

# OPUNTIA 329

Christmas 2015

## SO THIS IS CHRISTMAS

photos by Dale Speirs

Each year the Lions Club of Calgary stages a massive Christmas lights display in Confederation Golf Course (owned by the City), one of the major attractions of the season. The lights stretch about two kilometres along Confederation Creek, which runs through the middle of the park. By day, in winter, it is popular with skiers and tobogganers. The lights are on every night in December until early January. A great place for parents to take their kids.

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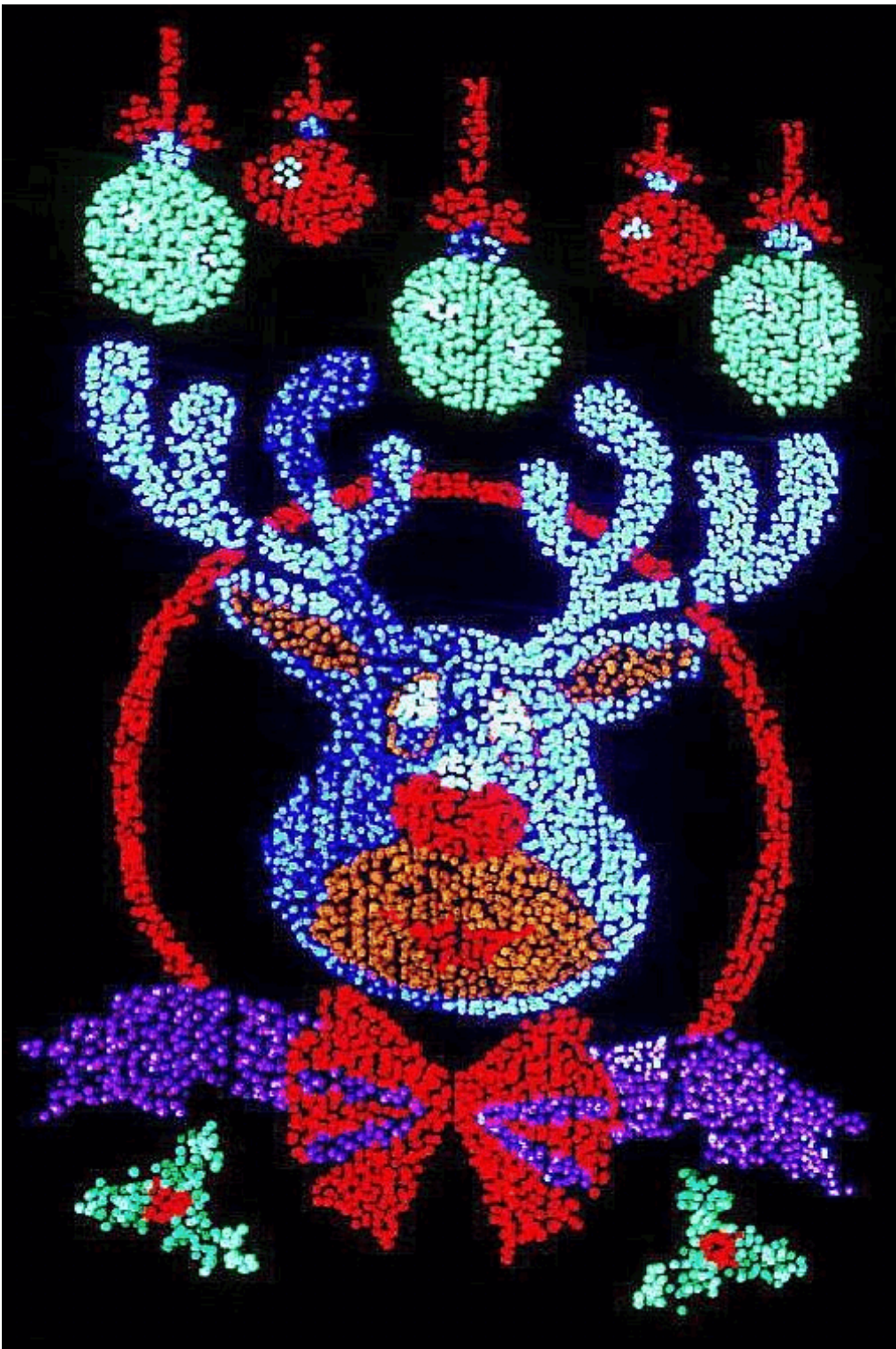
Fortunately the politically correct crowd haven't been able to repeal the idea that Christmas is a Christian holiday, not a generic one.













My mother, although Canadian-born, was a pure-blood Finn. She never taught us kids Suomalais on the grounds it wasn't a useful language in Alberta, but I

was able to recognize the words "Hyvaa Joulua" in the sign below, or "Happy Christmas".





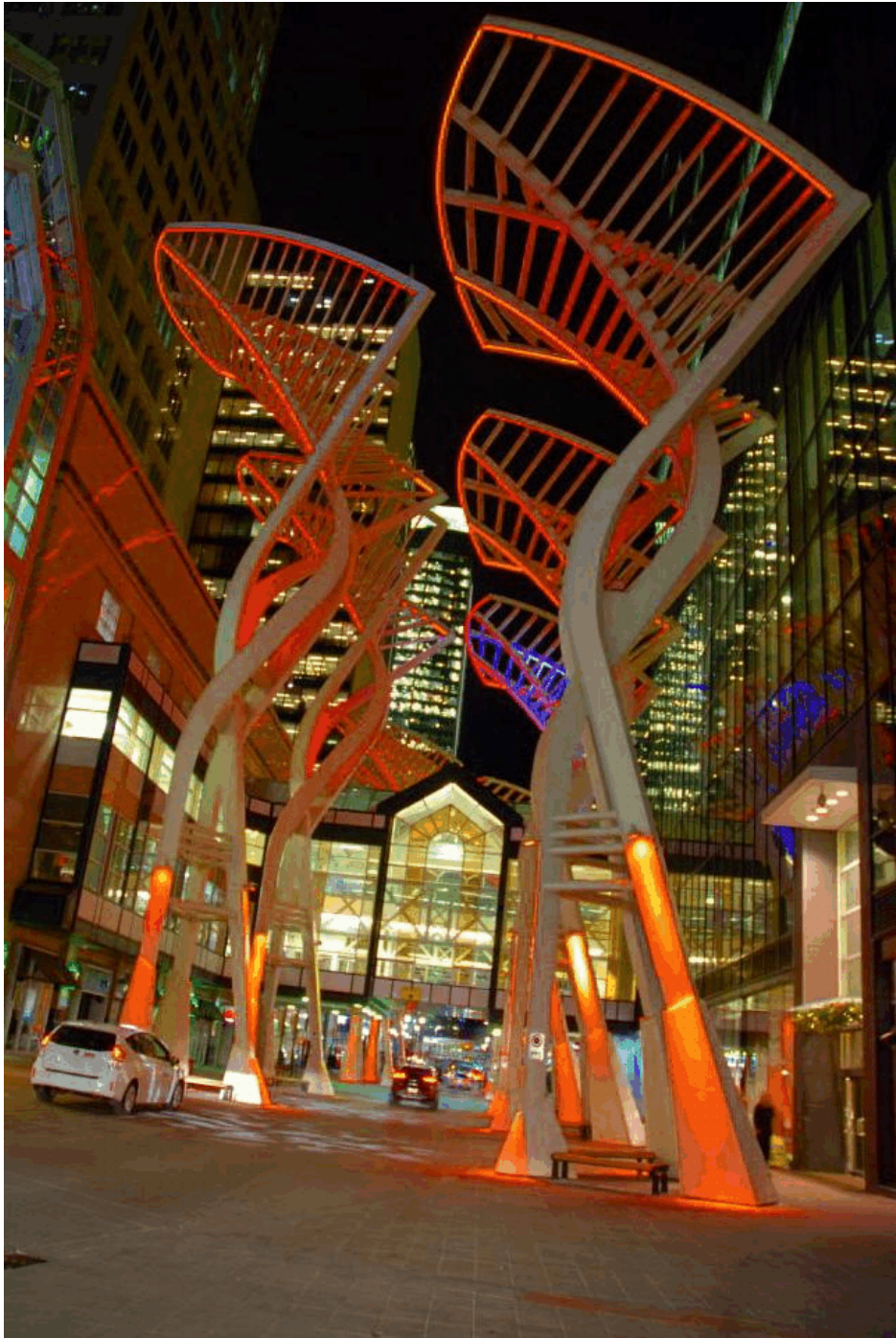


The lights on this pedestrian bridge over Confederation Creek were nicely reflected in the water below.

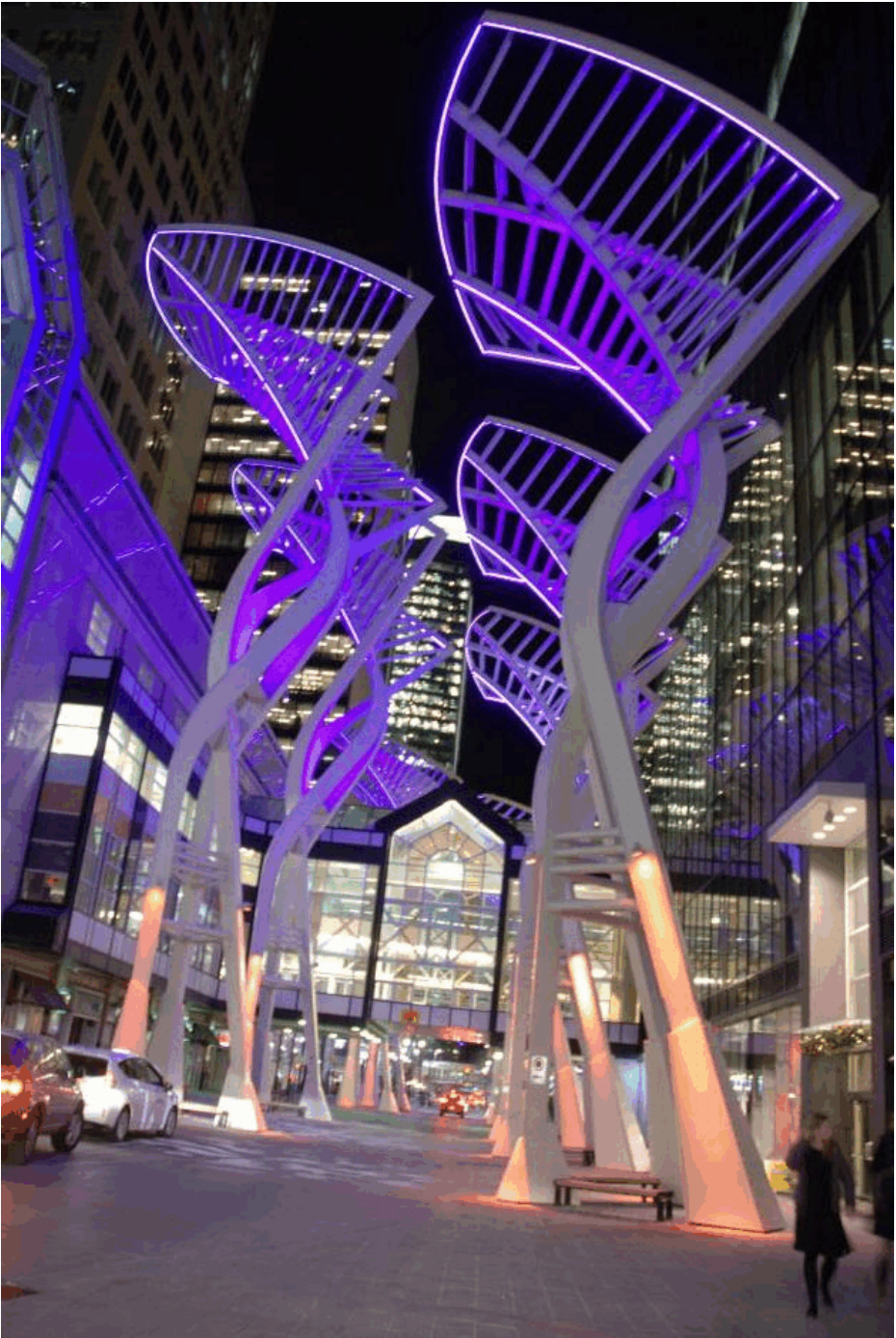




And now a jump to the Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall in the downtown core. The west end of it is hemmed in by skyscrapers which deflect upper level winds down to the street so strongly that pedestrians were knocked over.



The solution was to build these wind defectors to break up the airflow into milder turbulence. Technically these aren't Christmas lights because they shine every night of the year, but I took the photos in December, so what the hey.





At the east end of the mall, where it terminates in front of the Olympic Plaza and City Hall, these planters were illuminated for Christmas. The stately pile is the Performing Arts Centre, originally the Federal Building, built a century ago. Those are real stone pillars, not the fake sprayed-concrete style used today.

In the lower middle of the photo, notice the ghost image of a pedestrian. I had to use a long exposure to bring out the colours, and she walked past while the shutter was open. For night shots as in this issue, I brace my camera against something solid like a sign post or tree trunk so the image won't be blurred.





## VENUS IN HER GLIMMERING SPHERE: PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #324.]

### Long Ago And Far Away.

The anthology OLD VENUS (2015) edited by George R.R. Martin and Gardner Dozois is a companion piece to OLD MARS. Both volumes have new commissioned pieces written about those worlds before the Mariner and Venera space probes made obsolete thousands of science fiction stories.

In the introduction to OLD VENUS, written by Dozois, he observes that the idea of Venus as a rainy Carboniferous swamp received its main impetus from the Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius in his 1918 book THE DESTINIES OF STARS. When SF began developing into its modern form in the late 1920s, Venus jungle stories were not far behind, peaking during the 1939 to 1955 era. After 1962, the space probes destroyed any hope for Old Venus stories.

“Frogheads” by Allen M. Steele is a noir detective story that isn’t exactly a mean streets story because there are no streets on Venus, a waterworld with floating Soviet-made islands. The protagonist is Ronson, a private investigator who has been sent by a wealthy client to locate his missing son David. The frogheads are the native Venusians who were made addicted to chocolate by humans, a real addiction like crack or cocaine. It turns out that David wasn’t an abducted tourist who came to grief but had decided to set himself up as a drug lord on one of the floating islands.

“The Drowned Celestial” by Lavie Tidhar is an action-adventure centred around an ancient idol named Roog and its enemy the dragon Sun Eater. Indiana Jones, pardon me, a man named Colt, is an adventurer looking for easy money. The story writes itself.

“Planet Of Fear” by Paul McAuley takes place at a remote mining camp on the coast of an equatorial continent. The miners are being wiped out by some sort of psychosis or disease. This is an ecopuzzle story about medics trying to find the source of infection. It appears to be coming from Venusian fish but how?

“Greeves And The Evening Star” by Matthew Hughes is Bertie Wooster on Venus, written in the best P.G. Wodehouse style. The standard Jeeves storyline

follows, with unrequited love, silly misunderstandings, unbounded effrontery by cads, and all that Edwardian rubbish. A spot-on parody.

“A Planet Called Desire” by Gwyneth Jones is about the first explorer to Venus. It is in the pulp magazine style, with assorted strange and mostly dangerous animals, a jungle maiden, and all the trappings.

“Living Hell” by Joe Haldeman is about a pilot who has to rescue a group of humans from the Venusian swamps, complicated by a huge solar flare that fried most spacecraft. A very nice twist when it is discovered that Venusian animals are immortal and can also make humans that way but in a completely novel method.

“Bones Of Air, Bones Of Stone” by Stephen Leigh is an angst story with scenes on Venus. The litcrit crowd like this sort of thing. This is the type of story that gave rise to the Sad Puppies.

“Ruins” by Eleanor Arnason is about a safari to Venus. It is a habitable planet but no signs of sentients were known until the safari stumbles across a ruin. An average story.

“The Tumbledowns Of Cleopatra Abyss” by David Brin is about humans living in decaying bubble cities at the bottom of the Venusian ocean. They originally went there to escape the toxic atmospheric gases but have been there for so long that they have almost forgotten what lies above the surface. They are unaware that terraforming has been proceeding and the once-poisonous clouds are now safe. This story is an interesting switch on all those generation starship stories.

“By Frogsled And Lizardback To Outcast Venusian Lepers” by Garth Nix sums itself up in the title. Even the Sad Puppies would have trouble finishing this.

“The Sunset Of Time” by Michael Cassutt is about a legend the Venusians have that every so often the clouds part and they see sunsets and sunrises. How could this be?, the human invaders wonder. It transpires that Venus’s rotation is subject to irregularities that trigger sudden tectonic movements, massive quakes, tsunamis, and briefly clears the atmosphere.

“Pale Blue Memories” by Tobias Buckell is an alternative history of a deadly space race between Nazi Germany and the USA for possession of Venus. Nasty, with missiles and dirty tricks.



“The Heart’s Filthy Lesson” by Elizabeth Bear concerns a scientist obsessed with proving her hypothesis about Venusian (in this story, Cytherean) aboriginal settlement patterns. So politically correct that it is guaranteed to set any Sad Puppy foaming at the mouth.

“The Wizard Of The Trees” by Joe R. Lansdale is about a Titanic passenger who instead of drowning, finds himself on Venus after recovering consciousness. The trip is made by handwaving, and allows the hero to begin a new life on the planet. What worries him though, is that lately he has been having dreams about being pulled back into the cold North Atlantic waters. Was his trip to Venus real or is it dying hallucinations?

“The Godstone Of Venus” by Mike Resnick is a treasure hunting story with a twist ending. The fabulous jewel being sought and found also revives a god, but in a new way. In the same line of retro, “Botanica Veneris: Thirteen Papercuts by Ida Countess Rathangan” by Ian McDonald is veddy Victorian in the style of ERB. An Englishwoman journeys across Venus the way they did back in Victorian times on grand tours.

**Other Stories Of Old Venus.**

“Katahut Said No” by J.T. M’Intosh (1952 April, GALAXY) begins with a world-dominating supercomputer running the economy, its decisions unquestioned by humans. It decides that a village named Katahut on Venus is superfluous and should be dismantled. The inhabitants refuse to be dispersed and stage a successful rebellion. This, the supercomputer warns, will disrupt the smooth functioning of the economy and lead to inefficiencies and chaos. The story was written during the Cold War, so it is obviously a warning about planned economies.

A hot swampy Venus naturally brings to mind the American South, and Kendell Foster Crossen looks at the problems of plantation owners on Venus in his story “My Old Venusian Home” (1953 January, STARTLING STORIES). It is January 2076 and the USA has just elected its first black President (so you know this is science fiction). This has upset some down-South Senators and other politicians. They plan a coup d’etat but can’t directly involve themselves because they have political baggage that tarnishes their reputation. They decide to use a golden boy currently on Venus running a plantation away from the public eye. The natives are bipedal crocodilians who are lazy, like singing, and are content to work in the fields.

The politicians visit Venus and convince their candidate to come back to Earth with them. As they attempt to leave, the Venusians stop them, killing the golden boy to make their point, because to them, the plantation life is just playing a game. They like to play games. Only then do the humans learn that millennia before there was another alien race that colonized Venus but eventually died out one by one as they learned the hard way that they couldn’t control the Venusians when they got tired of playing games.

“Publicity Stunt” by Robert Moore Williams (1953 March, OTHER WORLDS) deals with restless natives on Venus. A spaceship line is trying to boost the tourist trade to Venus, but understandably most people don’t like humid swamps with lots of small biting flying insects. The company sends a public relations team to try and find something that could bring in the tourist trade. Matters get off to a bad start when the team land their ship in the middle of sacred dancing grounds. The primitive Venusian tribesmen are talked out of a lynching, and eventually convinced to change their customs to fit the idea of what tourists think they are. Much like Earth, of course.

SF authors are historically poor in economics, such as the idea that metals would be mined on other planets, and then hauled out of their gravity wells and taken to Earth at incredible expense. “Secret Of The House” by H.H. Holmes (1953 March, GALAXY) is based on one aspect of human history, that of the spice trade. Europe and China did not trade iron ore; the valuable items were spices and opium. The story at hand supposes that the swamps of Venus produce valuable spices. A newlywed wife has trouble pleasing her husband, a gourmet, so she begins using Venusian spices to flavour the meals. A colonist visiting from that planet is amused that Earthlings go into ecstasies over what to him are dried weed extracts.

“Community Property” by Alfred Coppel (1954 December, WORLDS OF IF) is about Jose Obanion, a hotshot divorce lawyer on Earth who is asked by some Venusians to handle their case. The matter is a complicated one because the humanoids that live there have three sexes. Obanion has a difficult time of it, starting with having to name five respondents in the court action, and then figuring out who did what to whom.

“To Each His Own” by Jack Sharkey (1960 January, WORLDS OF IF) reverses the usual story. This time the Venusians land on Earth. The explorers come down in Manhattan. As they explore the city and the continent, they find countless buildings and structures but no inhabitants. They try to analyze



documents and figure out the language. The story is a cheat though, because information is withheld from the reader until the end. The Earth was flooded when lithium bombs melted all the ice. The Venusians, living as they did on a waterworld planet, had landed in a flooded city and thought nothing of being underwater, but the reader isn't made aware of that. Like all twist-ending stories, it can only be read once.

**Humans On New Venus.**

Given what we know about Venus, it makes no sense to have humans land on its surface. There is enough trouble getting robot probes to work on the surface, and no advantage to all the extra weight and gear needed for humans. But some SF writers in the modern era still write such stores.

“Becalmed In Hell” by Larry Niven (1965 July, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is not an excursion to the surface of blast-furnace Venus but a trip among its clouds. A spaceship arrives from Earth, operated by a cyborg brain and with one human crewman. The huge fuel tank is drained by the final orbital insertion burn and then sealed in the vacuum, to be subsequently used as a blimp floating in the top cloud layer while instrument packages are dropped down. The cyborg brain is paralyzed and the crewman, thinking it is psychosomatic, uses a placebo to get its functioning back. The placebo, as it turns out, accidentally cured a real physical problem. The story concentrates on the interplay between the human and the frightened cyborg, which would be more believable if there was any valid reason for sending a human to Venus.

“Crazy Oil” by Brenda Pearce (1975 April, ANALOG) is about wildcat drillers on the surface of Venus who have found shallow oil. Not petroleum oil, but an organic type that might make good fertilizer or chemical stock. The first crew was killed by a blowout, but the second crew discovers it was a strange sort of blowout. After the disaster, the oil then contracted back down into its source in the underground strata.

The reader instantly recognizes that the oil is an amoeboid organism, but that would make this a vignette instead of a novelette, so the characters stumble about reading instrument dials and speculating what could make the oil behave the way it does. More supporting characters die before the truth comes out. Not entirely implausible to have the quasi-oil on Venus, but still I wonder why anyone would try to put humans on the surface of Venus.

“In The Bowl” by John Varley (1975 December, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) posits settlements on Venus with domed cities impervious to the heat and pressure. Each city has a theme, Venusburg as an example being the beloved Carboniferous swamps of yore. The narrator is a tourist who runs into trouble while prospecting for blast jewels out on the surface. The jewels are unrivaled for clarity and beauty but can be dangerous if not properly treated. Eventually it is discovered that the jewels may be the bones of a previously unknown Venusian life form that avoids the cities. This is an attempt at setting up an ecopuzzle story, mixing it with cyberpunk (yes, I know it would not exist for another decade), and pouring in some Essence of Harlan Ellison. The story just misses by that much.

“To Reign In Hell” by Paul Dellinger (1979 June, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) has Venus being used as a penal colony. One convict is stranded in a Venusian dust storm (this is the modern Venus), running out of oxygen, and his pressure suit rapidly overheating. He and another convict are in a blood feud over a female convict. Matters are complicated when large insect-like Venusians are discovered which help save the men in the storm. The ending is forced when the convicts shake hands and make up. It doesn't ring true.

Among the implausible is “And Then We Went To Venus” by Bill Pronzini (1980 June, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF). A manned vessel was sent to Venus where it landed. Its crew was protected from the heat and high pressure by special materials, but they came back to Earth as gibbering idiots. They found life on the planet but of such apparent great horror that it drove them insane. They now live in semi-catatonic condition in a hospital and only say the word “Medusa”. Even Lovecraft was never this bad with his eldritch horrors. The illogic of the story is made worse by a slow start of the narrative that is nothing but tedious.

**Aliens On Venus.**

“Amateur In Chancery” by George O. Smith (1961 October, GALAXY) is about a research team that landed a matter transmitter on the surface of Venus, then sent an explorer through from Earth. She discovers that Venus has a civilization but gets into trouble and needs to be rescued within fifteen minutes or she will die. The team can't send help through because the other end is still blocked by her equipment. Contact with a Venusian is established but the team has to explain to it which button to push to send the explorer back. How do you explain the words “left” and “right” to an alien that can't see you? Finally the



correct button is pressed, although the ending seems dishonest. The title of this story makes no sense but the editor of GALAXY at this time, Horace L. Gold, was notorious among authors for arbitrarily changing titles for no good reason.

“From Venus With Love” is a 1967 episode of THE AVENGERS television series. The original Avengers, that is, from England, not those Americans prancing around in coloured tights. John Steed and Emma Peel investigate the mysterious deaths of five rich or highly-placed amateur astronomers, who have only one thing in common; they all belonged to the British Venusian Society. They all died by mysterious beams of light that, on one occasion, burned its way into a private vault.

The leader of the BVS is Venus Brown, who believes the attacks are the vanguard of an attack by aliens from Venus. She takes it personally because she has been soaking the deceased for goodly sums of money to keep her and the BVS in the style to which they have become accustomed.

Steed and Peel sort through various suspects. The various fights were unusual for that time in television because Peel used martial arts. That is taken for granted today, but back then the women were supposed to scream and cringe back into a corner, not chop the bad guy in his guts. The villain of the piece is discovered to be not an alien invader but a mad scientist who built a high-powered laser into his Lotus sports car. In 1967, not too many in the general public knew what a laser was, so Steed uses an “As you know, Professor ...” conversation to explain it, one of the few times this type of infodump was justified. They finally defeat the mad scientist by reflecting the laser back at him with a hand mirror.

“Venus, Mars, And Baker Street” by Manly W. Wellman and Wade Wellman (1972 March, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) picks up where H.G. Wells’ story ends, with the Martians dying from bacteria. Sherlock Holmes and Professor Challenger had pooled forces in the struggle against the Martians and are now studying the dead ones and their machines. They have tapped the Martian communications systems and learned that the rear guard of Martians switched destinations and decided to land on Venus.

For a spacefaring species, they aren’t very good at scouting, and after landing on Venus, find out what its surface is like. The Martians can’t go outside and can’t get back into space. Holmes and Challenger watch them slowly die.

“Alphas” by Gregory Benford (1989 March, AMAZING) begins with the arrivals of aliens, who ignore the Earthlings and set up on Venus. They warn away humans and begin clearing the Venusian atmosphere. Then they use a cosmic string (ref. quantum mechanics if you don’t know what it is) to core the planet like an apple. This produces a hollow tube from pole to pole, out of which the molten metal in the planet’s interior squirts like toothpaste.

A human spacecraft gets too close to Venus for the aliens’ comfort, so they take it out. One astronaut survives and is tossed down the shaft the aliens cut, to fall all the way through and come out the other end alive. The aliens then build space colonies with the extracted metal, still ignoring the humans trying to establish contact with them. Benford is one of a few great SF writers who knows how to really build worlds based on speculative science fact. The story is a good read in how to take a wild idea and run with it.

### **Plagiarists From Venus.**

While reading through my run of WORLDS OF IF, I came across a story in the 1971 October issue titled “To Kill A Venusian” by Irwin Ross. It was about a serial wife murderer who drowned each wife in the bathtub to collect insurance. But his latest wife had gills that opened when he pushed her underwater. She revealed herself to be a Venusian, a humanoid amphibian, and said that they were infiltrating Earth. She was immune to shooting or stabbing because her body healed its wounds instantly, and Earth poisons were like candy to her.

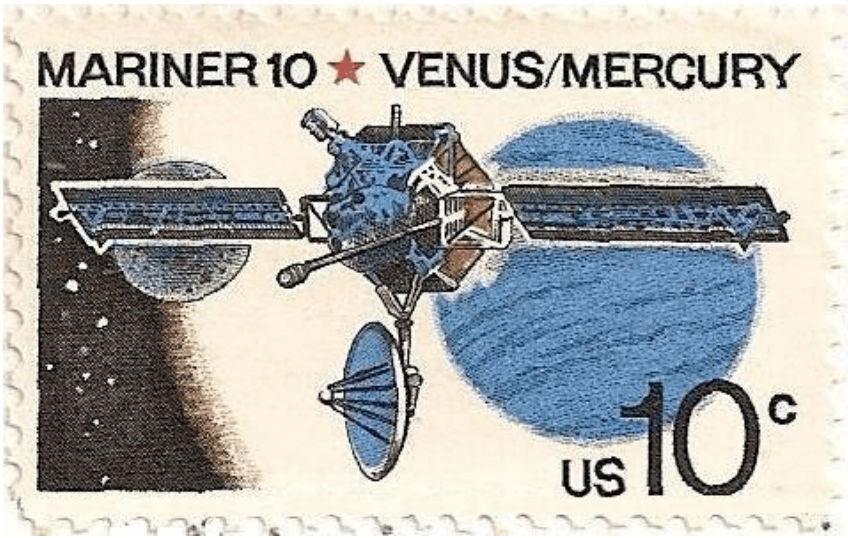
He finally killed her by lopping off one of his fingers, grinding it up, and serving it to her in her food. The foreign cells killed her. Other Venusians were discovered around the world simply by spritzing people on their necks with water, which caused the gills to open automatically. And so the invasion was turned back.

This story baffled me because by 1971 the blast furnace condition of Venus was well known. Why did the editor publish such an archaic story? Part of the answer came when I reached the 1972 February issue, where an apology admitted that the editor had been taken in by a plagiarist. The story was almost verbatim from “Nine-Finger Jack” by Anthony Boucher and originally appeared in the 1952 August issue of MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. In those days, of course, a swampy Venus was still plausible. While it is understandable that the editor accepted the story in good faith, it doesn’t answer the question of why he would accept such an obsolete plot.



**Pathfinders.**

Venus being inhospitable to humans, robot probes are the obvious proxies. “A Matter Of Orientation” by Bob Buckley (1970, ANALOG) is about an autonomous American robot roving the surface of Venus. The Soviets land their own probe but are concerned because the American probe assumes any other moving form is Venusian life, and moves in to dissect it. It all works out well in the end though, as the probes learn they can all just get along.



**Terraforming.**

Turning Venus into another Earth is not as impossible as it may seem. The hellish high pressure and carbon dioxide atmosphere are the result of a runaway greenhouse effect. Science fiction writers have proposed many schemes to reduce the gaseous CO<sub>2</sub> and add water.

“Fergussen’s Wraith” by Mike Conner (1985 August, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is about a megacorporation terraforming Venus by running a giant tube from the surface to a point just above the atmosphere. Pure sodium or potassium mined from Mercury is dumped down the tube, where it reacts with the carbon dioxide to form carbonates and thus remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere. Immediately I find it difficult to believe the economics, although the technical details seem plausible. A government might do it, but a long-term project like this would not be done by private business.

More troubling is that all the spacecraft hauling the metals are manned, when logic would dictate that they be automated for the long trips in space. The premise of the story is that pilots are going insane on arrival at the tube and exiting their spacecraft for no apparent reason, dying in orbit or in the acidic atmosphere. The megacorporation hires private investigators to find out why, and the story is written in the noir style.

The lead P.I. discovers there is a life form in the clouds, a wraith that exists on the powerful electrical currents circulating in the atmosphere. It realizes that the terraforming will destroy it. Being an energy field, it messes with the minds of the pilots, for the human brain is an electrochemical energy field. The resolution of the story is weak and unsatisfactory, but the concept of the terraforming is interesting.

A story that grated on my nerves for its errors was “Chimera” by Bob Buckley (1976 December, ANALOG). Terraforming of Venus has begun, and after a couple of centuries the upper layer of the atmosphere has a bit of oxygen and can support some genetically-engineered life and their mutant offshoots. Humans still have to wear protective suits but can travel in the upper layers using buoyant squids as vehicles. The various life forms from algae up to giant bubbles called whales are cleverly described.

The story is a western transferred to the upper atmosphere of Venus. The two cowpokes who are the heroes of the story are moseying along in their squid when engine trouble develops and the squid becomes nothing more than a hot-air balloon. The heroes set out sails and then begin tacking and steering about like a sailboat. Even a flatlander like me knows that sailboats can only do so because they have a keel down into the water that allows resistance and steering. A balloon cannot be steered with sails because both are part of the moving air mass and need some sort of resistance to turn, just as an automobile cannot be steered on frictionless ice.

Since a major part of the story is spent steering the floating squid about with lots of technical details about sails, this is not just a minor nitpick. Along the way, the heroes interact with the various aerial forms of life of the upper atmosphere. The planet is being used as a type of rangeland with animals called airbeef, which supply food at, no doubt, incredible cost, but then again SF writers were always weak on economics. The heroes have assorted adventures as they try to find their way back to civilization, including a final showdown with cattle rustlers, pardon me, airbeef poachers. Git along, little dogies.



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: Charles Rector  
Woodstock, Illinois

2015-12-11

Re: OPUNTIA #318: Finally got around to reading the When Words Collide issue. It was well worth the wait given the interesting coverage of how unrealistic that TV cop shows are, for instance. One thing that I'm wondering about is that was the convention programming mostly oriented around Science Fiction/Fantasy/Horror or was there more topics pertaining to traditional Historical/Romantic/Western Fiction than you mentioned in your coverage?

[Without going back and wading through the programme book, I would say that it was roughly one-quarter for each group of genres and one half for generic writing workshops, pitch sessions, and how-to sessions. My observation is that women were about half the membership and almost all of them were trying to write, sell, or publicize novels. WWC is almost a trade fair now. Online publishing dominated; in the dealer bourse I only saw a few books that were traditional hardcovers or mass-market paperbacks, and the rest were the trade paperback print-on-demand style, say 99% of them. It is difficult for me to classify the proportions of the genres because there were so many crossovers, such as fantasy romance or vampire detectives.]

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Lawrence, M.J., et al (2015) **The effects of modern war and military activities on biodiversity and the environment.** ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW 23:443-460

Authors’ abstract: “Here we review the potential consequences of modern war and military activities on ecosystem structure and function. We focus on the

effects of direct conflict, nuclear weapons, military training, and military produced contaminants. Overall, the aforementioned activities were found to have overwhelmingly negative effects on ecosystem structure and function. Dramatic habitat alteration, environmental pollution, and disturbance contributed to population declines and biodiversity losses arising from both acute and chronic effects in both terrestrial and aquatic systems. In some instances, even in the face of massive alterations to ecosystem structure, recovery was possible.”

“Interestingly, military activity was beneficial under specific conditions, such as when an exclusion zone was generated that generally resulted in population increases and (or) population recovery; an observation noted in both terrestrial and aquatic systems. Additionally, military technological advances (e.g., GPS technology, drone technology, biotelemetry) have provided conservation scientists with novel tools for research. Because of the challenges associated with conducting research in areas with military activities (e.g., restricted access, hazardous conditions), information pertaining to military impacts on the environment are relatively scarce and are often studied years after military activities have ceased and with no knowledge of baseline conditions.”

Schilkea, O., M. Reimanna, and K.S. Cook (2015) **Power decreases trust in social exchange.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 112:12950–12955

Authors’ abstract: “Here, we report on a series of experiments in which we manipulated participants’ power position in terms of structural dependence and observed their trust perceptions and behaviors. Over a variety of different experimental paradigms and measures, we find that more powerful actors place less trust in others than less powerful actors do. Our results contradict predictions by rational actor models, which assume that low-power individuals are able to anticipate that a more powerful exchange partner will place little value on the relationship with them, thus tends to behave opportunistically, and consequently cannot be trusted. Conversely, our results support predictions by motivated cognition theory, which posits that low-power individuals want their exchange partner to be trustworthy and then act according to that desire. Mediation analyses show that, consistent with the motivated cognition account, having low power increases individuals’ hope and, in turn, their perceptions of their exchange partners’ benevolence, which ultimately leads them to trust.”