

# OPUNTIA

## 312

World Wide Party 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.

### YARNBOMBING IN COWTOWN

photos by Dale Speirs

A group of Calgary artists has a deal with local contractors that when a building is scheduled for demolition but not soon, the artists can decorate it as a piece of installation art. This is 832 - 10 Street NW, across from Riley Park in the Sunnyside district of central Calgary. At right is a view of the back of the derelict house, and various other photos on the following pages.

















**RAPPELING DOWN THE CALGARY TOWER**  
photos by Dale Speirs

2015-06-20

Soldiers from the Canadian Forces put on a display in downtown Calgary, rappelling from the Calgary Tower onto the sidewalk.



## WE'LL ALL GO TOGETHER WHEN WE GO: PART 5.

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 4 appeared in OPUNTIA issues #249, 276, 283, and 301 respectively.]

### Standard Template For Big Ugly Rock Movies.

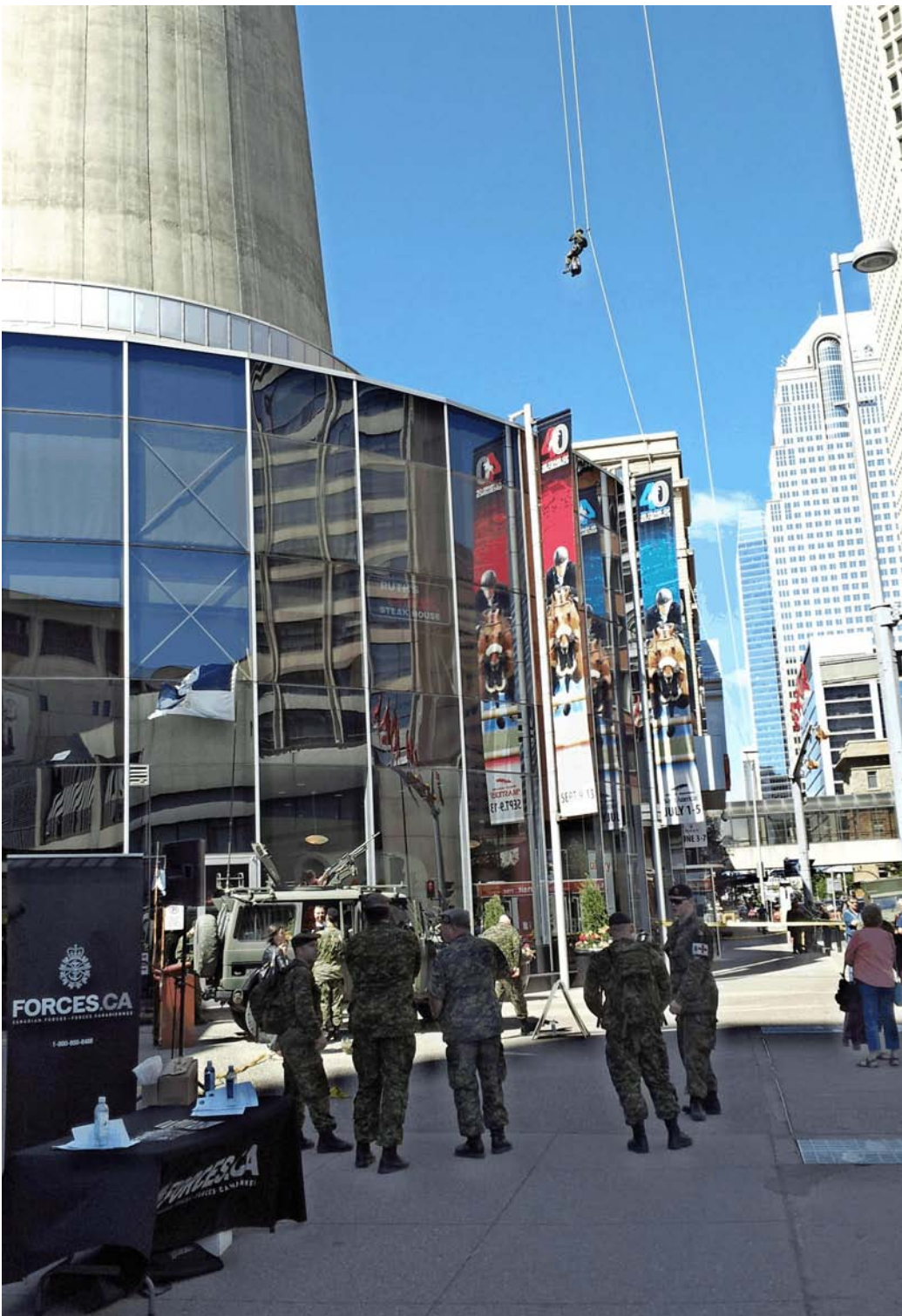
Big Ugly Rocks can be asteroids, comets, dark matter, a passing star, a planet, or anything else that will hit Earth hard enough to end life as we know it. As they pass through the camera frame in deep space, they make a deep rumbling sound, despite the fact that the vacuum of space does not transmit sound waves. They generally travel completely across the solar system in one day but suddenly slow down and take two days to travel past the Moon into Earth's gravity well. This allows sufficient time for the characters to do their headless chicken routine as they try to decide what to do.

Very few disaster movies immediately go straight into the excitement. First a few bit players have to die, usually pulverized by a harbinger fragment of the Big Ugly Rock. Often friends or authorities do not believe there is a problem until a deputy sheriff dies the hard way in front of his comrades.

The general public, when not yet aware that a Big Ugly Rock is inbound to end life as we know it, will gather and stare up at the sky in awe at its forebodings. A popular type of foreboding is an aurora borealis shining in the bright sunshine over a southern California high school or busy street. Drivers will stop their cars in the middle of the road, get out without looking for traffic, and stare open-mouthed. No one takes selfies with their smartphone, but that is a new trend I'm sure will appear in future movies.

The hero (or heroine) is a disgruntled scientist who was laughed out of the university or space agency for his wild and crazy theory which is finally coming true. He now lives in a remote area or on a farm and has to be convinced to come back by a pair of Men In Black. One of the MIB is Negro and the other is Caucasian, just to show that the movie studios aren't racist. They are feds with some kind of alphabet agency (CIA, NSA, FBI, etcetera) and drive shiny brand-new, fully-loaded black SUVs. Your tax dollars in action.

The hero always has personal family problems. He will often end up working with his ex-wife, a scientist at the alphabet agency. The kids are rotten





teenagers who will ignore orders to stay inside the house where it is safe and instead go out into the disaster zone and have to be rescued. He may have a sidekick who is black or oriental and has a 50/50 chance of surviving to the end credits. The black guy always died halfway through the movie in the past but it became such a cliché that the movie studios had to give him a better chance.

When the disaster takes centre stage and shows itself, everyone stands still and stares in awe. This is always good for padding out the movie. Another method is to have characters talk on cellphones and explain the plot to each other, which saves considerable money for location shooting and SFX.

As the disaster swings into full blast mode, the populace panic and start running. Those in the south will run north to safety. Those in the north will run south to safety. Half of them must be wrong. The easiest method to determine which group will die is to see which direction the hero is running. That is the true path to safety since you know he will make it to the end credits.

The Big Ugly Rock will target Manhattan, Los Angeles, London, Paris, or any other famous city with well-known landmarks. It will not take dead aim at Eckville, Alberta, the rural village where I was born. So if you hear about a real-life asteroid heading to Earth on an impact course, run for west-central Alberta and I'll meet you at my Aunt Darlene's house.

What to do? One word: nukes. If that doesn't work, then reverse the polarity of something, such as the Van Allen Belts or Earth's magnetic poles.

The President of the USA always gets involved, gathering around him the Joint Chiefs of Staff, assorted flunkies and bureaucrats, and as many other people as will fit into the boardroom. He will end up approving the only logical course of action: Nuke 'em and nuke 'em hard. This pleases the USAF Space Command General, who can finally justify his job instead of doing all those boring training simulations. Ammunition was meant to be used.

The wild and crazy astronomer hero will have a different plan. It works with only a few seconds left on the countdown clock. In the celebration afterwards, he reconciles with the ex-wife. If there is any money left in the SFX budget, the end scene will show a silent explosion blossoming in the sky as the Big Ugly Rock expires. All's well that ends well, except for the bit players who were squashed by harbingers.

## Variations On A Theme.

The standard story of a Big Ugly Rock smashing into Earth uses an asteroid or comet, but there are other possibilities. In the short story "Industrial Accident" by Lee Correy (1980 March, ANALOG), an automated space freighter with 35,000 tons of ore is inbound to Earth when it malfunctions. It did not flip over at the braking point of its orbit and is now heading straight in to the planet at full speed and its engines are still firing. The impact won't be an extinction-level event but it will cause an immense catastrophe wherever it punches into the planet, equivalent to 100 megatonnes or more.

Most of the story is about the political recriminations as the doomsday freighter heads in. No one had any method prepared for such an eventuality due to budget cuts, so a jury-rig is set up. Two manned spacecraft, the only ones available with sufficient mass, will smash into the freighter to deflect it away from an impact. It does mean the deaths of the pilots. The kamikaze mission shakes up some of the politicians into realizing that they are partly to blame. That ending is optimistic to the point of fantasy.

"Double Planet" by John Gribben (1984 November, ANALOG) starts off with the standard doomsday scenario of a huge comet inbound to Earth. It will be deflected by spaceships, but not the way the politicians think. The scientists decide on their own that instead of sending it out into empty space, they will move it into a slow, come-from-behind impact with the Moon. The cometary ice will melt and form an atmosphere. Granted the Moon is too small to hold on to an atmosphere, but that is on a timescale of hundreds of megayears. An atmosphere can be held for many megayears, and refreshed from time to time with additional slow-speed comet impacts. The addition of an atmosphere to the Moon would allow for large scale colonization.

THE GOLIATH STONE (2013) by Larry Niven and Matthew Joseph Harrington mixes nanotechnology with asteroids. Dr. Toby Glyer is a surgeon who uses nanites to cure his patients' intestinal woes. But 25 years before that, he had used different nanomachines for a private endeavour called the Briareus Project. This involved launching a missile filled with nanomachines to an asteroid, which was then to be diverted into Earth orbit for mining. Unfortunately contact with the nanomachines was lost just after they reached the asteroid, the project was shut down, and Glyer has long since moved on to other things. Now the asteroid has been seen heading to Earth.

(Pause for digression. I have always doubted the economics of mining asteroids. Firstly, it is an incredibly expensive way of supplying minerals, compared to the much cheaper cost of refining and fabricating on Earth, then lifting finished products into space. If an asteroid were to be mined in such abundance as to pay the costs, the supply would flood the market and crash the price of the metal. Space colonies could use a supply from asteroids, but when are they going to happen?)

The novel starts off slowly with the back story and infodumps about how the asteroid project operated. The Briareus nanomachines reach the target asteroid and run their programmes as scheduled, but then begin to evolve. They develop a collective intelligence and society, and question why they should follow the Maker's orders. Next, they split into factions and invent war. Back on Earth, someone has released nanites that are remaking humans. Diseases become extinct and genetic disorders are remedied. Glyer, his girlfriend, and everyone else are changing appearances.

The Briareus nanomachines decide to return to Earth. After forming the asteroid into a spacecraft, they set sail. For reasons of delta vector, the initial course is directly at Earth, with a scheduled course change later. The naive nanomachines assume Earthlings would realize this and not panic. As anyone knows who has taken any kind of safety training, never assume. Spacecraft are sent up to destroy the asteroid and are routed. But the Briareus nanomachines come in peace; they just want to trade.

On Earth, the nanites are spreading in an epidemic, changing humans and their societies. The creator of the nanites is not just playing God, he is God. It may be a Big Rock, but it is not a Big Ugly Rock. The novel's ending is a bit of an all's-well-that-ends-well, but certainly is brimming with fresh ideas that come together at the end and connect with each other.

Another non-standard impact story is "Impact Parameter" by Geoffrey Landis (1992 August, ASIMOV'S). An astronomer detects a gravitational lens, caused when an extremely massive object bends light around it from luminous objects behind it. The object is moving very fast and heading straight to Earth. Doomsday will be in ten days. But when the calendar ticks over, Earth is still there. What it was, was an alien spaceship. They turned off their star drive at Saturn and coasted the rest of the way to make First Contact. A neat twist on the Big Ugly Rock story.

## **Halley's Comet.**

1985 was the year Halley's Comet returned, so it was no surprise that ISAAC ASIMOV'S SF MAGAZINE (1985 Mid-December) had two stories relating to comets. James Blaylock starts off with "Lord Kelvin's Machine", an alternative history. We know it is AH because a British Zeppelin is mentioned in the first paragraph. The hero of the story is Langdon St. Ives, who is faced with two problems. There is a giant comet about to make a close pass to Earth, but the general public is not yet aware of it. Evil-doer Dr. Ignacio Narbondo has threatened the authorities with his plan to give exaggerated information about the comet to sensationalist newspapers. He intends to start a mass panic in the stock markets and wreck national economies by falsely claiming the comet will hit Earth and do great damage. Unless, of course, he receives financial consideration for holding back on his plan to trigger volcanic eruptions that will move Earth into the comet's path.

It is a bluff, since volcanic eruptions don't alter Earth's orbit, but he is relying on the politician's ignorance of science. Meanwhile, the Royal Academy of Sciences is blundering about on their own. Having determined the comet has an iron core, they have hired Lord Kelvin to reverse the polarity of Earth's magnetic field to repel the comet. This would make things worse, so St. Ives must foil the plan by sabotaging the machine in such a way that it will look like technical problems. He succeeds in both endeavours, and all ends well, except for Narbondo.

In that same issue of ASIMOV'S is "Storming The Cosmos" by Rudy Rucker and Bruce Sterling. It is the dawn of the Space Age, and as the Russians enjoy their triumphs of the late 1950s, someone gets the idea that maybe the Tunguska event of 1908 wasn't a comet but the crash of an alien spacecraft. Assorted Russkies of varying competence are sent out and actually do discover an artifact. The device reads minds and becomes what people think it is, in this case a giant rocket.

The Russians decide to launch it but someone gets nervous that it might explode. The thought is father to the fact, and the device obliging blows up on the launch pad, the Nedelin disaster of 1960 in our timeline. The story is a humourous tangle of competing KGB and nomenclatura factions on the expedition to Tunguska and the aftermath.



**The K-T Bolide.**

The extinction of the dinosaurs and other critters is popularly attributed to an asteroid impact in Yucatan, although modern research shows it was not the sole cause but rather the final straw. The world’s ecosystems were already under stress due to continental drift causing serious climate change, and the big bang pushed them over.

L. Sprague de Camp takes on this idea with a short story “The Big Splash” (1992 June, ASIMOV’S). Time-traveling palaeontologists go back to the end-Cretaceous and get into position to observe the impact. Not directly under it of course, but at the far side of the North American continent where they can observe the impact and still be able to jump back into the time machine before the shock wave arrives. Except that one of them accidentally locked themselves out of the machine. Fortunately they get the door open and pile inside just as the shock wave arrives. And so does a frightened *Stenonychosaurus*, fleeing the shock wave like everyone else. The time travelers don’t notice it inside their machine until after they flip the switch to return home.



One of a set of five dinosaur stamps issued by Canada Post in 2015

**ALTERNATIVE HISTORY REVIEWS**

by Dale Speirs

**The Tide Of History.**

There are two schools of thought about history. The Great Man theory says that history is a random walk and depends on individuals. If no Hitler, then peace in our time and no World War Two. The Tide of History theory says that trends make major events inevitable, and while the names and details would be different, the same general outcome would occur. If no Hitler, then some other German rabble rouser would have started World War Two.

In the Tide of History camp is the story “Lenin In Odessa” by George Zebrowski (1990 March, AMAZING), which postulates that the Russian Revolution would have happened no matter how the infighting went between the Bolsheviks. The story involves a British double-agent sent to Moscow to mess up the newly-installed Politburo, various characters jockeying for power, and the assassination of Lenin.

Lenin’s premature death doesn’t make any difference, for Stalin was still maneuvering for power and in this AH finds himself the dictator sooner than he expected. The Bolsheviks consolidate their power as they would have in our timeline, since the historical momentum was on their side and they had the greatest number of psychopaths.

“The Old Man And C” by Sheila Finch (1989 November, AMAZING) posits that Albert Einstein became a violin player and teacher instead of a physicist. After a good life in the orchestral world, Einstein is reaching the end of his years in the late 1950s. He thinks about how his life might have turned out had he stayed in the patent office instead of making better money teaching the violin. He pays little attention to the world news. There is passing mention of the Americans using a new kind of superbomb to smash a city in the Korean War. Physicists are extending a new theory about how light behaves in the universe, and Einstein wonders if he should have kept playing with numbers instead of music.

**Look Away.**

Normally I avoid cliched AHs such as the American Civil War. However, one caught my eye because I am a fan of Edgar Allan Poe. “No Spot Of Ground”



by Walter Jon Williams (1989 November, ASIMOV’S) supposes that Poe did not die in 1849 but managed to survive long enough to join the Confederate Army in the War Between The States. He had military training as a young man, and in this AH advances to a General in the war. The story alternates\*\* between regrets about his life and his memories of those he loved, and his frustration at dealing with the incompetence of his fellow officers and the lack of communication between combat units in the action against the Union. The stupidity of the officers killed more men than the enemy, and Poe’s rage becomes incandescent at times.

**Play Ball!**

In our timeline, Fidel Castro was briefly a baseball player before he got into politics, and was once offered a contract by the New York Giants. Several AH stories have taken this idea to another timeline. “Beisbol”by Ben Bova (1985 November, ANALOG) is one such example, where an American national team is playing a Cuban team for prestige and honour among South American nations. Castro is coaching for Cuba and Richard Nixon for the USA. Lots of dirty tricks, including a Cuban robot pitcher that can really fire a fastball past the batters. One of the American players decides to bunt, thinking the robot can pitch but can’t catch. He fails, but manages to get on base anyway because the robot throws the ball to the first baseman so hard that it tears the glove off him and goes on out into the field.

The August 1993 issue of ASIMOV’S has not one but two stories about Fidel Castro as a pitcher. “The Franchise” by John Kessel is a sports story about the struggle between Castro and a batter from an opposing team. The batter is George Herbert Walker Bush, who decided to play professional baseball, mostly in the minors. He eventually makes it to the American League on the Washington Senators.

From there he goes to the 1959 World Series, where he regularly bats against Castro of the New York Giants, and finally gets in the winning run. President Nixon, who succeeded to office after Eisenhower’s fatal stroke, is a baseball fanatic who annoys the Senators coach by constantly bombarding him with advice on which players to use and what tactics to follow.

\*\*Please note the correct usage of this word compared to “alternate history”. Yes, I know it is a lost cause, like people who write about “block voting” instead of “bloc voting”.

Following on in that issue of the magazine is “Southpaw” by Bruce McAllister. Castro is again pitching for the Giants but he is concerned for events back home and the nascent revolution. The two most famous Cubans in the USA are him and Desi Arnaz. Castro journeys to Hollywood to meet Arnaz and appeal to him for assistance in propagating the revolution, only to be cold-shouldered. It ends unhappily for Castro, who wonders if he made the right choice in life.

**Alternative Rockets.**

Allen Steele supposes a faster entry into space in “Goddard’s People” (1991 July, ASIMOV’S). This is actually a prequel filling in a back story, and was published after the first story in Steele’s AH. I’ll review them in order of the AH rather than publication date. In our timeline, Goddard experimented with rockets in obscurity because he was sensitive to criticism, and as the USA’s only major rocket expert, came to notice much too late to do any good.

Steele’s divergence is that the work the Germans were doing on the A-9, the Amerika Bomber, stirred alarm in Washington, D.C. and a rush project was started to develop an interceptor. The X-1 is developed as a manned rocket interceptor. Goddard is tracked down by the government as the only man who knows anything about rockets and is put into the project.

When the Germans launch the first Amerika Bomber at the USA in 1944, the X-1 successfully intercepts it before an 80-ton incendiary bomb can be dropped on Manhattan. The X-1 is later used to firebomb Hiroshima. The use of atomic bombs never happens. It isn’t until 1950 that the USA and the USSR get working bombs. Germany still loses the war on schedule, partly because it had diverted so many resources into programmes such as the vengeance weapons and the Final Solution.

In Steele’s short story “John Harper Wilson” (1989 June, ASIMOV’S), the American military goes into space by 1956 and a wheel-type space station is completed by 1963. John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson try to convert the space programme into a civilian agency, but fail when Kennedy loses to Nixon in 1960 and Johnson fails re-election that same year. In our timeline, NASA was created because Eisenhower was fed up with feuding between the Army and Air Force over who had rocket priority, but this divergence has a unified front by the military that wouldn’t need someone to step in and knock heads together. The Soviets don’t get a man into space until 1959.



Nixon and the military agree that the first Moon landing should claim it for the USA; none of this coming in peace for all mankind. John Harper Wilson is chosen to be the first man to set foot on the Moon but he has a crisis of conscience and on doing so does not claim it for the USA. The military can't do much against him, and later they are eased out in favour of a new agency called NASA by President Robert Kennedy.

I find it difficult to believe that a gung-ho military man like Wilson would develop any angst in the midst of the greatest moment in his life. It must be noted that even in our timeline that while NASA was civilian, its flight crews were military pilots.

**WORLD WIDE PARTY 2015**

by Dale Speirs

Founded by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria) in 1994, the World Wide Party is held on June 21st every year. At 21h00 local time, everyone is invited to raise a glass and toast fellow members of the Papernet around the world. The idea is to get a wave of fellowship circling the planet.

I toasted the four corners of zinedom at 21h00. First, I faced east and toasted those who had already celebrated the WWP. Then I faced south and north in sequence to those celebrating in the same time zone. Finally, I faced west to those who would be celebrating in the next few hours and saluted them. May all of you have the best in the forthcoming year.

**ZINE LISTINGS**

[I only list zines I receive from the Papernet. If the zine is posted on [www.efanzines.com](http://www.efanzines.com) or [www.fanac.org](http://www.fanac.org), then I don't mention it since you can read them directly.]

[The Usual means \$5 cash (\$6 overseas) or trade for your zine. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada or overseas (the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount) or mint USA stamps (which are not valid for postage outside USA). US\$ banknotes are still acceptable around the world.]

CHORRADA #8 (The Usual from Kris Mininger, Calvo Sotelo 13B, 4B, Plasencia 10600, Caceres, Spain) Perzine with a trip report to Morocco and all the chaos and inefficiency we've come to expect from that part of the world.

**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](mailto:opuntia57@hotmail.com)]

FROM: Lloyd Penney  
Etobicoke, Ontario

2015-06-17

OPUNTIA #310: [re: photo of Canada geese nibbling dandelions] There's been a lot of fuss lately in this fair town about dandelions, and how to get rid of them. I wish they'd back off from trying to rid any green area of them, for not only to Canada geese like to nibble on them, but for bees, they are a necessity, and right now, bees don't need anything more to reduce their already low numbers.

[Of course, people will then complain about goose droppings. When I was the Calgary Parks Dept. Trouble Call Supervisor, I got calls from young mums who saw a single bumblebee buzz past a playground and wanted the area to be immediately saturation sprayed.]

I hope we do eventually get to Mars. I think one of the greatest ideas humanity is lacking these days is the idea of adventure, the unknown, the explorable. This is natural for us, and because there is little to explore left, we squabble with each other. We have nothing we can put the nation's effort behind. We might even stop fighting with each other, and I hope we can do it for long enough to get there before we make our own planet uninhabitable, which seems closer all the time. I hope there's a way to terraform Mars quickly. I also wish we wouldn't market space exploration as a kiddie toy. An adult marketing campaign could still turn things around.

OPUNTIA #311: [re: language evolution] I have a t-shirt with a variation of that great quote from James Nicoll. The shirt says, "*English doesn't borrow from other languages. English follows other languages down dark alleys, knocks them over, and goes through their pockets for loose grammar.*" English is the jambalaya/pizza/stew/other garbage food of the language world. Throw something of everything into the pot, and some of what you've got left over. Many editorial jobs over the years got me to keep an eye out for Americanisms in the copy I was given, and get rid of them.



**GETTING READY FOR THE WORLD’S BIGGEST COSTUME CON**  
photo by Dale Speirs

The Calgary Stampede doesn’t start until the Friday after Canada Day, but the celebrations begin during the third week of June. The rodeo is ten days long, but we Cowtowners make it a month’s worth of celebrations around the city. Last year, 1.2 million people paid their way into the show, but there are hundreds of free events around the city, from the traditional pancake breakfasts to street festivals to shopping mall performers. The taverns are packed and stay open extra hours. Divorce lawyers report an uptick in actionable cases in late July, and medical clinics lay in extra penicillin for the aftermath.

These days I rely on [www.stampedebreakfast.ca](http://www.stampedebreakfast.ca) to find out which places to visit. Like many Calgarians, I go for several weeks without paying for breakfast. It is the only time of year I eat pancakes. Menus usually include sausage or bacon and fruit juice or coffee. You have to stand in line a while, and listen to bad country music, but I’m not proud; free food is free food.

On June 20, I attended a free flapjack breakfast at a local community association. Walking back to my car, I saw this horse team parked behind it. The cowgirl was waiting for those who wanted a ride around the community.

