

# OPUNTIA 328

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**Opuntia** is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. It is posted on [www.efanzines.com](http://www.efanzines.com) and [www.fanac.org](http://www.fanac.org). 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.

**I'VE BEEN THROUGH THE DESERT IN A HONDA WITH NO NAME**  
photos by Dale Speirs

Forest fire smoke from Washington State blanketed southwestern Alberta this summer, so I only made a few hikes in the Rockies on rare days when the wind shifted away from the southwest. Instead, several times I drove two hours eastward to the badlands where the air was nice and clear. This is mostly uninhabited desert. These photos are from a trip in late August. Below is Highway 862 approaching Finnegan Ferry. The “highway” is a one-lane gravel road through open rangeland. I stopped to let the Angus bull at left cross the road, not wanting my car dented disputing the right-of-way with the bull.





**FINNEGAN FERRY**  
**HOURS OF OPERATION**  
**7:00 AM TO MIDNIGHT**  
**NO NIGHT SERVICE**



I arrived at the ferry about noon. The ferryman told me I was his first customer of the day. It was a Monday though; he is busier with tourists on weekends.

This is one of two flatdeck scow ferries left on the Red Deer River. They are deliberately kept by the provincial government as tourist attractions. Finnegan Ferry began in 1913 and is named after its first ferryman, an immigrant Scot.





Looking back from the other side after crossing the river. In the hour I spent driving Highway 862, I saw no other vehicles.

Don't do this trip if your car has been making strange noises lately. I keep mine in perfect condition. There is no cellphone service for 100 km.





Proceeding north along the river, I came to the hamlet of Dorothy, named after the first white child to be born in the area. Once there was a railroad line alongside the abandoned grain elevator, but it was torn out decades ago.

There were six houses, two churches (both abandoned) and a dozen horses. Sagebrush is dominant. The only trees are cottonwoods along the riverbanks and miscellaneous trees around the houses.





Various views of Dorothy. The sagebrush has reclaimed the old grain fields.





The Red Deer River quietly flows along.





I didn't do any hiking in the badlands because the slopes are slippery bentonite clay. In the Rockies, one has the advantage of walking on hard bedrock.





Further upstream yet, on a side branch of the badlands, is the hamlet of Beynon in the Rosebud River canyon. Only one farm family lives here, descendants of the original settlers.

I took this photo from the flatlands on top. The canyon is invisible until the road suddenly drops over the escarpment.





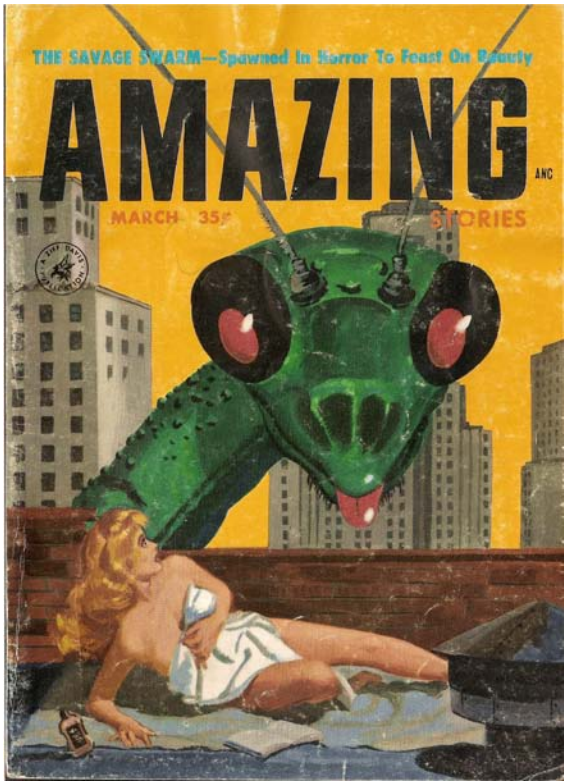
# VIOLATING THE SQUARE-CUBE LAW: PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #254.]

The square-cube law states that as the size of an object or animal doubles, its mass increases by cubic exponentiation. For monster movies, this means that an insect enlarged to the size of a house would collapse. Its legs couldn't carry the extra weight and the internal organs would collapse. So you needn't fear giant ants or 50-foot women.

## The Standard Giant.



as a mysterious substance that triggered gigantism. He invents a type of time machine that sucks in air from back when and produces giant insects in the here and now. It gets away from Mathou, of course, followed by the usual alarms and excursions before the critters are brought under control.

Most attack of the killer (insert species here) stories follow a standard template. Only the methodology changed. Harlan Ellison, for all that he strutted about in his New Wave days bragging about his trendy status, churned out some standard monster fiction, such as “The Savage Swarm” (1957 March, AMAZING).

Franklyn Mathou is the mad scientist of the hour. He noted that giant insects and arachnids developed during the Carboniferous era when there was more oxygen in the air as well



who looks to be the hero of the story is instead stung to death by a giant bee before the conclusion.

“Soldier Key” by Sterling E. Lanier (1968 August, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is part of the Brigadier Ffellowes series, which were tall tales told by the man to fellow members of a private club. The story at hand took place on a remote Caribbean island where his ship visited. The island was owned and inhabited by a reclusive religious sect whose apparent focus of worship was not evident to outsiders. They eat no meat but turtle, and kept the shells for a mysterious project.

When a crewman is kidnapped from the ship, Ffellowes and his comrades go ashore to rescue him, and find that he is about to be sacrificed to a giant hermit crab by the cult that worships and feeds it. The crab is stated to be ten feet high and weighing a thousand pounds, a clear violation of the square-cube law. The cult was fabricating a new larger shell from the turtles for the hermit crab and the ceremony was for its transfer. The rest of the plot you can guess. It all ends

“Legacy Of Terror” by Henry Slesar (1958 November, AMAZING) has a young woman inheriting her father’s estate, which consists of a laboratory and house in a remote area. She finds out that he was experimenting with gigantism in insects. Despite knowing little or nothing about the project, she decides to take it over.

The plot is predictable, with giant ants and bees, alarms and excursions, and all that. One nice thing is that the insufferably handsome young man



in tears. Later a hurricane scours the island clean of the surviving cult members, conveniently removing any proof that it happened.

**Non-Standard Giants.**

Most monster stories seem to be either lizards, spiders, and ants. A nice difference is “The Hungry Guinea Pig” by Miles J. Breuer (1930 January, AMAZING). The resident mad scientist in Chicago is experimenting with gigantism in guinea pigs. One the size of a house gets away and begins trashing the city. It is not malicious, just frightened and in particular very hungry. Setting aside the fact that the square-cube law would prohibit a house-sized guinea pig, the story makes the point that such an animal would be extremely hungry because of its mega-metabolism. The guinea pig roams Chicago, cleaning out greengrocers, wholesale food warehouses, and any shrubbery it comes across in the parks. Alas, it is finally taken out by a bomber as it snorfls down a batch of alfalfa hay dropped into a park as bait.

Which brings me to a very neat twist on this idea by Edward Bryant in his story “giANTS” (1979 August, ANALOG). A scientist whose pregnant wife was killed by fire ants develops a formula to counteract them. He isolates the exact DNA that makes a fire ant into a fire ant. From there, he creates a virus that only affects fire ant queens, causing their offspring to grow to house-size. The mutants never actually get that far since the square-cube law then kills them off as soon as their size reaches the tipping point.

“Bringing In The Sheaves” by Rudy Rucker (1987 January, ASIMOV’S) is certainly bizarre. It is set in a world of mutants, but not the superhero type. An evangelist, a normal human, preaches salvation to them. The mutants, however horribly disfigured, can quickly heal any near-fatal injuries they might receive. By an accident, several discover that if they are healing together in physical contact, they can merge into one body. The preacher calls the worst to the altar for merging with those who have gone before.

Initially the merged mutants are just a conglomeration of bodies, but they begin reorganizing their organs and senses into a single creature, and in time a giant leech is created. The leech starts to grow and instead of waiting for the next come-to-Jesus sermon, it goes out hunting on its own, including the preacher. Other mutants join its body and it grows to the size of a house, while its human prey is gobbled down for food.

The story ends abruptly there, but the implication is that the giant leech is going to go out into the world. The square-cube law may not apply, since the leech has basically become a bag of jelly with hundreds of organs floating in it and can spread itself over the ground. Buoyancy effects may take over here.

**LET MARS DIVIDE ETERNITY IN TWAIN: PART 3**

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 and 2 appeared in OPUNTIA's #310 and 321.]

**Long Ago And Far Away.**

The Mariner space probes destroyed an entire sub-genre of science fiction. But do not despair, as George R.R. Martin and Gardner Dozois have edited the anthology OLD MARS (2013), which is new fiction by fifteen writers set in the era before the Mariners threw thousands of SF stories into the dustbin of literature. (There is also a companion volume OLD VENUS.)

Allen M. Steele leads off the anthology with “Martian Blood”, about a scientist named Dr. Omar Al-Baz who comes to Mars to obtain blood samples from the Martian natives. They call themselves Shatan, and are so remarkably humanoid as to raise questions about whether they and humans are related or from the same panspermia source. Humans have colonized Mars and treated the Shatan the same way that North American aboriginals were treated. Jim Ramsey, a human born and raised on Mars, guides Al-Baz to a Shatan reserve. The blood samples show that the two species have nearly identical DNA genomes and must have had a common origin. Ramsey is so upset that he kills Al-Baz and makes it look like an accident, trying to suppress the discovery. He finds out that he was too late, as Al-Baz had already transmitted the data back to his university.



“The Ugly Duckling” by Matthew Hughes is on a Mars where humans inadvertently killed off all the Martians with human diseases. The mining companies are now chewing up the dead cities for metals. Archaeologist Fred Mather is racing ahead of them trying to salvage Martian books and artifacts. He fails and the story ends on a down note. I found that difficult to believe. Even if the companies didn’t care, individual miners know money-making opportunities when they see them, and there would have been a huge market for smuggled artifacts taken from the mineface ahead of the machines.

David D. Levine’s “The Wreck Of The Mars Adventure” is an outright silly alternative history. The pirate William Kidd is pardoned by King William III on condition that he go on an expedition via sailing ship to Mars. The premise is that there is an interplanetary atmosphere. After various alarms and excursions, they crash on Mars, then parley with the Martians, who are giant crabs. Then ... but why go on? It is mildly amusing humorous fantasy.

“Swords Of Zar-tu-kan” by S.M. Stirling is high-fantasy Martians with a plot written as a hard-boiled detective story. Down these mean Martian streets a man must go. The Martians’ dialogue reminded me of Keith Laumer’s Retief stories, where the alien Groacis talked only in prepositional phrases. Again, mildly amusing.

“Shoals” by Mary Rosenblum is about a boy among the human colonists who can see the ghost images of the ancient Martians. Much melodrama, big bad mining companies, unbelieving settlers, and all the usual. Likewise, Mike Resnick’s story that immediately follows, “In The Tombs Of The Martian Kings”, is an Indiana Jones parody whose plot can be guessed from the title. And carrying on in the next story, “Out Of Scarlight” by Liz Williams, are Arabic nomad tribes rewritten for Mars.

“The Dead Sea-bottom Scrolls” by Howard Waldrop, who knows how to write oddball stories, is about a man recreating a famous trip by a Martian named Oud, who was an alien version of Windwagon Smith. A humorous story, as Oud’s diary makes it clear he was an outspoken Martian. Visiting one sacred site of his fellow Martians, a giant rock, he notes that if you’ve seen one big rock, you’ve seen them all.

“A Man Without Honor” is by James S.A. Corey, a pseudonym of two collaborating writers. The story is set in the early 1700s. A ship in the Caribbean comes across another, a burned-out hulk with bodies littering the

deck, both human and alien. They make a trip to Mars with an impudent young sailor named Carter. There they find ancient kingdoms and rehash what ERB did all those years ago.

“Written In Dust” by Melissa M. Snodgrass is about a young woman on Mars who has visions and dreams. There are ancient abandoned cities, a plague, and trouble with the Earth government, but not to fear because it ends with hugs all around.

“The Lost Canal” by Michael Moorcock is an action-adventure on Mars about an outlaw on the run, pursued by warp-drive drones sent from Earth. He finds an underground canal, amidst assorted mundane events. Ho hum. Even worse is “The Sunstone” by Phyllis Eisenstein, about a young man on Mars with a dysfunctional family but who manages to connect with the Martians.

“King Of The Cheap Romance” by Joe R. Lansdale, is narrated by Angela King, a young girl who survives a crash on Mars that leaves her father dead and her all alone. She must make it back to the colony with duct-taped equipment and baling twine, overcoming various struggles along the way. An ANALOG-type story that John Campbell Jr would have been pleased to buy.

“Mariner” by Chris Roberson is about sand pirates on Mars, both human and Martian. Sailing, sailing, over the bounding dunes ... The final story in this anthology is “The Queen Of The Night’s Aria” by Ian McDonald. It is a humorous story about a troupe of entertainers touring the front lines on the red planet. Bob Hope on Mars.

### **Other Tales Of Old Mars.**

“The Martian In The Attic” by Frederik Pohl (1960 July, WORLDS OF IF) is the plan of Hector Dunlop to extort half the business empire of Quincy LaFitte, who has apparently created dozens of fabulous new inventions that sell by the hundreds of millions and made him rich. In the past few decades, Mars had been explored. In the ruins of the canals and cities were found primitive sentient creatures about the level of intelligence of a cat. They were thought to be unrelated to the extinct beings that built the cities and dug the canals. Dunlop researched the matter and found that Mars lost all its water in the same catastrophe that destroyed its civilization. He figures out that the primitive Martians were actually the juvenile stage of the advanced Martians, and needed water to develop into the next stage. LaFitte got there first and secretly brought



back a Martian, immersed it in water, and created the next stage, intelligent enough to develop all those marvelous inventions.

Now Dunlop wants half, but he bungles twice. The first time is his fault for inadvertently giving away his secrets so that LaFitte can neutralize them. The second is when Dunlop tries to kidnap the Martian and finds out the hard way that there was a reason why LaFitte kept its existence a secret. It is a turnabout story where Dunlop gets his the hard way. Lest the reader develop any sympathy for Dunlop, the author was good at showing, in bits and pieces along the narrative, what Dunlop was really like, turning the reader's sympathy into disgust.

**Explorers On Old Mars.**

“Operation Distress” by Lester Del Rey (1951 August, GALAXY) is about a Marsnaut returning to Earth when he breaks out in rashes and puffy eyes. His spaceship is diverted to a quarantine station on the Moon, where detailed examination fails to turn up any Martian pathogens. Eventually the cause is established as some new air filters that the Marsnaut installed from storage on the return voyage. The filters hadn't been previously used, and only after they were installed was it discovered that they were made from cat's hair, to which the Marsnaut was allergic.

“The Hour Before Earthrise” by James Blish (1966 July to September, WORLDS OF IF) is about a young man named Dolph who builds a backyard spaceship from a treehouse and travels to Mars. The propellant is an antigravity gizmo he invented. The story spends a considerable amount of time on Dolph's methodology, as well it might. After a successful landing on Mars, he finds himself stranded because a vacuum tube burned out and he didn't have a spare. His girlfriend Nanette is the plucky type who resolves to rescue him, and the rest of the plot is obvious. If you allow the basic implausibility, then the story doesn't read too badly if you're a teenager.

The idea was repeated in “The First Mars Mission” by Robert F. Young (1979 May, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF). The story alternates between two points of view, three young kids who build a backyard spaceship and think they've gone to a Barsoomian Mars, and one of those kids who, decades later, is the first man to set foot on Mars. What he doesn't tell NASA is that he found on Mars a pocket knife he lost when he was on that backyard expedition. What is objective reality?

“Dominions Beyond” by Ward Moore (1973 September, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is a parody of Verne and Wells. In 1887, a silly twit of an Englishman named Humphrey Beachy-Cumberland takes a spaceship to Mars where it crashes in the midst of a Martian civilization. Humphrey blusters and converts the natives to the British way of life, forcing them to learn English and get married in the Anglican Church. When another expedition arrives in 2002, unaware of his previous visit, they find a veddy British culture. Mildly amusing.

**The Probes.**

“Marsman Meets The Almighty” by Don Trotter (1975 February, GALAXY) is about a probe to the red planet that is returning lots of dull boring data about rocks, hardly a thing to encourage further funding from the government. The scientists decide to spruce up the video feed by faking a split-second glimpse of a Mars critter scuttling from one rock to another. It only proves to be a one-week sensation though. Later on, the Mars probe spots a plinth with alien writing on it. That one does get the politicians interested. But was it real? Or did a second group of scientists have the same idea as the first?

In Part 1 of this review series (OPUNTIA #310) I mentioned a 1989 story “All The Beer On Mars” by Gregory Benford, about a joint American-Russian expedition discovering that the microbial life on Mars was a contaminant from a Soviet space probe. What I didn't know but do now as I work my way through all my SF prozines is that it was based on the story “Hellas Is Florida” (1977 January, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) by Gordon Eklund and Gregory Benford. The only difference is that the 1977 story is an all-American expedition, whose characters die off one by one. The sole survivor finds the Soviet probe but decides to keep quiet about it because he doesn't want the politicians to cut off funding for the missions.



# 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: Joseph T. Major  
Louisville, Kentucky

2015-11-28

OPUNTIA #327: [Re: OTR shows] Allen’s Alley: Senator Claghorn was voiced by Kenny Delmar. Some of his opinions would not do today. He listened to the Southern Broadcasting Company, which had shows such as THE KKK IN PEACE AND WAR, a reference to the crime-busting show THE FBI IN PEACE AND WAR. The Warner Brothers cartoon group adapted his voice and mannerisms for their character Foghorn Leghorn, voiced by Mel Blanc fortunately.

[Delmar said the character was an exact imitation of a Texas rancher who gave him a ride when he was hitchhiking through that state in the 1920s. In conversation, the Texan bellowed everything twice, twice that is!, and always ended his funny anecdotes with “*That’s a joke, son!*”.]

Red Skelton: He carried all his regular characters over to his long-running television show. Somehow, while he had the mannerisms and voice done to perfection, it was hard to accept a 6' 2" (188 cm) Junior.

[OTR was fascinating in what performers could get away with. Small girls were voiced by middle-aged women. One of the biggest acts on radio was a ventriloquist, Edgar Bergen (father of Candice). Fresh-mouthed boys were played by men in their 30s and 40s. White men played black characters, one of them a maid. Mel Blanc imitated Jack Benny’s car with its wheezing engine badly in need of a tune-up. There are thousands of OTR episodes available as free mp3s from [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)]

Re: Lily Tomlin and her character Ernestine: Mr. Veedle was Gore Vidal, the writer. He even appeared on an episode of LAUGH-IN to confront Ernestine. It says something about the culture of the era that the TV audience would be expected to recognize a well-known writer.



More utility box art. The building in the background is the Westbrook LRT station in southwest Calgary. It is above the only subway portion of the system, which is three stories beneath the building.