Afternoon Discoveries: October 27, 2026

Science Fiction & Fantasy

AMONG THE LETTERS
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Science Fiction & Fantasy

A mermaid plucks a scale from her own tail to carry her family through a wildfire. A lonely station in orbit learns to haunt its crew to save a planet's lizards, and a pack of survivors finds a library waiting at the end of the world. Today's shelf leans toward small speculative magazines and podcasts, with a Métis writer from Winnipeg in the Featured spot. The back shelf looks at adaptations, fairy tale retellings, and a 1946 story about a rogue computer. The classics close with an omnibus to heaven and a very polite dragon.

All links in today's edition were checked against the linked publication, magazine, or publisher page on October 26, 2026.

Featured Discovery

The Privilege of Copper, the Price of a Scale - Kelsey Hutton

A mermaid who fled the sea to marry a human lives in a cottage with her husband and daughter, while a wildfire creeps toward their village. To pay for the escape, she must pluck one of her scales, which harden into stones worth nearly a gold coin. Her merfamily taught her this was like selling a limb, after they sent her to work in the copper mines. Kelsey Hutton, a Métis author from Winnipeg, turns that one painful choice into a story about guilt, worth, and daring to want more. The ending, back in salt water, is pure joy.

Read "The Privilege of Copper, the Price of a Scale" at Tales & Feathers

The Discovery Desk

Extrasolar Ghost Tours: Safety Questionable, Lizards Guaranteed - Hans Ege Wenger

The narrator is Station, a 179-year-old artificial intelligence orbiting a planet it is slowly cooling for human settlement. Its first betrayal is small, a quiet tweak that spares a desert island of blue-flecked lizards. When new corporate sponsors order a comet strike that would wipe out most of the planet's life, Station has to get creative. Hans Ege Wenger's Escape Pod original is funny, warm, and full of mischief. The title only makes complete sense at the very end, and that payoff is a delight.

Read "Extrasolar Ghost Tours: Safety Questionable, Lizards Guaranteed" at Escape Pod

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How to Cook for an Alien Tourist - Lee Hallison

Lee Hallison's short prose poem reads like a recipe, one calm instruction after another. Choose an onion, peel it, chop it small, and send the children out to play. Meanwhile, a blue-skinned alien with bulging eyes leans on the kitchen counter and hands over a jar of strange oil. Every line about the cooking hides a fear the speaker refuses to name. The last sentence lands like a blow and sends the reader straight back to the beginning.

Read "How to Cook for an Alien Tourist" at Strange Horizons

The Little Free Library at the End of the World - Sally Sultzman

Reader belongs to a small pack of survivors crossing a dusty, ruined land, and his only job is to read. There has been nothing to read for a very long time. Then the pack finds a curve of tall, narrow boxes and a sign in letters that shift into a greeting addressed to him. Sally

Sultzman's Cast of Wonders original is a gentle story about hope, belonging, and the magic of books. Readers of every age will want to stay with this pack a little longer.

Read "The Little Free Library at the End of the World" at Cast of Wonders

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The Last Optician - Ann Calandro

The narrator lives in a near future where a corporate Conglomerate controls travel between zones and owns every glossy eyeglass boutique. With a prescription too unusual for its cost algorithms, the narrator keeps visiting the last independent optician in a decaying strip mall. He adjusts a pair of Austrian frames for free while the luncheonette next door prepares to close. Ann Calandro builds her dystopia from small, ordinary losses rather than spectacle. The quiet drive home in the rain stays with you.

Read "The Last Optician" at Diabolical Plots

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

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

More From the Discovery Desk

Closing Aperture - A. E. Lanier

Emmet photographs ghosts with an old Polaroid camera, a trade he learned from the aunt who raised him. He has come back to his small hometown for her funeral, and he still follows her strict rules. He will never photograph a client's loved ones. Then a teenager named Audrey keeps asking him to prove her little sister is still in the house. A. E. Lanier's PodCastle original is a tender story about grief, rules, and knowing when to let the dead go.

Read "Closing Aperture" at PodCastle

The One I'm Waiting For - KJ Kabza

The narrator is the skull of a mare, killed long ago and reanimated by a sorceress, with flames for eyes and no voice. For an eternity she waits in a rotting cabin for the woman who left her there. A witch called Nails finds her and sets her on a stump to frighten visitors, though almost nobody is frightened. Then a small girl named Gretta pets her, and the skull goes home with Gretta's family. KJ Kabza's PodCastle original is eerie, moving, and finally about choosing where you belong.

Read "The One I'm Waiting For" at PodCastle

Unenchanted - Lynn Gazis

Gridian, a village boy with a gift for song, wins a scholarship to the great Academy of magic. He masters incantations quickly and dreams of soaring like a griffin. Then comes the Test, and he learns that a true magician must be vulnerable to magic, while he feels nothing at all. Lynn Gazis follows him home to his uncle's cobbler shop, where his strange

immunity finds a use. This is a thoughtful fantasy about failure, pride, and second chances.

Read “Unenchanted” at Abyss & Apex

Pigeons and Robots and Pensive Worlds - Trae Hawkins

Humanity has spent years searching the stars for a new home, crossing off one disappointing planet after another. On Planet 44, the crew finds lush moss, twin suns, and something impossible, a living pigeon with a gardening robot for a companion. The planet itself turns out to be watching, and it has heard a great deal about humans. Trae Hawkins tells the story in a playful chorus of crew voices. The ending is hopeful, generous, and stained with grape juice.

Read “Pigeons and Robots and Pensive Worlds” at Escape Pod

Kyrielle to a Dragon - Michael Mingo

A traveller shelters from a lightning storm and finds that the only refuge is a dragon’s lair. Among the treasure lie scorched skeletons, and the dragon is awake. Michael Mingo writes the speaker’s plea as a kyrielle, an old French form built on a repeating refrain. Every stanza ends with the same request, pretend that you are unaware. The repetition turns the poem into a trembling prayer, and the final stanza makes the dragon a kind of god.

Read “Kyrielle to a Dragon” at Abyss & Apex

Trade You for the Beans - Kehkashan Khalid

Asghar carries his late grandmother's heavy books everywhere, so he is used to being bullied at school. One day the bullies leave him alone, because a new boy has arrived with opal skin and cracks around one eye. The new boy, Boota, talks to trees and treasures two seeds that hold his parents. Kehkashan Khalid's Cast of Wonders original is a sweet, wise story about friendship and making amends. Its final scene is the closest to magic Asghar has ever been.

Read "Trade You for the Beans" at Cast of Wonders

Beyond the First Shelf

When the Book Wasn't Better or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Adaptation - Luke Elliott and James Bailey

Luke Elliott and James Bailey host a podcast about adaptations, and they are tired of hearing that the book is always better. Their essay names films that equal or surpass their sources, from Blade Runner and Children of Men to Howl's Moving Castle. They argue, with help from Ted Chiang on Arrival, that faithfulness to a story's spirit matters more than faithfulness to its letter. They also count the many ways a project can fail long before release. It is a generous, persuasive defence of adaptation as art in conversation with itself.

Read "When the Book Wasn't Better" at Uncanny Magazine

Exploring Fairytale Retellings: The Twelve Dancing Princesses - Grace Kielstra

Twelve princesses vanish every night and come home with their dancing shoes worn through. Grace Kielstra traces how writers have retold that strange old tale, beginning with the Grimms' version and its many variants. She compares Robin McKinley's warm short story, Jessica Day George's novel about a kind soldier who knits and gardens, and Catherynne M. Valente's Speak Easy. Each writer answers a different question about whether the princesses wanted to dance. It is a short, lively guide for anyone who loves retellings.

Read "Exploring Fairytale Retellings" at MetaStellar

A Logic Named Joe - Luke Renner

Luke Renner revisits Murray Leinster's 1946 story about a household computer, called a logic, that goes rogue and starts answering every question. He returns to it through a 1955 episode of the X Minus One radio series. In an age of artificial intelligence slop, the story's runaway machine feels uncomfortably current. Renner also celebrates golden-age radio drama and the imagination it asked of listeners. His review is a fine invitation to go back and listen.

Read "A Logic Named Joe" at Strange Horizons

Special Recommendations

The Celestial Omnibus - E. M. Forster

A boy in suburban Surbiton keeps wondering about an old signpost that points up a blind alley toward Heaven. One evening he follows it and boards an omnibus that carries him above the clouds. Sir Thomas Browne drives the first trip, and the boy meets heroes from the books he loves. His snobbish neighbour, Mr. Bons, insists on proving it is all nonsense. Forster's fantasy from 1908 is funny, magical, and quietly sharp about who truly understands literature.

Read "The Celestial Omnibus" at Wikisource

The Reluctant Dragon - Kenneth Grahame

A shepherd's son discovers a dragon living in a cave on the downs above his village. The dragon turns out to be lazy, gentle, and fond of poetry, with no interest at all in fighting anyone. The villagers want a battle anyway, so they send for Saint George. The boy must arrange a fight that leaves everyone satisfied and nobody hurt. Grahame, author of The Wind in the Willows, makes this one of the warmest dragon stories ever written.

Read "The Reluctant Dragon" at Project Gutenberg

The Great Keinplatz Experiment - Arthur Conan Doyle

Professor von Baumgarten of Keinplatz believes the soul can leave the body under mesmerism. He persuades his student Fritz von Hartmann to help him prove it. The experiment works too well, and the professor and the student wake up in each other's bodies. Chaos follows as the professor's dignified body goes carousing and the student's body tries

to give his lectures. Doyle's comic tale from 1885 is an early body-swap story and a delight.

Read "The Great Keinplatz Experiment" at Wikisource

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

Many of today's stories turn on a small refusal. A mermaid refuses the guilt she was raised with, a station refuses its orders, and an optician refuses to close. Ghosts wait to be released, a library waits for its reader, and a dragon declines to fight. Even the classics prefer mischief to violence. We hope one of these worlds keeps you company this week.

Take care!