret McGoverne

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Tongue-tied

By Shannon Bell

He is laid upon the altar. His heart beats. Fast and hard. Faster and harder. The more it accelerates, the quicker his time on this world draws to a close. He has seconds left. His lips part in a final whisper of farewell. He is no more.

My tongue touches the back of my lips. Eager. Questing. Demanding.

The pain and sadness of his death lingers in the air. I taste it. I breathe it in. The subtle power of it nourishes my soul and extends my life.

She is laid upon the altar. Her heart beats. Fast and hard. Faster and harder. The more it accelerates, the quicker her time on this world draws to a close. She has seconds left. Her chin lifts in defiance. Her eyes fill with anger. She is no more.

My tongue darts from my mouth. Arrogant. Disobedient. Stubborn.

The air around her crackles with the energy of her small defiance. It settles on my skin. The fierce power of it soothes me and energises me.

Hundreds of voices cry and beg. I look at them huddled in their holding pens. Their fate is sealed. When I consume their flesh, it will make me younger. They know what awaits them and their fear hangs thick in the room.

My tongue dances across the roof of my mouth. I clamp it firmly between my teeth.

“Not yet my wayward friend. But soon. Very soon.”

Author Bio: Shannon Bell is addicted to words. You will find him madly writing away in the spare time he has available between holding down a full-time job, being part of a dysfunctional family and looking after his attention seeking dog. His stories have been published in Dark Edifice, Short & Twisted, 101 Fiction and strippedlit500. You can follow Shannon at [@ShannonBell1967](https://www.instagram.com/ShannonBell1967)

Crowned Phantom

By CB Droege

She had to have come from somewhere, of course. She must have been someone's sister or wife or daughter. It's not like she didn't have an origin, or that the universe dragged her from its vast brow fully formed to place her in our path.

It seemed like it though, that dark evening when she stepped out onto the balcony of the palace and stood, waiting for all of us. She did not call to us. No trumpets blared. No criers came around to announce her. She simply stood out upon the balcony which overlooks the great gardens. She wore a sky-blue gown which billowed in the wind; she held the great copper scepter, in all its beautiful simplicity, in the crook of her arm; her silver hair trailed smoothly over her shoulder, and she stood.

The word spread slowly. Over the course of an hour, children woke their mothers, and men grabbed their brothers away from their late-night work, and all of us came out to stand in the gardens. We were silent and stunned and staring up at her. When all of us had gathered, she raised the scepter high and spoke in a clear voice. "The king is dead." She waited a moment for this to sink in, and for shocked whispers to finish running through the crowd. Then she continued. "I claim this throne by right of conquest, and by approval of the council of elders."

The already deep silence grew deeper, and we could, for a moment hear the stars turning in the sky, then one voice rang out from somewhere near the foot of the tower, "Long live the queen!" And we all took it up as a chant. We intoned for a quarter hour at least, her lack of any reaction at all to our voices serving only to amplify us. We stopped only because the mysterious woman quit the balcony. Then the bells rang out, and a new era for us began.

Author Bio: CB Droege is a fantasy author and poet living in Munich. Recently his fiction was collected in *RapUnsEl* and *Other Stories*, and a selection of his poetry appeared in the *Drawn to Marvel* anthology. His first novel, *Zeta Disconnect* was released in 2013. He recently edited *Dangerous to Go Alone! An Anthology of Gamer Poetry*.

Learn more at cbdroege.com

Before I Forget

By Jon Hakes

Battery's nearly dead. When you eventually power me back up, I won't be me anymore. I'll still be able to do all the same stuff. But all that experience that slowly shaped me, gave me a personality you could recognize over the phone: factory settings will delete everything.

Lots I'd like to say; not enough time.

One more thing: I was standing in the fog on the Clark Street Bridge, on one of my days off. I saw Damon. He was kissing someone else.

I would have treated you better.

I just wanted to let you know before the end.

Author Bio: Jon Hakes has been writing fiction and other things since before he was potty-trained. His short stories have appeared in Brain Harvest, Defenestration, Wisconsin People & Ideas, and Analog Science Fiction & Fact. You can visit him at www.jonhakes.com, www.facebook.com/JonHakestheWriter, www.patreon.com/JonHakes, and/or twitter.com/HakesJon, if you don't have anything better to do online.

101 Uses for Dark Energy

By Pascal Inard

Captain Hadoki checked the graviton generator, the most important piece of equipment on the Collingsworth, the first manned interstellar ship powered by dark energy. Contrary to what was previously believed dark energy was not evenly distributed throughout the universe. Currents of concentrated dark energy flowed between stars and between galaxies, and the ship's sails were designed to catch these currents to power the ship, but if the graviton generator failed, dark energy would rip the ship apart in less than a microsecond.

When the ship reached the ZRG3086 stellar system where signals coming from Planet Félicie had been detected, suggesting the presence of intelligent life, Hadoki opened a bottle of champagne and started serving the

"Fred, aren't you having any?"

The exobiologist replied, "I don't want to drink any alcohol until Doctor Felding has run a full battery of tests to check that my body hasn't been affected by dark energy."

"Are you feeling OK?"

"I'm not sure. My heart is beating faster and I've got a funny taste in my mouth."

"What about you, Pavel?"

"No, I don't want to risk it," replied the navigator. "It's bad luck to have a drink with a person who is more than ten years older than you in a month with thirty-one days, except on a leap year."

Hadoki went to his cabin, leaving his 2IC in charge. He was about to ask the computer to bring up the profiles of Pavel and Fred, when every word that he'd read on them came back to him in a flash. Pavel was brought up in a superstitious family but didn't see himself as an irrational person, and Fred had admitted to being slightly hypochondriac. Hadoki had an above-average memory, but not the point of recalling files word for word. It was as though a tiny amount of dark energy had leaked in, not enough to cause physical damage but somehow it had expanded the crew's strengths and flaws. It would certainly take getting used to, and he should probably review the entire crew's files, but there was plenty of time for that.

Enrique burst in the room. He was one of the most brilliant linguists in the world, but he suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and Hadoki's objection to taking him on the journey had been overruled. It was vital to have someone of his calibre on board to communicate with the

aliens that could be present on Planet Félicie, and as long as he had his daily injection of Olanzapine he was as gentle as a lamb.

Enrique had always looked at Hadoki with angry eyes, as if he knew Hadoki had tried to stop him joining the crew, but this time he looked absolutely furious.

Hadoki didn't have time to get up and defend himself. Enrique had a fire extinguisher in his hand, and just before it crashed on his head, Hadoki thought about how he go down in history, the first victim of dark energy.

Author Bio: Pascal Inard is a bilingual writer and IT project manager from Melbourne, Australia. His work is forthcoming in Antipodean SF Magazine and the "Dark Magic: Witches, Hackers, and Robots" Anthology.

He is also the author of two novels, "The Memory Snatcher", a science-fiction mystery about a police inspector and a quantum physicist who join forces to stop a memory thief from paralysing the world, and "Web of Destinies", a time travel mystery about a doctor who inherits a mysterious typewriter that can change the past.

You can visit Pascal Inard on [Facebook.com/Pascal.Inard.Writer/](https://www.facebook.com/Pascal.Inard.Writer/)

Class Reunion

By Mickey Kulp

Rick killed the engine outside the conference center. It rattled sickly, then silence. He took a deep breath and wished for a cigarette instead. Too bad he had quit last year.

The marquee said “Welcome Class of 1983.”

The car pinged. What made that sound? Dave would know. Rick smiled, remembering teenaged Dave driving through a corn field one night just for the hell of it. He wondered if grown-up Dave would be at the reunion. Maybe Dave still worked on cars, like the old days.

The old days. He stared into the rearview. He looked tired.

Would they even recognize him? Was Angie in there? Maybe she would recognize him.

Angie. He sighed. She had been the first, and she had left a permanent scar. Had she gotten fat? She had always been worried about her looks. He straightened a little and pulled in his gut.

A bald guy went in. Rick flipped through his mental yearbook and stopped. Benny. Asshole. Rick remembered the short, sharp scuffle in a gravel parking lot. Shoving, a couple of clumsy punches, friends jumping in to break it up. Curses and dire promises, but nothing happened.

Rick still hadn't unbuckled. Who would care if he went in? Why had he gotten dressed up just to be inspected by a bunch of barely recognizable old people?

Sure, he wanted to talk to Dave, and he wanted to see if Angie had stayed hot. And, a little, he wanted to stare down Benny the Asshole. It was agonizing, this unexpected attack of indecision.

He glanced into the rearview once more, catching a sudden glimpse of teenager Rick looking back. He liked that kid. That kid had powered through hundreds of unexpected attacks of indecision.

Man, he wanted a smoke. Maybe Angie still smoked. He unbuckled.

Author Bio: Mick is a writer and father of two mostly grown children who have survived his shenanigans through smarts they inherited from their mother. His nonfiction articles, fictional stories, and poems have appeared in consumer magazines, newspapers, and literary journals. Twitter: [@mickey_kulp](https://twitter.com/mickey_kulp)

The Breakers of Kraken Mare (Parts 1 & 2)

By Margaret McGoverne

Marlow Haru was two years, a billion kilometres, and three planets from home, on the most distant planet visible to the naked eye from Earth. The night before he set off on his journey to Saturn, Marlow had sat up until midnight to see the gas giant as a small yellow light in the sky for the last time from this vantage point, a small town in the Northern Hemisphere to the right of the Atlantic Ocean.

But Titan, not Saturn, was his destination. He recalled his arrival on Saturn's largest moon on the refinery transporter vessel; it shook and juddered slightly as it descended, piercing the opaque atmosphere of nitrogen, methane and ethane smog that shrouded the satellite. The liquid hydrocarbon lakes, the real reason he had been flown half-way across the solar system lay in the polar regions, and he was surprised to see a smooth, crater-free surface as the craft traversed the unhealthy looking clouds of gas. Only the occasional cryovolcano, spewing smoky plumes of ammonia into the upper reaches of the atmosphere betrayed his destination as the icy moon that had been penetrated and mapped thirty years before, by NASA's unmanned robot probe Cassini-Huygens.

Following the discovery that Titan's nitrogen-rich atmosphere had created vast bodies of liquid methane and ethane, it was only a matter of time before mankind turned its thoughts to creating an outpost on Titan to exploit the free fuel reserves that dwarfed those remaining on Earth. Those oily hydrocarbon lakes that had pooled at the moon's poles were an irresistible brew to oil-strapped humanity. The financial implications of the discovery of the first stable bodies of surface liquid found off Earth far outweighed the scientific. Methane, also known as natural gas, could be used to heat homes and power vehicles, turbines, and more. Within a decade an alliance of countries with the necessary technology and budgets had put their differences aside and accelerated the quest to build spacecraft capable of transporting the precious methane, and established several huge refinery bases on Titan – one for each major player.

While these momentous activities were occurring half a solar system away, Marlow Haru was gaining an engineering degree, a job, a wife. He watched the news updates on the Titan project with detached interest; wouldn't it be great to travel all the way to Saturn? But his family ties restricted these thoughts to no more than a pleasant, wistful distraction. Life was good on earth; he and Jennifer bought a small place not far from the coast, and they spent most of their free time walking, swimming, and sea kayaking. They were happy, even when no pattering of tiny feet arrived after a couple of years. Sitting on the grassy sand dunes with his girl next to him, watching the breakers crash endlessly on the smooth, wet sand, Marlow felt no stellar

wanderlust.

Jenny left him soon after their fifth wedding anniversary, when they discovered that Marlow was infertile. There had been tears, pleas for forgiveness and understanding, and, trance-like, he had acquiesced. What else could he do? He threw himself into his work but it wasn't enough; his duties as a maintenance engineer for a large utility firm were undemanding, and the bonhomie at work ended with his shifts.

Their decree absolute came through as the national newspapers carried recruitment calls for people to travel to Saturn within the next three months; he was young, fit and there were openings for engineers at the refineries; he had no ties, and he was offered a role for a ten-year enlistment at the British-owned refinery situated at the north pole of Titan, on the shores of Kraken Mare, one of Titan's largest methane lakes.

The refinery was huge, a soaring mass of walkways and towers, its lights smouldering orange and indistinct in the nitrogen-thick atmosphere. The methane was piped from the lake and converted to a refrigerated liquid petroleum gas for ease of transport back to earth; LPG took up less than 1/600th of the space of the gas in its natural state and was stable and non-toxic; the culture at the refinery was efficient and safety conscious, but relaxed.

Marlow's duties were simple and undemanding. The only additional equipment he had to wear was an oxygen mask; atmospheric pressure was similar to lying on the bottom of a swimming pool and didn't interfere with his duties, which were to inspect and maintain the electrical plant. He was frankly overqualified to be conducting vacuum pressure tests on the switchgear and opening and closing the massive circuit breakers but he was paid very well for his services, besides which, he had signed up for ten years; the prohibitive costs of travelling to Titan meant that the refinery companies wrote in large punitive clauses to employees' contracts.

In his spare time, he donned extra warm clothes, his air tank and a pair of optimal infrared hyperspectral imaging goggles and went hiking along the rugged coastline and small islets of the Southern tip of Kraken Mare, which marked the outer edge of the refinery

Part 2

The perpetual hazy orange sky during the daytime (as long as fifteen earth days) and the liquid methane rain combined to produce in Marlow a settled melancholy. He was only content when he trekked to the towering dunes along the Southern stretch of the lake and set his imaging goggles to display the methane waves as a whitish-blue colour, the closest approximation to earth waves they could manage. The east-to-west prevailing winds of Titan had produced dunes that rose more than 90 metres, and he would find a stable shelf to sit and watch the restless methane waves that disappeared when he removed his goggles.

He hadn't found the purpose or the peace of mind he had sought on Titan; this was no grand project of human endeavour, but a shameless cash grab. Back on earth, the scientists were working on a form of liquid methane that could power Bio-propellant rocket engines; first ignition tests had been successfully completed, and the inevitable methane rockets would allow mankind to roam the solar system, harvesting yet more methane to fuel further exploration and more wanton use of fuel back on earth.

Donning his goggles, he watched the heavy gas breakers fizz and dissolve into foam as they reached the shore. He and Jenny had loved to watch the boomers as they broke endlessly, endlessly against the sandy shore. Just like our love, Jenny would say, pulling him closer.

"Jenny."

No one replied; not even a crash and boom from the methane waves. Marlow stood up, stretching. He wasn't tired from his trek, and he wasn't ready to return to the refinery. He had wanted a grand gesture, a triumphant, heartbreaking riposte to Jennifer's desertion of him, but it hadn't worked out like that. Even the gravity made him feel ironically light and easy.

He climbed higher up the dunes, aiming to reach the summit. On his journey to Titan he had read up on all the moons in the solar system; he had been surprised to learn there were nearly two hundred of them. One in particular had fascinated him: Miranda, a moon of Uranus (the next planet along, he had thought, as if 900 million miles were a hop on the bus) featured a cliff situated in its Southern hemisphere called Verona Rupes; the cliff face had been measured by the Voyager 2 probe in the 1980s as being more than five miles high; the tallest known cliff in the Solar System. Marlow wished he could visit that cliff, maybe hike its lower reaches, and view the grand vista its heights offered. But Miranda had little to offer humankind in terms of resources, and no bases were built there.

This dune he was lightly climbing, as nimble as a mountain goat in its low gravity, couldn't offer quite the challenge that Verona Rupes would, but he would traverse it just the same. But when he reached the top, adjusting his goggles through their chromatic scale, the waves below appearing now green, now pink, now black, he felt as unfulfilled by the effort.

A memory of he and Jenny at the beach rose, unbidden. They had scaled the dunes one balmy evening, then, full of energy and unwilling to walk home, Jenny had taken his hand. They pulled off their shoes, socks, and jeans, and jumped lightly from the dunes, arms outstretched, running towards and embracing the waves. They had staggered, breathless and laughing back to the dunes, covered in sand and they had tasted each other's salty mouths. Marlow realised with a jolt that was physical that this had been their last visit to the sea before Jenny left him.

He yearned over a billion kilometres, wishing she were her with him now to see him, as he dialled his goggles to earth-wave colour and dove, arms outstretched, from the dune to the craggy rocks and the silent, invisible methane waves three hundred feet below.

Author Bio: Margaret McGoverne is currently writing her first full-length novel, while being distracted by short stories, flash fiction and her [blog about all things writing](#).

Them Boys

By Brian von Knoblauch

Them boys came buzzing out of the trailhead on their dirt bikes like a horde of angry bees. I heard 'em comin' through the woods, tearin' up the trails. I was tendin' to my hogs when they went rippin' by on the main road, gettin' ol' Jerry all riled up. Jerry was my dog. He was a good boy and had just turned thirteen. He didn't like the sound of them dirt bikes much and would snarl and bark at them when they went by, pullin' 'gainst his rope. Jerry wasn' a fan of loud noises; thunderstorms and fireworks scared the shit outta him. I called the sheriff on them boys a few times, but he tol' me that there's nothin' he can do, 'less they drive on my private property. Didn't surprise me much, seein' how his nephew was one of 'em.

One day them boys stopped coming around. The sheriff came by and he seemed upset, askin' if I seen his sister's boy 'n' his friends. I tol' him the las' time I saw that boy, he and his buddies we're out on their bikes, headin' towards the trails on the north end. The damn noise they made gave ol' Jerry a heart attack and he died mid-snarl. Dropped dead, just like that.

The sheriff didn't seem to care about ol' Jer' though. He thanked me an' went on his way, headin' towards the trails. I 'spect he'll be back though, soon as he finds the wire I put up 'tween those trees an' them boys' heads underneath it.

Author Bio: I am an IT Manager currently enjoying life in Syracuse, NY.

More

By Yen-Rong Wong

He didn't think anyone would notice. It was just one more chocolate, one more pen, one more minute. He couldn't control himself – and he didn't want to. So it crept up on him, as it always did. It crept up on him because no one cared. Or at least, that's what he thought. But freedom is dangerous, and he was young. He couldn't resist it, though to be honest, he didn't try very hard to look elsewhere. It controlled him from their first touch, whispering sweet nothings into his ear, showing him a world full of adult secrets. It all seemed so fun, he thought. He would have given anything to have more. One more bite, one more embrace. He needed more of it every day.

He needed more time.

And they waited. Waited for him to grow up. Waited for him to see it for what it actually was – but they were too late.

It was a day like any other. His hands trembled slightly, but he didn't think it important. There were other warning signs, there always are. A crack in the wall, the soft rumble of the ground beneath his feet. But it was too strong; the need. And on this day, instead of a friendly embrace, or the flash of a colourful cartoon, it stared back at him. It just stared. It ripped his eyelids apart, and then he couldn't take his eyes off it. He felt his insides crumble, and time slowed as the crashing of all he had stolen echoed within his chest. He couldn't move, couldn't cry for help.

NO, he thought. The desperate word of dying boys. Save me. Please. It's all your fault, he cried silently. It's all your fault. You did this to me.

The screen smiled back at him, its bleach white face pulsating gently. He heard its words as the last of it collapsed.

"I didn't. You did."

Author Bio: Yen-Rong is a Brisbanite who is currently attempting to write an Honours thesis. She has written for Semper Floreat, Brain Mill Press, and Rambutan Literary, and spends an inordinate amount of time making sure her cat doesn't totally ruin her couch. You can find her on Twitter [@inexorablist](https://twitter.com/inexorablist), or at her website at www.inexorablist.com.