

OPUNTIA

#41.5

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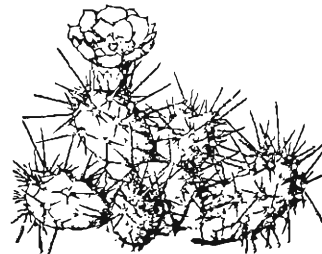
ART CREDIT: The cover depicts *Opuntia arborescens*, by an unknown artist in the 1856 House of Representatives (USA) REPORTS OF EXPLORATIONS AND SURVEYS TO ASCERTAIN THE MOST PRACTICABLE AND ECONOMICAL ROUTE FOR A RAILROAD FROM THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER TO THE PACIFIC OCEAN, Volume 4.

EDITORIAL: With a modest cough, I announce that this is the 100th issue of OPUNTIA since publication began March 1991. In the eight years since, this zine has been running about every third week or monthly, not bad for what is officially an irregular.

To support Toronto's bid to host the 2003 World Science Fiction Convention, send C\$20.03 or US\$15 to: Toronto in '03, Box 3, Station A, Toronto, Ontario, M5W 1A2.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's
remarks
in square
brackets]



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FROM: Harry Andruschak
Box 5309
Torrance, California 90510-5309

1999-02-01

By the way, do remember that we have a total lunar eclipse scheduled for January 20/21, 2000. Maximum is at 4:44 UTC, and that would be a great time for all fans to toast each other at the same time. This eclipse will be visible from the USA, Canada, and the British Isles.

FROM: Ned Brooks
4817 Dean Lane
Lilburn, Georgia 30047-4720

1998-12-12

I had no idea that beavers were that large that a man couldn't drag a dead one out of the river. What does an adult beaver weigh?

[About 25 to 30 kg dry, probably add another 10 kg for water. To remove it from the river would have required lifting it vertically a couple of metres on a slippery riverbank, then dragging it through poplar brush and fallen dead trees, and across an open field to the truck, then lifting it up onto the truckbed. Not to mention the mob of dogs instantly attracted to the goings-on, as the park is very popular with dog owners giving their pets a walk. Much easier to push it out into the river current and let it float downstream into someone else's jurisdiction.]

FROM: William Breiding 1998-12-14
Box 2322
Tucson, Arizona 85702

Your floating one of the corpses of Roscoe's minions downstream does not bode well for the Toronto in 2003 bid!

[For the benefit of my non-SF readers, Roscoe is a archaic fannish ghod not unlike a beaver. Witness the mascot of the Toronto bid for the 2003 World SF Convention. Not to worry about Roscoe's minion; he (or she; it is difficult to sex a decayed defunct beaver) was a Calgary beaver. 3,000 kilometres distance between the two cities should grant some kind of immunity. I don't imagine the Cancun bid would worry too much if a dead toucan showed up in a Hurst, Texas, park.]

FROM: Sheryl Birkhead 1999-01-05
23629 Woodfield Road
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882

Great Goddess [by Teddy Harvia] on the cover!

I presume that whenever there is a planned implosion that movie makers throng, so they can catch the unique event for future use.

[Discovery Channel was there for sure, and I wouldn't be surprised if the footage shows up in some future movie. Which leads me to wonder about a scene I saw in the recent movie THE STATE OF THE NATION. The Gene Hackman character blew up a deserted warehouse by the railroad yards. When I saw the scene, I immediately suspected that this had been a planned implosion. Can anyone advise?]

FROM: Harry Warner Jr 1998-12-13
423 Summit Avenue
Hagerstown, Maryland 21740

It seems a shame to blow up large buildings. Surely they can be used for some such purpose as storage of the type of stuff that doesn't normally attract thieves and doesn't need regulated heat and adequate light.

[It was determined that it would be cheaper to demolish the hospital buildings than to renovate them to make them useable for any purpose.]

FROM: Carolyn Clowes 1999-02-03
5911 West Pay Drive NW
Depauw, Indiana 47115

Everything I read or see about Calgary reminds me what a relatively new city it is and how much room there is to expand. I would think that makes for better planning and more efficient new construction. Here there's usually an effort to preserve old structures, or at least their facades, and renovation is more costly. The cultural tendency of the South is to keep everything the way it used to be. Some times it's worth it, more often not.

[The cultural tendency of Calgarians is to sprawl, not to plan better and more efficiently. Calgary suburbs can spread indefinitely to the east and south out onto the prairies, so the new suburbs are repeating all the mistakes that Los Angeles and Toronto did with their urban sprawl. I drive 11 kilometres one way to work without leaving the central area of the city. To the west and north, growth has slowed because of a combination of foothills topography and lack of available land due to all the acreages owned by petro-executives. Most of the beautiful

sandstone buildings in the downtown core, which is a century old (Calgary was founded in 1875), were replaced in the 1970s boom by glass skyscrapers. The remnant historical buildings are now saved by law, but they are out of context in the midst of the skyscrapers. We learn nothing from history, alas.]

FROM: Chester Cuthbert 1998-12-13
Winnipeg, Manitoba

I often wonder if the higher cost of housing in Vancouver, Toronto, and other boom centres [such as Calgary] means that the higher wages earned are lost in higher housing costs and taxes. Winnipeg is a backwater by comparison, but our cost of living is reasonable.

[Quite true, and I think that many people who move from city to city every few years looking for the next big thing would be just as well off to stay in one place, assuming they have steady work, of course. Calgary is getting lots of Maritimers who would rather be working poor in Cowtown than on the pogeys back East.]

FROM: Buck Coulson 1998-12-15
Hartford City, Indiana
[deceased 1999-02-19]

The gopher roundup was amusing. I used to shoot ground squirrels, mistakenly called gophers, in the Silver Lake cemetery when I was a boy. With permission of the cemetery management, since the ground squirrels, the 13-striped species, dug their holes under the tombstones and would eventually undermine them to the point of falling over. I didn't shoot while there were visitors in the cemetery. I never exterminated them, but I did reduce the numbers and the damage.

FROM: Rodney Leighton 1998-12-18
R.R. 3
Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia B0K 1V0

[A lumberjack] job I did was close to a brook which is home to a beaver or a colony of them. They are smart. There was a regular trail where they had been hauling branches to the house or pond. I cut a maple one day and left the top and limbs on top of that path. Came back next morning and every bit of the top and limbs were gone. There was one tree which was half gnawed down. After I started cutting, they never touched it or any other tree again. I guess I put enough food on the ground that they didn't

have to gnaw down big trees.

[I've noticed the same thing in Calgary riverbank parks. If a tree goes down, it soon disappears, and as long as the occasional supply of green branches is available, they won't harm other trees.]

FROM: Elizabeth Garrott 1999-01-13
2265 Bradford Drive
Louisville, Kentucky 40218-1562

Your description of the Winnies on the road to Red Deer on Labour Day weekend reminds me of an observation I made during our family trip in 1958: If all the Fiats in Italy were laid end to end, it would be Sunday afternoon.

FROM: Karen Johnson 1999-01-10
35 Mariana Avenue
South Croydon, Victoria 3136, Australia

What is a gopher? It's not an animal that zoos are rushing to collect, so I've never seen one. The image called to mind by your description is something like a guinea pig, with about as much common sense.

[*Spermophilus richardsoni*, or the Richardson ground squirrel, is an abundant burrowing animal on the Canadian prairies, and like coyotes, magpies, and ravens, has adapted very well to urban life. It is commonly but incorrectly called a gopher but is actually a tan coloured squirrel that lives on the ground and does not climb trees. It is about twice as long as a guinea pig and a bit thinner. It is commonly seen standing upright looking for danger or scampering on all fours along the turf. Its alarm call is a very loud and penetrating squeak. The real gopher is a subterranean animal that few Canadians have seen.]

A long hot drought [in Calgary] with temps soaring to 25°C! I guess it's all in the eye of the beholder. As I write this it's 23°C and it feels pleasantly cool as yesterday was 33°C. Shortly before Christmas we had a real heatwave. For a week, temperatures started at 35°C and went up from there. Two of those days it was 40°-42°C and everyone melted. On the other hand, I can't even imagine what -25°C would be like.

[30°C in Calgary would make the front page, 35°C would have the health authorities issuing warnings to pensioners, and 40°C would almost shut down the city. On the other hand, one can dress up for -25°C and keep pruning. It should be noted, though, that the humidity is always low in Calgary, so -25°C out here is equivalent to -10°C in eastern North America or Europe. But we are all adapted to our own climates. No matter where you live,

there's always something.]

I had a sudden flash of déjà vu when I read about the implosion of the old Calgary General Hospital. About two years ago, they decided to implode the old hospital in Canberra. It was the biggest event in town, and spectators swarmed down to watch the event. Unfortunately things went horribly wrong. Instead of going inward, glass and metal fragments were sent flying into the crowd. One little girl was killed and a score of other spectators were nastily injured. Needless to say, I'm very glad that all went smoothly in your case, but you won't catch me rushing to watch a demolition, even with the chance of getting fantastic photos.

[In the publicity leading up to the Calgary implosion, the Canberra tragedy was prominently discussed in our local newspapers. The implosion contractor, not the one who did Canberra, had to do quite a bit of public relations work to reassure Calgarians about the safety of the job. Apparently the Canberra contractor used too much explosive, which blew debris outward, instead of just cutting support columns and letting the building fold inwards. My viewpoint was several kilometres away so not even in the worst case could any debris have reached me.]

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Ken Cheslin, John Held Jr, Michael Waite, Lloyd Penney, Scott Crow, Eric Lindsay

CREATURES OF HABIT

Every workday morning at 06h25 I drive into the parking lot at my work depot. By the time I open the gates, unlock the building, and settle into my office chair, it is 06h35. My office window offers a scenic view of the vehicle compound entrance, the Blackfoot Trail freeway (which terminates in front of the depot), and a small patch of grass about the size of the average suburban front yard. No later than 06h40, a jackrabbit lopes across the yard, travelling southeasterly towards the rough area of a golf course adjacent to the depot. It always pauses by the compound gate, and we always look at each other for a moment. The jackrabbit then ducks under the chainlink fence and bounds across the compound to the other side.

It seems to be earning a decent living in the suburbs west of the depot. I can't tell its travels in the summer, but after a fresh snowfall I can see its tracks back and forth across the depot complex. Sometimes it seems there is more jackrabbit traffic across the yard than vehicle traffic coming down Blackfoot Trail. I don't know what it lives on; it never seems to nibble on anything in the depot perennial beds nor the trees.

I do know what the magpies live on. Myself and the crews are in the habit of tossing any scrap food out onto the lawn, where we know the black-and-white scavengers will quickly clean it up.

The usual scenario is that a magpie flutters past in random flight. Magpies have a swooping flight path like a cruise missile with defective code in its navigational software. The first magpie happening along makes an Immelman turn, a couple of right-angle switchbacks, and plops onto the ground with a controlled crash, its long tail feathers held high to avoid touching the grass. It struts over to the food. Depending on how recently it ate, it either madly gobbles the food down as fast as possible or begins caching it elsewhere in the turf or the mulch around the trees. What with the aerating action of magpies digging into the soil to cache food, the composting of rejected scraps (they don't like lettuce and neither does the jackrabbit), and the bird droppings, the lawn is a nice green.

Other magpies swooping past see the first one on the ground and immediately turn to investigate. There is seldom squabbling or major aggression between the birds. They ignore each other while gobbling down the food or raiding each other's caches. If all are well fed, they may converge on the food and grab as if eating from a buffet table, as well behaved as any lineup of people eating at a hotel Sunday brunch. A hungry magpie may rush the others in an attempt to keep all the food for itself, but this fails if there are two or more other birds. While it is rushing one of them, the others sneak in behind and grab the food, leaving the aggressive bird with less than it would have had otherwise.

There may be a moral in this story, I hope.

All members of the Calgary Philatelic Society received an invitation from Canada Post to attend the unveiling of the Year of the Rabbit postage stamp, held this evening at the Chinese Cultural Centre in downtown Calgary. It's not that often we have first-day-of-issue stamp ceremonies in Cowtown, so many members of the CPS attended. I was surprised to see a number of Edmonton Stamp Club members present as well; they made the 4-hour drive down from the north on icy highways.

I left the house early, thinking there would be a problem finding a parking spot near the Cultural Centre. Chinatown is crowded enough to begin with, and since it was a Friday night, the adjacent Yuppieville district would be jammed with tavern and theatre goers. Much to my astonishment I found an empty parking stall a half block from the Centre on my first go-around, and so found myself at the appointed place early.

There developed a full crowd for the ceremonies, about half Caucasian stamp collectors and half Chinese. The curtain rose on a traditional Chinese dance by one woman, very colourful in both costume and scenery. She danced through the dry-ice fog swirling along the stage and flowing down over the footlights, a flurry of fans and long scarves. I had my camera with me and got off a dozen flash photos. I might have had more but there were

other photographers and television crews in the way. Normally I don't use flash at theatre events as this may annoy the people on stage, but as there were three or four Chinese photographers strobing away, I saw no reason to hold back.

The dance was followed by a Cultural Centre official dressed in mandarin robes, who acted as the master of ceremonies. He stuttered through the English announcements, but I thought nothing of it since it was obviously a second language. He then repeated the announcements in Cantonese, and punctuated it with just as many ums and uhs. It never occurred to me before that 'um' and 'uh' were cross-cultural linguistic stumbles.

The dignitaries were the usual assortment one sees at any public ceremony anywhere in the world, and you've heard those speeches no matter where you live. In the absence of Andre Ouellet, the Minister for Canada Post, the feds were represented by Senator Joyce Fairbairn. The ceremony was mostly bilingual in English and Cantonese, but she threw in the obligatory French paragraph that is expected at all federal ceremonies in anglophone Canada. Some of us in the stamp club had been expressing surprise to each other that the letter of invitation to this event was bilingual only in Chinese and English. From its past dealings with Canada Post, the CPS knew that any kind of publication or event associated with a stamp launch is supposed to make at least a

token nod towards using both official languages. We could only guess that the Ottawa bureaucracy slipped up because the regular person in charge was away for the holiday season.

Next up on the stage was an actor dressed in scarlet robes as the God of Wealth. If you can imagine Santa Claus as a mandarin, then you have the picture. The God came down into the audience and handed out souvenir commemorative envelopes with the stamp and postmark (trilingual) and a wish form (bilingual, no French). The idea of the wish form is that you put your name and telephone number down, then complete the sentence: "*My wish for the God of Wealth to relay back to Heaven is:* ". The Cultural Centre staff will sort through the forms in time for the Chinese New Year and select winning entries. I kept my form unused for mounting in my stamp collection.

Next up were the dragon dancers, always my favourite. Noisy drums and cymbals, and every colour of the rainbow. The dragons danced up to the edge of the stage and tossed out candy to the audience. The dancers belong to athletic clubs, as this is a very strenuous type of dance. The young men leaping about with the dragon heads were dripping with sweat by the time they finished. They wore uniform traditional garb, the effect of which was somewhat spoiled by their sneakers. One supposes though, that leaping about on a polished hardwood stage requires something with a good grip.

The dignitaries unveiled the stamp design, presentations were made, and the M.C. announced the end of the ceremonies. He then began a list of trivial announcements ("*There will be a Spring Festival this coming March ...* ") but spoke to the backs of the audience. Half the people rushed the Canada Post sales booths for Year of the Rabbit stamps, and the other half rushed the steam tables for shrimp toast and pork dumplings.

About a dozen of us rushed the dignitaries to get commemorative covers and invitations autographed. I don't collect autographs but since Senator Fairbairn's name was listed on the invitation, I decided to get her signature on it. I'll mount it on a page in my stamp collection as an interesting piece of collateral material. I was second in line from getting her autograph when a PR flunky came over and asked her to move across the room for a photo opportunity next to the Canada Post sales booth. He was kind enough to ask us along with her and finish up with the autographs over there. So off she went, followed by a conga line of collectors holding pens and paper.

We threaded our way through the television camera crews, who were trying to interview a Canada Post official holding a Year of the Rabbit display pane. The crews rather resented the traffic wending its way in between them and their prey. I didn't feel any guilt at this, as I knew from past experience at CPS stamp shows

what the final result would be. Just as SF conventions always wind up on television as nerdy Klingons with a weight problem, so it is that stamp show chairmen are only asked what the most valuable stamp was on display. As I went by a television interviewer, I heard him ask the Canada Post official how much the Rabbit stamps would be worth in future years.

The conga line ground to a halt behind the stamp display next to which Senator Fairbairn was to pose. I found myself at the head of the line, the original lead man having been bumped out by a burly cameraman en route. As some of the dignitaries with whom the Senator was to pose had also been blocked by said cameraman, she finished signing autographs for us while waiting for the PR flunky to round up the strays.

Clutching my prize, I went off in search of shrimp toast and deep-fried yam at the steam tables. I also finished off the dragon dancers' candy, a boiled sweet in a unilingual Chinese wrapper. The stamp collectors gathered in clumps and talked of trivia, the same as you might hear at any SF convention consuite. The Chinese gathered in clumps and talked, and while not knowing a word of Cantonese, I feel safe in saying that they talked of trivia, the same as you might hear at any SF convention consuite.

The rabbit is associated with happiness, kindness, patience, and luck. The Year of the Rabbit is to be a placid year, a time of

persuasion and diplomacy rather than war. We can only hope.

CREATURES AND DEATH

1999-01-11

My assistant was making the normal garbage run this morning through the parks in our maintenance district, emptying the cans. When I saw him later in the morning, he reported that he had seen two coyotes as he drove into a riverbank park. Not too unusual for us, as we see coyotes occasionally, but these two had just killed a white-tailed deer. They stood over their victim, glowering at Wilf as he stepped out to empty the garbage cans on the other side of the parking lot. They watched him leave, then returned their attention to their breakfast.

In the early afternoon I had to check a gate at a nearby park, and swung by the other park on my way back. As I idled along the gravel road that leads into Douglasbank riverbank park, I saw the largest flock of magpies in one place I had ever seen. Many were gathered on the roadway in a small area a few square metres in size. The size of area that a deer would make in its final struggles as two coyotes brought it down just after it jumped the fence into the road in the last moments of a desperate run. Patches of hair and scraps of flesh outlined the death scene, but that was not the final resting place of the unfortunate deer. Even without the trail in the snow, I could have spotted where the carcass was just by

observing the magpies, for there was another flock gathered around it. The birds were silent. They took turns grabbing for what little the coyotes had left behind, fluttering a short distance away to gobble down their takings. After the coyotes killed the deer on the road, they dragged it back under the cable fence, then along a swale into the thin scattering of underbrush. Only the rib cage, a haunch, and a towel-sized piece of hide remained.

The kill and cache were not more than 20 metres from a row of executive homes, big nouveau-rich barns that start at \$300,000. Bright-red jellied blood in the drag tracks was still fresh, like new-made taffy in the snow. The arterial blood glistened and shone brightly against the white background. There had been no hope.

EXERCISE OF HABIT

Although I get a fair amount of exercise at work, one does start to put on weight as one ages. Not wishing to become a stereotypical blimpish SF fan, I do a fair amount of walking when I can in my off-hours. In summer, this is no problem, as I can walk downtown from my house along the Elbow River pathway system, about 8 kilometres and 2 hours one way. In miserable winter weather, I've found the acceptable alternative is to take the bus downtown and walk around the +15 pedestrian walkways.

The skyscrapers in downtown Calgary are mostly interconnected to each other by a system of public walkways known as the +15 system, so-called because they are 15 feet above ground, linking the second floors of adjacent buildings. This system is not complete; there are gaps between some older buildings preventing one from walking all the way from one end of the downtown core to the other without going outside. The main loop of walkways, through about a dozen skyscrapers, offers about a 4 kilometre round trip.

I combine my trips downtown with business errands and carry a briefcase. As I wear jeans, cowboy boots, and lumberjack shirt in winter, the oil company executives (Calgary is the capital of Canada's oil business) and security desk officers assume I must work for a lenient employer who has a western dress code. Anyone in jeans but sneakers instead of cowboy boots is watched carefully. The +15 system is a public thoroughfare, the same as any sidewalk, but the passages through the skyscrapers are private property, the same as any shopping mall.

I think it's my briefcase that throws them off. Mixed signals like that confuse security guards, so they decide not to take the chance in case I am an executive who favours western dress. That and a brisk march as if I am on my way to a meeting. Since it takes about 3/4 hour to loop the whole network, a guard who happens

to remember me will think I am on my way back to the office, and once I cross the +15 link into the next skyscraper they forget about me. The ones who get frog-marched out of the buildings are the aimlessly wandering ripped-jeans-and-sneakers kids who don't look like they belong. Carry in a skateboard and you will be intercepted by the guards before you get halfway across the concourse. An alternative disguise is to wear a hard hat, tool belt, and steel-toed boots. Since every skyscraper is either under renovation or next to a new one going up, the guards assume you are coming or going from a coffee shop.

All of the +15 corridors are lined with shops. Every skyscraper has one cafeteria, one bakery, one travel agency (for secretaries to book their boss on business trips), and one medical office. During the noon hour, the network is solid with humanity as 30 or 40 floors of people come down to the +15 for their lunch break. After 18h00, the system is deserted; all the shops are closed, and even the business executives will be politely challenged by guards and asked to sign in and out.

I like to people watch as I go along. The young secretaries still husband hunting. The silver-haired petroleum geologists chatting about last night's hockey game as they amble to a reserved table at the Petroleum Club. The ambitious young accountants talking self-importantly on cellphones as they hustle to a quick workout in a physical-fitness centre (one of which is managed by my

brother). The couriers in bicycle helmets and Spandex weaving in and out of pedestrian traffic. The ubiquitous young Filipino women dusting potted plants. Their male counterparts cheerfully waxing the floors, right in the middle of the heaviest traffic, forcing everyone to detour.

Passing through the second floor of the Alberta Stock Exchange tower, I see the penny-ante market players gathered around the public computer terminals in a cul-de-sac of the +15. They stand three or four deep, watching the trades of junior petes (small independent petroleum companies), the Seven Sisters (big multinationals like Esso and Shell), and the penny stocks (startups and grubstakes that haven't yet found anything). The players chat with each other, learnedly discussing why Company X is a good bet, or, more commonly now, why it shouldn't go down as fast as others. Misery loves company, hence the cheerful siege around the public terminals. With oil prices slumping, those who bought junior petes or penny stocks in the boom are now living on antacid tablets as stock prices dive. But Calgary is more diversified now than it was during the oil bust of the 1980s. There are numerous computer companies speckled along the +15 hallways. Cowtown is now the second-largest head office city in Canada, closing in on Toronto. The morale of Calgarians is still high, and so far the oil price slump hasn't affected many people outside the industry.

A few of the +15 pedways crossing the streets have buskers. They are properly licenced, otherwise the security guards would have hustled them on their way. There used to be a man in his 50s who sang opera, but I haven't seen him for a while. The ones I see in my circuits are 20-something guitar players, singing some unintelligible tune that is probably a cover song if you could make out the words. One guitar busker on the pedway over 5th Avenue sings Pink Floyd. He does the entire "Wish You Were Here" album and actually isn't half bad. His vocals are spot on, and he manages to get as many of the chords as he can. The busker on the 4th Street +15 pedway between Esso Plaza and the Stock Exchange disappeared recently, but left a "To Whom It May Concern" notice on one of the fire doors. He announced that he had gone back to school and thanked everyone for "*the buitiful* [sic] *memories*" of working there. He said that he had made enough money to help out considerably with his tuition. I read this notice over the shoulder of a secretary who had also stopped to read it. She laughed, turned to me, and remarked he wasn't much of a guitar player. I never thought of it until later, but I should have recommended the 5th Avenue guitarist to her

EXIT ACADEMIA VIA DANTE

1999-02-04

I'm on my vacation and was today up in the northwest part of the city at the University of Calgary Library doing research. I finished up about 15h00 and as it was a nice day out I decided to

walk downtown, about 5 kilometres. The afternoon was sunny and mild, with temperatures at the 0°C mark, and a light breeze. I cut through the suburbs, past hidden little parks I knew of from when I used to be the foreman in charge ten years ago (I now work in the extreme southeast of the city), along quiet, tree-lined streets with no traffic noise. One modest whitewashed bungalow along the route has a sign nailed to the gable above the front door. Looking at it from the corner of my eye as I walked past, I thought it to be an ordinary name plate. Then a double-take; the sign read "*Deponite spem omnes quihic intrate*". I crossed the Bow River on the pedway slung underneath the LRT train bridge. In the middle of the frozen river were a half dozen magpies pecking away at something on the ice. I couldn't see anything that might be edible on the blue ice, and can only guess that there were tiny puddles of water temporarily melted by the afternoon sun. Animals often get desperately thirsty in winter if there is no open water left.

On the pillars of another bridge downstream are sets of posters. One is crudely photocopied with text only: "*Bryan N. Please come home! Your friends and family love you and miss you very much! Love, T.T.*". One can imagine the story behind that one. Next to it is a colour-illustrated poster: "*Big Money! Invest \$15,000 per painting, receive \$25,000 per painting within 6 months.*". One can imagine the story behind that one as well.

On the other side of the river was the west end of the downtown core. I walked a few blocks to reach the western terminus of the +15 system and went up into the labyrinth. The 5th Avenue guitarist had switched to Neil Young today, and was just finishing up “Harvest Moon” as I passed by. On the 7th Avenue pedway was a new guitarist. His song was incomprehensible, even though I slowed down to an amble as I went by in an effort to figure out what he was singing.

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

1999-02-04

I normally don't buy newspapers anymore but had picked up the Toronto *GLOBE AND MAIL* today because it had a special supplement on RRSPs. For the benefit of my non-Canadian readers, a Registered Retirement Savings Plan is a tax-free savings plan available most commonly as mutual funds or term deposits. I already have two RRSPs, a Canadian stocks mutual fund and a Canada Savings Bond (federal government) payroll deduction plan. I was looking for a money market fund to balance out the volatility of the other two. The peak period for most Canadians to buy RRSPs is February, in time for the tax season in March, when RRSP deposits can be deducted from current income and used to lower taxes. But having told you all that, I mention now what really caught my eye in the newspaper, a notice that the Russians would be aiming a space mirror at Calgary tonight at 18h30 from space station Mir, part of the Znamya ('Banner')

project by the Space Regatta Consortium.

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The mirror, named Znamya 2.5, was to be unfolded and aimed at several targets across the northern hemisphere. The locations to receive three minutes each of reflected sunlight from space were: Karaganda (Kazakstan), Saratov (Russia), Poltava (Ukraine), Frankfurt (Germany), Liege (Belgium), Quebec City, Winnipeg, Devil's Lake (North Dakota), and Calgary. The idea is to eventually light up northern cities and aid in search-and-rescue operations, although I can't understand how this would ever be economical. The beam of light reflected at Earth is to have a diameter of 6 to 8 kilometres. Since Calgary is about 40 kilometres north/south and 20 kilometres east/west, I might not bask in that light, but resolved to give it a try.

The sun set behind the mountains at 17h15. I checked the time and debated whether to try to watch the event from downtown or take a bus home and watch it from an open field across the street from my house. I chose the latter. I caught the bus with only a few minutes wait, but unfortunately the driver was new to the route. He missed a turning on the route, and we went on a scenic tour through a posh neighbourhood. I feel safe in saying that in the entire 50+ year history of that neighbourhood this was the first time that a bus had ever trundled down its streets. Folks thereabouts consider BMWs a low-end car for tasteless young petro-executives. The Old Money prefers Jaguars and Range

Rovers. The driver soon found the route again with the assistance of his passengers, and I made it home with fifteen minutes to spare.

Blood and feathers scattered on the hood of my car. There is a large Colorado blue spruce overhanging my driveway. A magpie had caught and killed a house sparrow, and dissected it on a high branch in the spruce. A high branch directly above the car, of course. Not, say, on the other side of the spruce, where the remains of the deceased would have fertilized my Harrison's Yellow rose bush. Instead, the remnants of its meal etched the paintwork of a freshly-washed car.

I went out into the field where it was reasonably dark. On such short notice I didn't have a star chart. The only two bright spots in the heaven I saw were Venus and Jupiter. I saw nothing that was moving across the sky as a satellite. Not knowing what direction Znamya 2.5 was coming from, I pirouetted at a slow even pace. Off in one direction I saw a dog walker, who, when she saw me, a dark silhouette apparently doing a moon dance by himself, abruptly changed course and took Fluffy back the way she came. People tend to be paranoid these days, I don't know why. It did seem that the dark field lightened very faintly, but I attributed this to my eyes becoming dark adjusted. By 18h40 I gave up and trundled across the prairie back to my house.

The University of Calgary Library has free Web and Usenet browsing on its catalogue terminals. This morning, I checked Usenet to see what happened with Znamya 2.5. The postings made it clear just from the headings alone; Znamya failed to open. Apparently the reflective panels snagged on an antenna. Some netizens were actually celebrating the failure since astronomers do not look happily on a future where their telescopes are constantly being blipped by flashes of light. The Iridium satellites are already causing flares, and the Znamyas would be 25 times brighter.

I then jumped to the Web and looked up the Space Regatta Consortium site. Not much more by way of details about the project failure. There is a backup Znamya in storage in Russia but it is not likely to be launched anytime soon due to lack of cargo ships to take it up into orbit. The backup may be used with the International Space Station circa 2004; Mir will be gone by then. A project summary said the Znamyas are both intended to eventually light up northern cities that can't afford streetlights and to act as prototypes for solar wind propulsion. It seems to me that cities unable to afford street lighting will not be able to pay for satellite lighting either. Solar sailing ships are one of the older predictions of SF writers

It would be interesting to see if sunjammers become a reality in our lifetime. Ah yes, the sunjammers. Interplanetary spaceships slowly sailing from Earth to Mars. Gigantic thin-film sails spread wide to catch the solar wind. I was suddenly taken back in memory to my childhood in rural Red Deer, where, in the 1960s, the public library had the latest SF novels of the 1940s and 1950s. Asimov, Heinlein, Clarke, Norton, and all the other reliables. A starship whose mutant passengers had been so many generations in transit that they did not know they were on a starship, and thought they were occupying the entire universe. Uppity robots who were always causing problems to their supposed masters, requiring scientific detective work to find out the cause. A psychohistorian who schemed to circumvent the Dark Ages by setting up a Foundation to pull the strings of history (and a young girl who defeated the mutant who disrupted those plans). A drunken sunjammer captain throwing his rookie crew in at the deep end and making the cadets figure out how to keep the ship from sailing off course out of the solar system into oblivion.

Thrilling stuff to a lad like me, who would look up from his book to see poplar bluffs and wheatfields instead of solar sails. Whether or not Znamya succeeds, I'm glad people are still trying to build the future instead of obsessing on Bill and Monica. No one has to apologize to their grandchildren for working in space exploration.

There were arguments on Usenet about how the Znamya money should have been used to help the poor, etcetera. Someone was quick to point out that the entire annual space programme of all countries is about one day's spending for the military. It is a red herring to say we cannot afford a space programme while there are poor people; we can afford both space and social programmes if we but would. Another netizen also pointed out what every Sacred boy on the Canadian prairies grew up knowing, that people starve not because there is a shortage of food (there has always been a worldwide surplus of grain) but because of inequalities in distributing it. The average Russian would be no better off if the Znamyas had never been built.

World Wide Party #6

On June 21st, at 21h00 your time, raise a glass to friends in the Papernet. The idea is to get a wave circling the planet. A simple toast will suffice (alcohol not required), but you could host a party, publish a one-shot zine, or do anything else creative in expressing friendship in the Papernet. Write and tell me how you celebrated, but also publish an account in other zines to spread the gospel.