

Afternoon Discoveries: October 13, 2026

Science Fiction & Fantasy



AMONG THE LETTERS

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Science Fiction & Fantasy

A feeding specialist climbs a living mountain in Malawi with a syringe hidden in his lunch box, while in a care home far away a widow notices that her family photographs have moved half an inch to the left and the cowboy on her television has started watching back. Today's science fiction and fantasy keeps finding the uncanny inside work, family, and the places people are told to be grateful for: a crater town beneath a floating city, a Brampton apartment where a boy waits up with his mother's camcorder, a park where a woman

wakes in the pine needles after a full moon she did not yet know to fear. Some of these stories are built from aliens, clockwork, and blood magic; others from hummingbird reviews, a stage door, and a plate of food set on the chest of a dead child. Around them are a reading of Octavia Butler that asks what it means to love a child on their own terms, a conversation about first contact imagined through a philosophy of connection, and a short history of the novel that helped a physicist picture the chain reaction. The back shelf holds three older visions: a feminist utopia powered by sunlight, a world with only two dimensions, and a rainbow with a keyhole at its foot. Taken together, they suggest that the speculative is rarely an escape from ordinary life, because it so often turns out to be a closer look at it.

All links in today's edition were checked against the linked publication, magazine, or publisher page on October 13, 2026.

Featured Discovery

How Does One Person Kill a Mountain? - Shi Heiyao, translated by Andy Dudak

Shi Heiyao's novelette, translated by Andy Dudak, follows Bakili, a Senior Feeding Specialist who bicycles out of his village before dawn, rides a packed shuttle past what was once Liwonde National Park, and works beside Chimbalangondo Mulungu, the Bear God, an alien creature that has grown into a crimson peak nearly eight hundred metres high in Lake Malombe. The creature eats ore tailings, electronic waste, and secondhand goods shipped in from the world's ports, then excretes fertilizer, sand, and refined metal, which has made it the centre of an economy that expropriated his father's tobacco estate and, Bakili

believes, took his father's life. Today Bakili means to kill it, and the story keeps interrupting his plan with sardonic second-person chapters on how one might kill a mountain, from heavy excavators to gentrification to simply voting to redefine the word. What follows is a kaiju story, a political thriller, and an argument about extraction, debt, and who gets to decide Africa's future. Shi refuses easy answers, giving the alien a voice that is as persuasive as it is chilling. It is a large, ambitious piece of translated science fiction, and its final turn will stay with you long after the lake goes quiet.

Read "How Does One Person Kill a Mountain?" at [Clarkesworld Magazine](#)

The Discovery Desk

The Rice Paper Bleed - Tia Tashiro

Tia Tashiro's Chiyo has lived at Estuary Estates for three years, and she is certain the room changes when she is not looking: a souvenir fan from Madrid turns cheap and yellow, family photographs shift half an inch to the left, and the walk to the dining hall stretches from nine minutes to eleven. Her granddaughter keeps explaining spatial memory, her son agrees with whatever happens to be on the wall, and the granddaughter's own name seems to drift from one visit to the next. The only constant is the Westerns on her television, until one night a handsome, colourless cowboy with icy blue eyes sits on the edge of her bed to tell her what is really happening. Tashiro, who works in cognitive

science, writes ageing and condescension with unsentimental precision, then folds them into a cosmic idea about universes layered as thin as rice paper. The story is tender about loneliness without letting anyone, including its visitor, off the hook. Its ending finds the anger Chiyo once used as an anchor and gives it a new target.

[Read "The Rice Paper Bleed" at Clarkesworld Magazine](#)

People Like Us - Grace F. Hopkins

Grace F. Hopkins opens with a woman waking in the local park at dawn, mud on her feet, scratches up her legs, and pine needles under her cheek, convinced at first that edibles, vodka, and a fresh breakup are to blame. It takes three months, three full moons, and one nervous confrontation in a coffee shop before she accepts that she is, in fact, a werewolf. The person who confronts her is Cleo, who uses a cane in the days before the moon and recognizes the pattern of pain, nausea, and lost time because she lives with it too. Hopkins, a chronically ill and disabled writer, uses lycanthropy as a sharp, funny, and generous way into the isolation of a body that will not keep to anyone's schedule. The story is less about the monster than about finding the people who already know how the next morning will feel. Its closing image of pancakes, pain pills, and electrolyte chews around a campfire is one of the warmest werewolf endings you are likely to read.

[Read "People Like Us" at GigaNotoSaurus](#)

Sister Cities - Marie Vibbert

Marie Vibbert's narrator, Geej, is a climber in Cratertown, a town of stairways, cliffs, and balcony cafes beneath The Halo, a donut-shaped floating city held aloft by a magnetic anomaly and defended by guns

that shoot down almost anything that approaches. Geej grew up in Portlanding and genuinely loves the town below, so she is the last person who wants to go up. Her best friend Crash, whose mother died trying to reach The Halo, has a drone that finally came back, a flight plan, and a fold under her lip that means she will go alone if she has to. Vibbert writes the ascent with breezy, bantering energy, from a scooter shot out from under them to a suction-grip climb up a wall as smooth as glass. What they find at the top is best left for the reader, though it quietly overturns every assumption about paradise. It is an Escape Pod original with the full text on the page, and it makes a warm case for loving the place you already live.

[Read "Sister Cities" at Escape Pod](#)

Alien Boy - Fawaz Al-Matrouk

Fawaz Al-Matrouk's story opens with a grown man prying open a water-damaged plastic box and finding the Crayola drawings he made as a child, not long after his family left everything behind in the war and settled in an apartment building in Brampton. One drawing shows an oblong object hovering over that building, and it carries him back to the night young Hadi sat at his window with his mother's camcorder, determined to prove what his father, Fahad, insisted was only a nightmare. The camcorder holds the last images of his mother, Nora, who stayed behind in Kuwait, and the story lets grief, displacement, and a child's fear of the dark blur into the possibility of a visitation. Al-Matrouk moves between past and present with restraint, keeping the father's sleeplessness as central as the son's terror. Something changes in Hadi after that night, though neither of them can say exactly what. The ending is quiet, humane, and gently unresolved, which suits a story about the things families carry across borders.

[Read "Alien Boy" at Reactor](#)

Thank you for spending some time with this afternoon's edition. Below this point are six more works of science fiction and fantasy, three pieces about reading, writing, and thinking with speculative fiction, and three special recommendations from the back shelf.

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

More From the Discovery Desk

In Search of Better Deaths - Zet Madej

Zet Madej's Sir Berokred wakes with his face stuck to a rotten banquet table, coughing blood beside a skeleton with a cracked skull, and has to ask his squire whether the hall was already a ruin when they fell asleep or whether they have slept for a hundred years. Tangren, an old squire who would have made a better mercenary than a knight, replies that a ruin after a hundred years would still be a ruin, which sets the dry, affectionate tone for everything that follows. The two have come to a haunted castle where ghosts replay a doomed courtship, and where the ancient Varthel returns again and again because playing his part makes him young. Madej writes a knight who is sick, tired, and still stubbornly committed to honour, alongside a squire whose devotion is never quite spoken aloud. The story asks whether a death can be made to mean something, and whether a life already has. Published in Beneath Ceaseless Skies' eighteenth anniversary double issue, it is secondary-world fantasy with real ache beneath its armour.

[Read "In Search of Better Deaths" at Beneath Ceaseless Skies](#)

Clockwork Bayani - EK Gonzales

EK Gonzales sets this story in a small shop inside the walls of Intramuros, where the children of Manila's wealthy press against the window to admire manika, clockwork dolls built with Swiss gears and dressed in clothes from London, Paris, Laguna, and Pampanga. Maria, a widow whose husband died fighting with the Katipunan, looks every day but never dreams of owning one, until the dollmaker offers her work cleaning the shop and, two weeks later, a bamboo boy with horsehair hair and glass eyes that blink when he sees her. The boy, Julian, can speak for himself, and when Maria calls him her son, he agrees. She brings him to the revolutionaries, who laugh at the wind-up toy until he asks for the chance to carry messages, keep watch, and serve the cause. Gonzales grounds the alternate history in the textures of the Philippine Revolution, from the bahay na bato houses to the Supremo seated on a banig. The ending is heartbreaking and earned, a story about the kinds of family a war can make and take away.

Read "Clockwork Bayani" at [Strange Horizons](#)

Élite - Caitriana NicNeacail

Caitriana NicNeacail's narrator, Fin, is a fixer, the person who fetches electrolytes, massages a star's hands, and makes sure the hotel room stays between twenty and twenty-three degrees. The star is Alex Hearth, a celebrated performer on tour toward Rome, Budapest, and Baku, and her art form is classical videoludic performance, staged for peacock-gowned patrons whose scores and tips decide who keeps working. Both of them grew up in the ghetto and climbed out, and tonight Alex is tired of being élite, a pampered performing monkey while their people struggle. NicNeacail writes the backstage world with lovely sensory detail, from the velveteen thump of flipping seats to the

overheard critics in the foyer, and keeps the satire light on its feet. The finale turns on a gesture of rebellion that the audience immediately learns to consume. Published on the author's Substack, Coracle Voyager, it is a small, sharp piece of soft science fiction about art, class, and what an audience will pay to watch.

[Read "Élite" at Coracle Voyager](#)

Petite Ville - Sheree Renée Thomas

Sheree Renée Thomas begins with a girl born ravenous in the poor township of Petite Ville, where milk from four mothers, the baker's crusts, and the butcher's scraps cannot fill her, and the whispering neighbours decide she must be lougawou, half person and half beast. Her hunger is finally answered at a child's wake, when Papa Jacques sets a plate of stewed goat, jasmine rice, and ginger tea on the small body and tells her to eat so the child's soul will be clear. Citadelle becomes the town's sin-eater, needed and shunned at once, until a handsome stranger called Smoke arrives and offers her something that looks very much like love. Thomas writes in the cadence of a told tale, salted with Haitian Kreyòl and food so precise you can taste it, and lets famine, pride, and betrayal gather like weather. The novelette first appeared in Forged in FIYAH: Celebrating Ten Years of Black Speculative Fiction, and Reactor has made the full text free to read. Its final image, of a town's sins rising as smoke, is unforgettable.

[Read "Petite Ville" at Reactor](#)

Modern Birdwatching - Jeff Soesbe

Jeff Soesbe's narrator used to love birdwatching, especially hummingbirds, until the feeder on a San Bruno apartment balcony

began collecting one-star reviews on CHURP, a review site run by birds, for birds. Genetic engineering has given pets brains and voices, escaped pet birds have passed that intelligence on to wild ones, and the hummingbirds now have firm opinions about weak syrup and irregular refills. Against the calm advice of Mister Friskers, a Seal Point Siamese, the narrator posts an all-caps demand for gratitude, and the comment thread turns with impressive speed. Matters escalate to a corner office at Shrike and Associates, where a red-tailed hawk attorney with painted talons promises to descend on the birds like a supersonic attack squadron. Soesbe writes the whole thing as a brisk comic fable about online reviews, entitlement, and the wisdom of listening to the cat. It is a light, generous palate cleanser in an edition with plenty of heavier weather.

[Read "Modern Birdwatching" at Escape Pod](#)

Knots of Red and Black - Victoria Brun

Victoria Brun's *Persephone* has just become a fifth-degree blood witch and headmistress of the Academy, and she still cannot get used to watching novices, and the woman she has spent months avoiding, drop to their knees when she enters a room. That woman is Reece, a first-degree witch with red eyes and traditional braids, and Persephone's request that Reece accompany her on a personal matter comes out as an order because she is too frightened to ask. The matter is a string of killings in which the victims have been bled out, and a governor, Lord Aster, who insists a little too carefully that he is not accusing anyone from her fine Academy. Brun builds a postwar world of gas lamps, old trenches, and runes carved into scarred forearms, where power over blood is both a weapon and an intimacy. The investigation is tense and the magic visceral, though the real pull is the slow, careful thaw between two women bound by rank. It is a satisfying novelette for

readers who like their fantasy with a mystery and a romance braided through it.

Read “Knots of Red and Black” at [GigaNotoSaurus](#)

Beyond the First Shelf

“I Must Put Things in My Mouth”: Loving Trans Children in Octavia Butler’s *Adulthood Rites* - Franklin Mitchell

Franklin Mitchell reads Octavia Butler’s *Adulthood Rites*, the second novel in the Lilith’s Brood trilogy, through Akin, the first male construct born to a human mother and raised by five parents across two species who have no model for who he will become. Mitchell draws on Elizabeth Freeman’s idea of chrononormativity and Jack Halberstam’s work on reproductive time to show how the adults around Akin try to fit his growth to timelines that were never built for him. The human resisters who take him pull things out of his mouth and want him to act like a toddler, while his own family leaves him with them partly because it serves the Oankali project of gene trading. Mitchell argues that the novel’s eventual turn toward Akin’s autonomy offers a blueprint for loving and respecting trans children on their own terms. A version of the essay won the Student Paper Award at the 2026 Science Fiction Research Association conference, and it reads with scholarly care and clear conviction. It is a fine example of criticism that sends you back to a classic with new questions.

[Read “I Must Put Things in My Mouth’: Loving Trans Children in Octavia Butler’s Adulthood Rites” at Strange Horizons](#)

Afrocommunitarian Philosophy and Aliens: A Conversation with Wole Talabi - Arley Sorg

Arley Sorg’s conversation with Wole Talabi begins with a remarkable biography: a Nigerian chemical engineer, now a senior reservoir engineer in Perth, who holds two patents, became a rescue diver despite a lingering fear of water, and taught himself to write by reading and writing. Talabi describes science fiction and fantasy as points on a continuum of the fantastic and explains why he likes to place myths and spiritual ideas right beside thought experiments about technology. Much of the interview turns on his new novel, *The Fist of Memory*, a first contact thriller that began about fifteen years ago, and on the craft of pacing hard science fiction through careful management of what the reader knows. Talabi frames the book as an Afrocommunitarian answer to Dark Forest Theory, drawing on Sankofa and Ubuntu, and places it in conversation with *Rendezvous with Rama*, *Contact*, and *Rosewater*. He also explains the founding of the Sauútiverse, a shared African speculative world built around sound, music, and oral tradition. Writers will find his advice to read widely and find a community refreshingly practical.

[Read “Afrocommunitarian Philosophy and Aliens” at Clarkesworld Magazine](#)

The Influence of Science Fiction on Science - Kevin Kelly

Kevin Kelly’s short essay, first written in 2007 and republished on his Substack this month, tells the story of H. G. Wells’s 1914 novel *The*

World Set Free, in which a scientist named Holsten unlocks atomic energy in 1933 and atomic bombs destroy the world's great cities in 1956. The physicist Leó Szilárd read the novel in 1932, conceived of the nuclear chain reaction in 1933, and filed patents on it in 1934, a line of influence Kelly traces through Dick Garwin's book Megawatts and Megatons. Kelly quotes generously from Wells, including a startling passage about a man who could carry enough latent energy in a handbag to wreck half a city. His larger point is that scientists rarely cite the fiction that shaped their imaginations, even when a novel helped them see not only an invention but its consequences. The piece is brief, readable, and slightly unsettling in what it implies about where ideas come from. It pairs especially well with today's Featured novelette about another power no one could quite control.

Read "The Influence of Science Fiction on Science" at Kevin Kelly's Substack

Special Recommendations

Sultana's Dream - Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Sultana's Dream, first published in English in The Indian Ladies' Magazine in 1905, begins with a woman lounging in an easy chair, thinking lazily about the condition of Indian womanhood, when a figure she takes for her friend Sister Sara invites her out for a walk. Outside lies Ladyland, where women run the country, cook with solar heat, draw water from the air with a balloon floated above the

clouds, and travel on planks lifted by hydrogen balls, while the men are kept indoors in seclusion. Sister Sara explains, with dry good humour, how women scientists won a war the generals had lost and why the system is now called mardana instead of zenana. Hossain, a Bengali writer and pioneering advocate for women's education, turns the logic of purdah inside out with wit rather than rage. It is one of the earliest works of feminist science fiction, and it remains startlingly fresh. Read it as a utopia, a satire, and a reminder that the genre's history is wider than its usual maps.

[Read "Sultana's Dream" free on Wikisource](#)

Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions - Edwin A. Abbott

Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland*, published in 1884, is narrated by A Square, a respectable citizen of a two-dimensional world where rank is measured by the number of a man's sides, priests are nearly perfect circles, and women are straight lines required by law to announce themselves as they move. The first half is a deadpan tour of Flatland's houses, weather, laws, and methods of recognition, which double as a pointed satire of Victorian hierarchy. The second half becomes a visionary adventure when A Square dreams of Lineland and is then visited by a Sphere from Spaceland who lifts him into a third dimension. Abbott, a schoolmaster and theologian, uses geometry to ask how anyone can imagine what lies beyond their own perception. The book has inspired mathematicians, physicists, and science fiction writers for well over a century. It is short, strange, and funny, and it still opens a door in the mind.

[Read "Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions" free through Project Gutenberg](#)

The Golden Key - George MacDonald

George MacDonald's *The Golden Key* begins with a boy who lives on the borders of Fairyland and listens to his great-aunt's stories about a golden key waiting where the rainbow stands. In Fairyland, rainbows stay put, so the boy, soon called Mossy, finds the key, while a neglected girl named Tangle flees into the forest and is taken in by a beautiful grandmother whose messengers are flying fish. Sent out together to find the keyhole, the two cross a valley of shadows and lose each other, and Tangle goes on alone to meet the Old Man of the Sea, the Old Man of the Earth, and the Old Man of the Fire, each younger and stranger than the last. MacDonald, whose fantasies shaped writers from C. S. Lewis to J. R. R. Tolkien, writes with a dreamlike patience that makes ageing and death feel like stages of a journey rather than endings. The story is luminous, odd, and quietly profound. Its last paragraph, with the travellers climbing the rainbow toward the country whence the shadows fall, is among the loveliest in fantasy.

[Read "The Golden Key" free through Project Gutenberg](#)

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

Many of today's pieces return to people who have been told what their lives are worth: a feeding specialist working beside a profitable god, a grandmother whose memory no one trusts, a sin-eater her town both needs and fears, a performer whose rebellion becomes a better show. Science fiction and fantasy give those pressures a shape large enough to see, whether that shape is a living mountain, a floating city, or a cowboy who feeds on loneliness. Some of these stories find community at the end, around a campfire or inside a revolution, and others leave their characters alone with a hard new knowledge. The essays and the older works on the back shelf are reminders that imagining another arrangement of the world has always been one of the genre's quieter powers.

*Wherever today's reading takes you, may it send you back to your own corner
of the world with sharper eyes.*

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

Take care!