Afternoon Discoveries: October 20, 2026

Science Fiction & Fantasy

AMONG THE LETTERS
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Science Fiction & Fantasy

A woman drives Highway 2 between Edmonton and Calgary while the prairie burns, counting horse trailers where buffalo once ran. A space tug captain loses a crewmate to drifting debris, and a woman rescued after nine years alone on a stranded ship mourns the alien who kept her company. Today's shelf gathers science fiction and fantasy from small speculative magazines and podcasts, with Canadian voices from Alberta and Ontario. The back shelf offers

a Victorian eruption under the Thames, a cheerful Martian, and a golden statue with a generous heart. Each piece makes room for wonder.

All links in today's edition were checked against the linked publication, magazine, or publisher page on October 19, 2026.

Featured Discovery

Horse Trailer, Ash, Pumpjack - EC Dorgan

EC Dorgan's story follows Jamie, who drives Highway 2 from Edmonton to Calgary every weekend while fires that may never go out spread across the prairie. Pumpjacks stand where her grandfather's stories placed buffalo herds, and the only traffic is horse trailers hauling animals nowhere. Then a green Nissan with a bucking bronco decal leads her to Kelly, a dental receptionist with a dimpled chin and a horse named Misty. Their friendship of Timbits, thermoses, and eighties metal is the first warm thing in years. Dorgan, a Métis writer near Edmonton, makes the end of the world feel achingly local.

Read "Horse Trailer, Ash, Pumpjack" at Augur Magazine

The Discovery Desk

One Heart - Annika Browne

Annika Browne's story begins as rescuers board a damaged ship and congratulate its lone survivor on being saved. For nine years she has lived there with an alien companion, canning pickles, braiding rag rugs, and welding pipes into a highway for his long blue limbs. The rescuers see a wreck and a trauma case, while she sees a home and a loss no one else understands. Browne writes grief with startling honesty, letting tenderness and fury sit side by side. It is a short, piercing story about love across species and the loneliness of being found.

Read "One Heart" at Diabolical Plots

The Embroidered Garden - Manahil Bandukwala

Manahil Bandukwala's Kanwal is nearly ten and waiting for her father, who works for weeks at a time at the port near Thatta. She embroiders flowers onto a chadar while her mother tends the garden, and one morning periwinkles appear in the bed with soft ridges stitched into every petal. Marigolds and frangipani follow, each blooming from her needle. Bandukwala, an Ottawa and Mississauga writer and a Writers' Trust of Canada Rising Star, keeps the magic as gentle as thread. The final stitches bring a longing child's wish home in a way that feels earned and quietly joyful.

Read "The Embroidered Garden" at Tales & Feathers

Life Support - Hall Jameson

Captain Eliza Crane commands the Meddybemps, a prehistoric space tug, when her crew spots a mangled pod tangled with a buoy and

showing signs of life. Her first mate Lucas, who reminds her of an estranged brother, volunteers for the spacewalk to tow it in. Drifting debris turns the rescue into a loss, and Eliza returns to base with a resignation letter waiting in her queue. Hall Jameson then brings a blind physician and his white German shepherd to her door. The result is a warm, hopeful story about grief, responsibility, and a three-tailed rat named Glitch.

Read “Life Support” at Abyss & Apex

A Starry Sort of Hope - Torrance Elizabeth

In Torrance Elizabeth’s seaside town, the dead are sent to the stars in starships made of cardboard, sealed with tape and topped with a powder candle. Danika knows Astraea’s ship will never reach the sky, yet waits on the shore for the launch beside Ilona, who still believes. Grief, doubt, and a tender friendship push against each other as the townspeople gather. Elizabeth is an eighteen-year-old English student, and this Cast of Wonders original is their first professional publication. It is a gentle young adult fantasy about mourning together, and it ends under a sky full of gemstone stars.

Read “A Starry Sort of Hope” at Cast of Wonders

Thank you for spending some time with this afternoon’s edition. Below this point are six more stories and poems, three essays on speculative craft and criticism, and three special recommendations from the back shelf.

Special Recommendations can be found near the bottom of the article.

More From the Discovery Desk

Carina Sagittarius - Josh Pearce

Josh Pearce's Carina pours coffee at a midwestern chain diner, though she can spawn and destroy worlds and rewind causality. Her skin is a dark slate grey that shields others from her inner radiation, and her fellow waitress Dot calls every customer Sugar. Carina has come to Earth to learn what purpose ordinary life serves, so she gets a job, a cat, and a garden. A government agent named Orel takes her disco bowling and asks about God, and she answers with nested universes. The story is funny, strange, and unexpectedly moving about work, friendship, and scale.

Read "Carina Sagittarius" at Kaleidotrope

When I Cowboy in Puuwaawaa - Ferdison Cayetano

Ferdison Cayetano's narrator, Han, is a Hawaiian paniolo who travels to Cheyenne with his ranch crew for a rodeo, carrying a grief he cannot rope. Since losing Frankie, his toss has gone wrong, and Yankton cowboys mock the islanders in a bar. A half-broken horse bolts with Han into the frozen Pryor Mountains, where memory and cold blur together. There he meets small, otherworldly friends who need a favour of their own. Cayetano, a Filipino American writer in Brooklyn, turns a tall tale into a moving story of mourning and grace.

Read "When I Cowboy in Puuwaawaa" at PodCastle

The Inheritance of Water - Grace Yang

Grace Yang's narrator is twelve and rides in her mother's boat off Jeju while her mother dives as a haenyeo, holding her breath for minutes at a time. The water there keeps memories, and the girl glimpses her grandmother as a dark fin beneath the foam. Her mother wants her to study and leave for Seoul, until an argument tips the girl into the sea. What she finds below reveals what the sea takes from the women who work it. Yang's short fantasy is fierce and sorrowful, a tribute to mothers whose labour carries daughters closer to shore.

Read "The Inheritance of Water" at Small Wonders

Triton at Perihelion - Stuart Greenhouse

Stuart Greenhouse gives voice to Triton, the moon of Neptune that stays frozen smooth for most of its long orbit. Near perihelion its surface warms just enough to breathe, and the poem counts the hours of that brief thaw in human heartbeats. Greenhouse moves through three numbered sections, from waking to sublimating to settling back under miles of ice. His note explains that the poem grew from twenty-five years of chronic illness and an online astronomy course. It is a precise, aching science fiction poem about distance, rest, and the heat we share.

Read "Triton at Perihelion" at Abyss & Apex

The Fourth Hero of Ouroboros - Erin Keating

Erin Keating's scholar flees the Charlatan King with books on her back and stories on her tongue, disguised in the brown robes of a travelling monk. The Kingdom of Ouroboros is fated to fall again and again, and each failing king hides the books and rewrites history. The land

remembers anyway, in ruined colonnades among the orchards and a statue rising from a drowned court. Somewhere ahead, a patient librarian is waiting for her. Keating writes a graceful fantasy about stories as a kind of divinity and the people who keep them alive.

Read “The Fourth Hero of Ouroboros” at Cast of Wonders

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nohkôm’s Coffee - Benjamin Johns

Benjamin Johns opens in a late grandmother’s kitchen, where the narrator unpacks boxes beside her old Chambers stove and the French press his grandfather once bought at a farmers’ market. He finds the jar of ground coffee in a box labelled Medicine, because coffee was always nohkôm’s truest medicine. As the kettle heats, he remembers the day he told her the person he loved was not a girl. Her answer came as a story about kimosôm and the people who love us most. Johns writes Cree fantasy with real tenderness, and this short piece will stay with you.

Read “nohkôm’s Coffee” at Tales & Feathers

Beyond the First Shelf

How to Not Overexplain in Speculative Fiction - Jeanette Smith

Jeanette Smith, a working editor and the writing advice columnist at MetaStellar, tackles one of speculative fiction's most common traps. Writers who build new worlds often want to explain everything at once, and Smith argues that the info dump pulls readers out of the story. She offers four quieter tools, namely cause and effect, dialogue, little details, and delay. Her examples are practical, from a spell whose components vanish to a ration card at the grocer. The column is short, friendly, and useful for any writer who trusts readers to piece a world together.

Read "How to Not Overexplain in Speculative Fiction" at MetaStellar

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Building the Labyrinth: Borges and the Conceptual Architecture of Modern Speculative Fiction - James C. Clar

James C. Clar, a writer and retired teacher, argues that much of modern speculative fiction is unthinkable without Jorge Luis Borges. Borges wrote no rockets and few machines, yet The Garden of Forking Paths imagined branching timelines decades before multiverse fiction made them familiar. Clar reads The Secret Miracle through Heidegger and shows how an invented encyclopedia overwrites reality in Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius. His central point is that Borges built speculative fiction from mirrors, libraries, and language. It is a clear and generous essay for readers who wonder where the genre's strangest ideas began.

Read "Building the Labyrinth" at MetaStellar

How to Structure a Short Story - Devon Halliday

Devon Halliday answers reader questions on Substack by breaking down how a short story gets built, shortly after a twentieth story

acceptance. An earlier guide focused on speculative stories, and this one widens the lens without losing that sensibility. Halliday suggests opening with an impossible first sentence, then writing the story that makes it feel natural. The fridge magnet list runs from hooking readers to opening the trapdoor and ending on a scene rather than a theme. Generous examples and candid notes on drafting make it a lively guide for anyone finishing a first story.

Read “How to Structure a Short Story” at Devon Halliday’s Substack

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Special Recommendations

The Thames Valley Catastrophe - Grant Allen

Grant Allen, born in Kingston, Ontario, published this disaster story in The Strand Magazine in December 1897. A second grade government servant recalls cycling near Cookham on the August morning a volcanic fissure opened beneath the Thames Valley. A sea of fire fills the valley behind him while he pedals in terror, then turns his thoughts to his wife and children. Allen narrates from a future in which the capital has moved to Manchester and the valley is a glassy desert of basalt. It is a vivid early catastrophe tale with a surprisingly modern sense of scale.

Read “The Thames Valley Catastrophe” at Project Gutenberg Australia

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A Martian Odyssey - Stanley G. Weinbaum

Stanley G. Weinbaum's 1934 story follows Dick Jarvis, chemist of the first crewed expedition to Mars, who crashes his small rocket far from the ship. Walking back across the desert, he rescues an ostrich-like Martian named Tweel from a tentacled creature. The two become friends without sharing a language, and Tweel's logic stays charmingly alien. Along the way they meet a silicon being that builds pyramids from its own bricks and a barrel-shaped race busily wheeling carts. Weinbaum's warm, funny tale changed how science fiction imagined alien minds.

Read "A Martian Odyssey" at Project Gutenberg

The Happy Prince - Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde's fairy tale, published in 1888, sets a gilded statue high above a city, covered in gold leaf with sapphires for eyes and a ruby on his sword hilt. A swallow late for Egypt shelters at his feet one night and is surprised by falling tears. The Prince, who never knew sorrow while alive, asks the bird to carry his jewels and gold to the poor he can now see. Winter closes in as the swallow keeps delaying his journey south. Wilde's gentle fantasy remains one of literature's most moving stories about kindness and sacrifice.

Read "The Happy Prince" at Wikisource

Thank you for spending part of your day among the letters with us.

Today's pages travel from burning prairie highways to the ice of a distant moon, yet many of them return to the same question. What do we owe the ones we have lost? A captain, a cowboy, a girl at the edge of the sea, and a grandson with a French press each find an answer that holds them. The writers

here imagined other worlds to say true things about this one, and we hope a few of their answers stay with you.

I hope one of today's pieces gives you somewhere worth staying for a while.

Take care!