

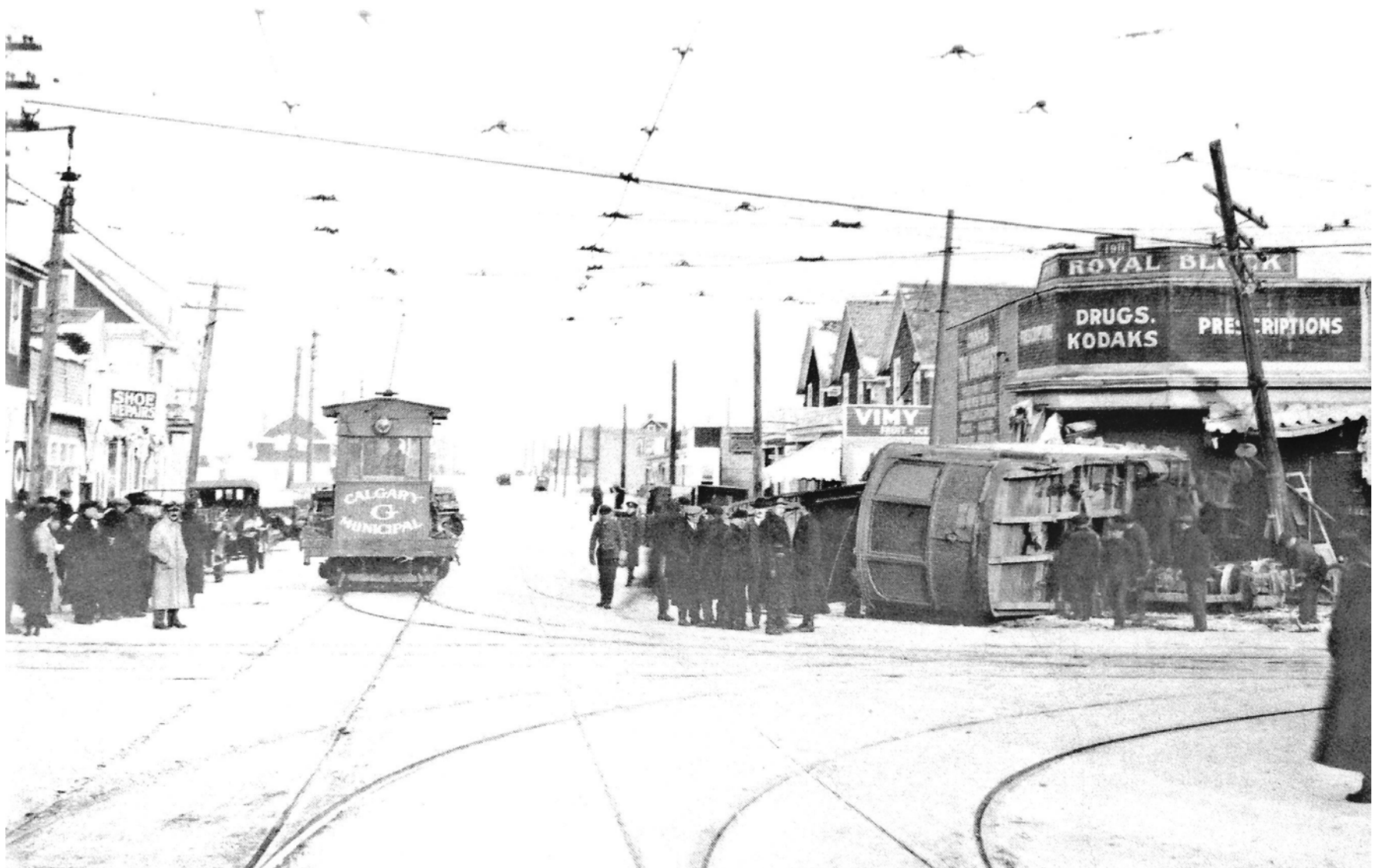
# OPUNTIA

## 298

Groundhog Day 2015

**Opuntia** is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. My e-mail address is: [opuntia57@hotmail.com](mailto:opuntia57@hotmail.com) When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

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## TRANSIT FANNING IN CALGARY: PART 8.

### DEATH OF A POSTMAN.

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 7 appeared in issues 256, 258, 260, 264, 269, 275, and 283 respectively.]

Calgary Transit began in 1909 as a streetcar system because the unpaved streets were too rough and muddy for buses. It was originally called the Calgary Municipal Railway. In 1946, the name was changed to Calgary Transit System and the final word dropped in 1970. Most streets by 1946 were paved. Trolley buses began replacing streetcars in 1947 and the conversion was done by 1950. At the same time, Calgary Transit began buying motor buses, first gasoline and then later diesel. The last trolley bus ran in 1975, and thereafter service was by diesel bus. Lines were identified by colour combinations until 1936. As an example, what is today Route 7 into South Calgary/Altadore was then called the Blue and Orange Line.

Route 7 is one of Calgary's oldest bus routes, dating from 1909, and much of it today still follows the original way. Part of its route is along 14 Street SW where it comes down a steep hill to the intersection of 17 Avenue. In winter, bus and car drivers alike get entirely too much excitement trying to go up or down the hill in snowy or icy conditions. That was to cause the death of a Calgary man in 1919.

An iconic image of Calgary history is a photo of a streetcar lying on its side, smashed into Crooks Drugs. The streetcar was descending 14 Street SW hill at 06h10 on Monday morning, 1919-12-15. There was ice on the rails, and the motorman lost control. This ordinarily wouldn't matter since then and now Route 7 goes straight down 14 Street past 17 Avenue. Unfortunately a Calgary Municipal Railway employee had been chipping ice out of the rail switch at the base of the hill and forgot to re-set it for straight ahead.

The streetcar, sliding helplessly down the hill, hit the switch at full speed and instead of going harmlessly straight ahead, swerved east on 17 Avenue. It couldn't and didn't make the turn and flopped over on its left, sliding into the drugstore. One man on the streetcar was killed and thirteen injured. The drugstore wasn't yet open for business and Ivan Crooks got a tremendous shock when he arrived a short while later to open his store.

The dead man was Robert Dougherty McWilliams, letter carrier #20 of the Calgary post office. He had been sitting on the righthand side of the streetcar, and when it tipped over, he was thrown downwards, smashing through a window on the opposite side. He died of head injuries. He was traveling with his son Alexander, also a postie. They were heading for the downtown Post Office, where Robert would pick up his daily mailbag of letters for delivery and his son would work inside the building as a clerk. The McWilliams household did not have a very happy Christmas.

None of the buildings remain, and the tracks were torn up for scrap iron decades ago. I doubt that a dozen people in Calgary today out of all those who drive through the intersection know the story.



# RETIEF, OF THAT ILK

by Dale Speirs

One of the science fiction series that I collected for one final read in my retirement was that of Jame Retief, interstellar diplomat. The stories were published in SF magazines and then later collected into books. They were written by Keith Laumer (1925-1993), who in his day job had served with the American diplomatic corp, and was spoofing that which he knew well.

The main aspect of the stories I like best are how Laumer created genuine alien species with distinctive behaviours and speech patterns. The stories were published over three decades and were not in chronological or any other kind of order. This makes it difficult to review them by theme.

Laumer also published a series of stories about the Bolo tanks, self-aware artificial-intelligence war machines. The Retief stories occasionally mention a Bolo in passing but they do not have any major part in the stories other than to indicate the two series were set in the same universe.

Retief is a handsome muscular young diplomat with the Corp Diplomatique Terrestrienne (CDT) in a junior position. His boss is Ben Magnan most of the time but Retief is occasionally seconded to an ambassador or some other overstuffed dignitary. Magnan is a by-the-book and very cowardly mid-level bureaucrat. To give him credit, he often follows Retief into dangerous situations and will unbend enough when the situation requires the rule book to be tossed out the window.

## The Plot.

The stories follow a similar pattern. Terra is trying to bring peace, order, and good government to some alien culture whether they want it or not, and to impose it with the same methodology and results that the USA used on Iraq or the Soviet Union in eastern Europe. If the alien government is too powerful for such methods, then the CDT must go in and straighten the matter out with baksheesh and cultural exchanges. They may also use their own private army, the Peace Enforcers, who are not soldiers, just a group of well-disciplined diplomats carrying weapons and flying in heavily-armed spacecraft that are not military ships.

Once the current muddle of the story is revealed, Retief quietly works in the background and counteracts the CDT in the interests of justice without them being aware of who actually stymied their plans. Often there are enemies of Terra acting as well, particularly the Groaci regime, who commonly use legal trickery backed up by military force in their attempts to subjugate a planet.

The plots are mostly identical. The stories were originally published in SF magazines over a period of time and were not intended to be read all in one sitting. The fun of reading them is the twist at the end, and the characterization of the CDT staff and the Groaci. Quite often there are several twists, as the advantage passes back and forth between the CDT and the Groaci.

Most of the stories are prefaced by an extract from the official history of the CDT which summarizes the glorious way in which Ambassador So-and-so or a CDT diplomat solved a crisis on an alien world. The story then tells what really happened, how the CDT buffoons messed it up while Retief worked behind the scenes to repair matters with a few well-placed spots of sabotage or thuggery. He operates without his CDT superiors, save perhaps Magnan, knowing what was actually happening, and is content to stay modestly in the background without any credit.

## The Corp Diplomatique Terrestrienne.

Laumer was obviously working out his frustrations about his career as a diplomat. The ambassadors in the Retief stories are all named derogatorily. As an example, DIPLOMAT AT ARMS, which collects stories from the early 1960s, mentions the various ambassadors for whom Retief and Magnan work for as having names such as Nitworth, Sternwheeler, Hidebinder, Biteworse, and Smallfrog. They are all pompous fools with no regard for justice, just their career paths.

Magnan is also a time-serving opportunist, but he does yield to Retief when pushed. He may not actively assist Retief but will often look the other way and say nothing as Retief blatantly violates policy.

Retief is the James Bond type, handsome, clever on his feet in a tight spot, and good at spotting anomalies. He prefers to work alone, especially away from CDT staff, but often relies on local inhabitants who know the terrain and local politics.

The CDT staff use an elaborate structure of etiquette that would not have been out of place in a Vienna palace during the height of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A running joke through the stories are the facial expressions that the staff are trained in. To take an example, “The Hoob Melon Crisis” story shows Ambassador Earlyworm and his staff using on each other such facial expressions as 321-k (Benignly Restrained Severity), 927-d (Viewing With Alarm, Second Degree), and 217-f (Sublime Confidence, Enhanced By Consciousness Of Virtue). Ben Magnan always had trouble with that last one, as a result of which his career has suffered.

An extract from the hoob melon story illustrates this: *“A most perceptive observation, Chester”, Earlyworm said, bestowing a 24-w (Gracious Condescension) leavened with a hint of 7-y (Expectation Of Great Thing In Due Course) on the lucky bureaucrat, at which his fellow underlings around the table were quick to bombard him with approbation, ranging from Faintlady’s 12.7-x (Knew You Had It In You, Fella) to Felix’s more restrained 119-a (We’re All Pulling For You, Lad), to which he responded with a shy 3-v (Modest Awareness Of Virtue).*

**The Enemy.**

The most common adversary of the CDT are the Groaci, the funniest alien species in science fiction. They are from the planet Groac, which suggests the pronunciation of their name is “grow-ack-ee” rather than “grouchy”. Laumer was writing in the 1960s about his diplomatic experiences in the 1950s, so the Groaci are analogues of the Soviets.

The Groaci have spindly legs and an exoskeleton torso with five eyestalks on top. There are passing references to their young as grubs. Their biology isn’t discussed that much but one of their favourite insults against each other is “nest-fouling litter mate”, which gives an idea. They often wear eyeshades, with colours ranging from combat camouflage for soldiers to gem-encrusted gold for high society. Groaci generally call humans Soft Ones or Terries. The Groaci language is a whistling high-pitched one which is translated by language devices carried by other species, such as humans, as a matter of routine. The Groaci are relentless, constantly testing the CDT, but fortunately their incompetence is greater than that of the Terries.

Another species that causes problems are the Basurans, voracious eaters who strip planets clean down to the bedrock. Not just figuratively but actually

because they can eat anything; plants, soil, mineral deposits, and oceans. With a lifestyle like that, they have to stay on the move, and the CDT is delegated to stop them on several occasions. They fail, of course, because the Basurans take no note of diplomacy. However, Retief wins the day with a well-aimed blaster shot, since the Basurans are not very good fighters and rely entirely on bluff. As any poker player knows, you can’t bluff 100% of the time.

**IF YOU AREN’T SQUAMOUS, THEN WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO BE ELDRITCH?**

by Dale Speirs

In which I look at a variety of stories from realm of weird fiction.

**Out Where The West Ends.**

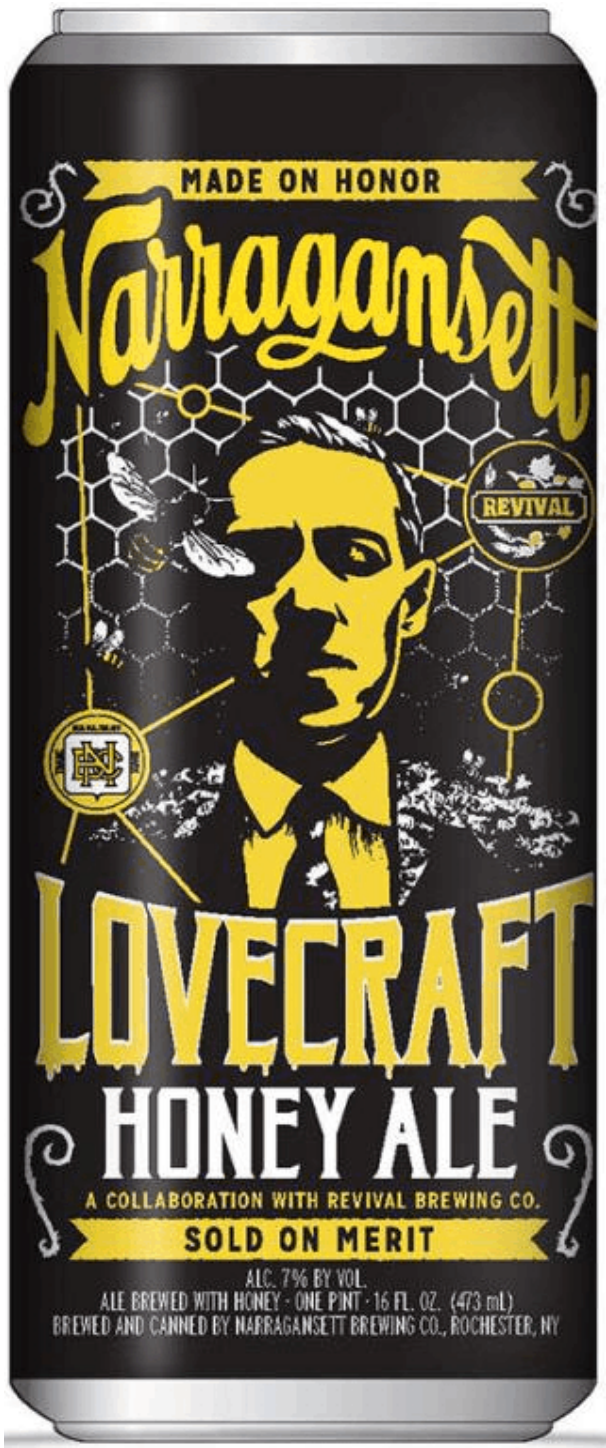
DEAD MAN’S HAND (2014, trade paperback) is an anthology of short stories edited by John Joseph Adams on the theme of weird westerns. I’m not going to review all the stories because I’m tired of vampires in the Old West or monster versus cowboy duels. I’ll just mention a couple of stories I liked but notwithstanding my remark above, most of the other stories in this anthology read well even if cliched.

“Hellfire On The High Frontier” by David Farland has a Texas Ranger stalking a psychopathic clockwork man who kills an innocent stranger once a month, to the minute. The usual cliché is that the hero finds a weak spot and destroys the robot. The story points out that in reality an old-time gunslinger would die at the hands of an armoured robot, and so he does.

Mike Resnick has fun with “The Hellbound Stagecoach”. Ben Bradshaw finds himself on a stagecoach drawn by a team of black horses with glowing red eyes. He and the other passengers soon figure out they are all dead by gunshot and will be riding the coach to the end of the line, wherever that may be. There is a nice twist ending, as the passengers make a deal with the stagecoach driver to let them off at a suitable location and build a stopping house along the route instead of being taken to their final destination. They can then spend eternity as genteel innkeepers instead of finding out what fate has in store for them at the end of the line.



**Taking HPL's Name In Vain.**



LOVECRAFT UNBOUND (2009, trade paperback) is an anthology edited by Ellen Datlow of stories in the HPL theme but not invoking Cthulhu or using words like “eldritch” or “ichor” (her statement in the foreword). I’ll just pick a few stories as examples.

“The Crevasse” by Dale Bailey and Nathan Ballingrud is about an Antarctic dog team expedition who find something at the bottom of a crevasse. There is a staircase at the bottom which goes down, down, down, to who knows where. But the expedition is in trouble, with injured crew members and short on supplies. They will have a struggle to get back to base camp, or else die on the ice. The story abruptly cuts off without any denouement.

“The Office Of Doom” by Richard Bowes is about a retiring librarian whose final job is to clean out Room 975. It is known by him and the few remaining older employees as the Office of Doom because that was where unwanted staff or student assistants were placed. One of the assistants, years before, ordered a copy of the NECRONOMICON through Inter-Library Lending and got the real thing. Events affecting subsequent occupants of the Office of Doom changed the meaning of its name to the real thing before it was sealed off as a little-used storage room. A nice idea that would make a good movie if the general public knew who HPL was. The best story of the bunch.

“Sincerely Petrified” by Anna Tambour is about Petrified Forest National Park and has nothing to do with HPL. The park is unique in that its main feature is the ease with which petrified wood can be stolen. Among other things, park rangers created a myth that cursed thieves in the hope of making them feel guilty and returning the stolen wood. The story is about two fossil collectors, and doesn’t really belong in this anthology.

“That Of Which We Speak When We Speak Of The Unspeakable” by Nick Mamatas is about three survivors waiting in a desert cave to make a last and futile stand against the shoggoths. The Old Ones have returned and no one bothers to lurk on the threshold anymore. A vignette rather than a story.

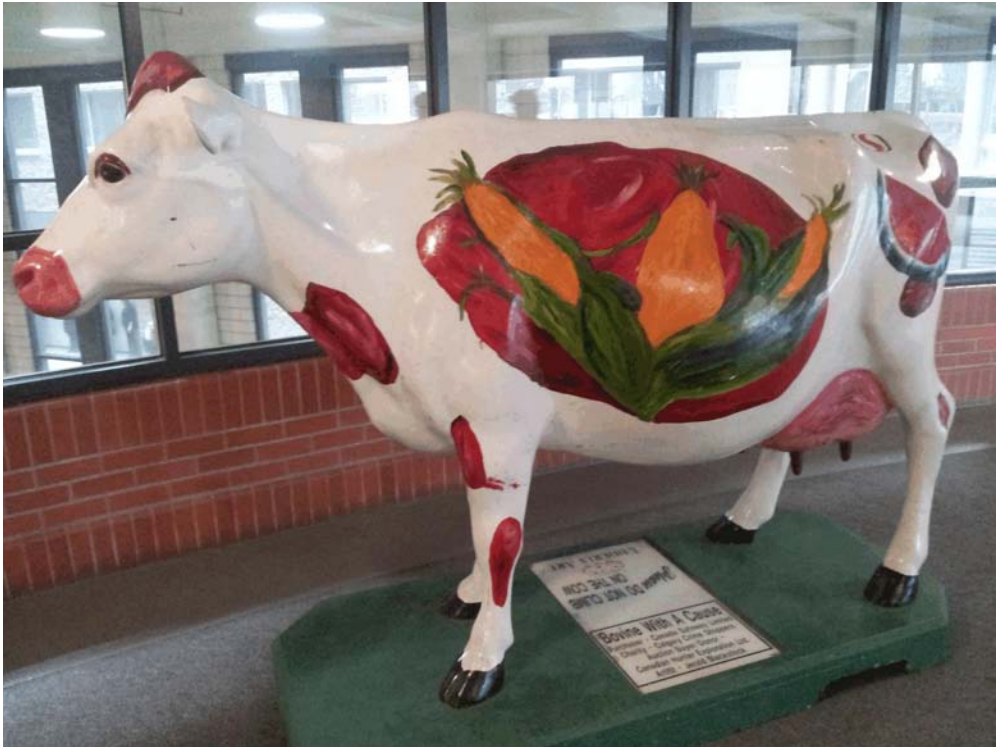
Most of the stories in this anthology read well, but some are off topic and some do not go anywhere. Vignettes, unresolved endings, or mood pieces should be left to the literary small-press magazines that no one reads except the authors. However, the good ones make up for the others.

**They’re Not Laughing At You, Mr. Lovecraft.**

Mike Ashley has edited several comic fantasy collections in the Mammoth Book series of themed anthologies put out by Robinson Publishing of England. MAMMOTH BOOK OF COMIC FANTASY (1998, trade paperback) includes two Lovecraft parodies.

“Tender Is The Night-Gaunt” by Peter Cannon has a mundane plot about a woman wandering through French Riviera society and nightclubs. The story is written as if HPL tried to write in the style of F. Scott Fitzgerald but still using that verbose and eldritch vocabulary. All the usual nameless horrors and Old Gods make their appearances, dancing the night away in unknown Kadath nightclubs.

“Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar” by Neil Gaiman is evidently written from experience of seaside England in the off-season. Ben Lassiter is a Texan on a walking tour of England in September and finds himself in the village of Innsmouth at the Book of Dead Names Inn. After he learns the hard way what a ploughman’s lunch is, he sits down with a couple of patrons in the saloon (not what he thought it was either) and buys a round of Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar, the local beer. And another round, and another, and soon the two local inhabitants are telling him this is the original Innsmouth whose legends were stolen by that usurper Lovecraft. They take him on a tour of the village harbour, where he sees that which is not to be seen. He wakes up the next morning and discovers the village has vanished, and upon making enquiries is told there never was any such place. Having seen that which is not to be seen, he returns home and resettles in Nebraska, about as far away from the ocean as he can get. A good story for HPL fans, although if you are unfamiliar with the Cthulhu Mythos then most of the jokes will escape you.



**PUBLIC ART IN CALGARY: BOVINE LEGACIES**  
by Dale Speirs

Calgary is nicknamed Cowtown because after it was founded by the Mounties in 1875 it became the headquarters of the ranching industry. Since the 1970s, the packing plants have moved out into the rural areas and there is no real centre anymore. The only cattle seen in Calgary nowadays are at the Stampede rodeo.

In the run-up to the Millennium, an art project called Udderly Art was one of the events to celebrate Y2K. A local manufacturer churned out life-size fibreglass replicas of a milk cow. Businesses and organizations sponsored individual cows, either painting it themselves or hiring a professional artist. The cows are now scattered all over the city, but many businesses didn’t want them cluttering up their lobbies, so they donated them to an art walk project that lined them along a Plus 15 pedestrian system of a downtown parkade.

I photographed a few of them, but have no intention of running around the city trying to find them all. Herewith they are shown.







The one below, called Midnight Cowgirl was done by professionals and is the best one I've seen. It depicts an evening view of the downtown core as it was in 1999, the photo taken from a helicopter (close-up at bottom).





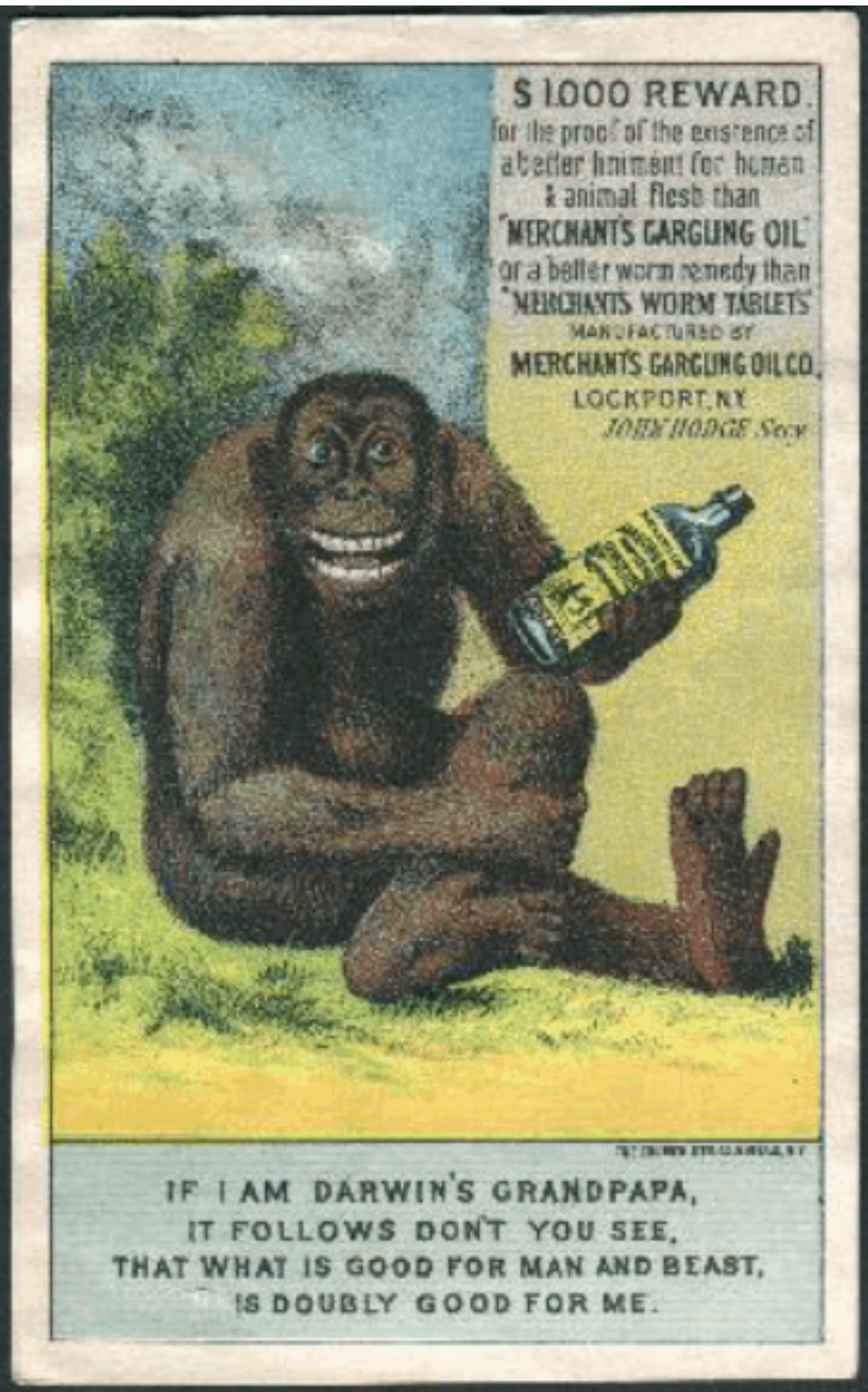
# TROLLING FOR THE DARWIN AWARD

On Friday, January 23, two men dressed in camouflage and carrying what were later determined to be toy guns were arrested in Gatineau, Quebec. They were lucky they didn't get their heads blown off by police. There is a greater significance that non-Canadians may not be aware of, in that Gatineau is directly across the river from Ottawa. (The river is the boundary between Quebec and Ontario.) On October 22, 2014, an Islamic gunman ran amok on Parliament Hill and killed a soldier before the Sergeant-at-Arms of the House of Commons shot him dead.

The two men were arrested by police and issued \$270 tickets (photo below by CBC). It turned out they were attending an anime convention at the Palais des Congres called G-Anime. For decades, Canadian science fiction conventions have warned costumers that walking around with toy weapons is all very well within the convention, but taking them outside is a violation of federal gun control law. It may be a toy weapon, but if it looks even somewhat realistic, then a constable will only have a split second to decide whether to open fire. Canada has had several recent incidents where police officers have been killed by gunmen, and tolerance by uniformed personnel is rapidly dwindling away.



If the men were dressed as furries or anime characters, the incident might not have been so severe. Walking around in camouflage and carrying guns is just waving a red flag. Had one or both of them accidentally pointed their toy guns at an officer, they would now be short-listed for the Darwin Awards.





LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor’s remarks in square brackets. Please include your name and town when sending a comment. Email to opuntia57@hotmail.com]

FROM: Joseph Nicholas  
London, England

2015-01-26

Noting your comments in OPUNTIA #297 on the collapse of Target Canada and impact of the recession on specialist shops reminds me of Tobacco Dock (an eighteenth century former bonded warehouse for high-value imports) in East London's Dockland area. It was touted at the time of its opening in 1990 as London's newest shopping destination but which had already gone into administration because none of the investors had spotted that it had absolutely no public transport connections and was therefore unreachable except by car. In East London, an area of high unemployment, low educational attainment, and next to no car ownership? As a well-known comedy catch-phrase would have it, what were they thinking?

Entranced by visions of people shopping for Filofax diaries and beeswax candles, the investors had clearly failed to think at all. I was working in the area at the time, in the Stepney social security office, and would make frequent trips visits to the building to see how it was faring, noting that the half of it which had opened with a glittering launch party was deserted by other than the staff of its non-performing retail units, and that the other half of the building was still being advertised as opening soon when it was obvious that no work was being done on it. Over time, those retail units in the half that was open gradually closed down, as the proprietors (some of them members of national chains, some of them independents) cut their losses and surrendered their leases. Eventually, and rather curiously, the only retail unit to remain open was one specialising in old maps, perhaps because it was the only place in London where anyone with an interest in such a subject could indulge it. But then that went, and hoardings went up around the building, perhaps to shield the embarrassing failure of the venture from the public.

I haven't been back there for over two decades, but I believe that the hoardings are still there, and that Tobacco Dock is now listed by Wikipedia as a prime example of what it calls a dead mall. An object-lesson to mall investors everywhere, doubtless.

[At the west end of Calgary’s downtown core, a skyscraper under construction in 1982 when the last oil boom collapsed stood unfinished for ten years until the Catholic School Board bought it in 1994 and finished it off as its headquarters. The skeleton stood for a decade as below left (my photos).]



I Also Heard From: Lloyd Penney

PRAIRIE DOG DAY

photo by Dale Speirs



No groundhogs out here but I can show a photo from July 2013 of a prairie dog. I took it at Head-Smashed-In, about two hours south of Calgary on Highway 2.

The enlargement at left was cropped from the full photo shown next page.



Looking east at the prairies from the top of the Porcupine Hills, the easternmost foothills of the Rockies. The next set of hills are about 500 km over the horizon.

This site at Head-Smashed-In is the only place I have seen prairie dogs. Taken with a telephoto lens at full zoom because they are very nervous creatures.

