COSMIC CREATURES

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THE ALIEN ALBATROSS

A decade aloft, and never once a landing

FOUR TIMES A YEAR, FROM THE KITCHEN TABLE

COSMIC CREATURES
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SECOND TIME OUT

BY PATRICK MELO, EDITOR IN CHIEF

The first issue went out in the spring and came back as letters, which I did not expect and have not entirely recovered from. Several of you asked the same question about the Stellarian — how do you know it is communicating and not just burning? — and the honest answer is that we do not. The file says so now.

This issue belongs to the Alien Albatross: several metres of wing that crosses the dark between stars without ever setting down. It is the creature I most wanted to draw, and the one that taught me how little I can draw, which is its own kind of education.

Page seven is the advertisements, which are my favourite part of the old pulps: the X-ray specs, the sea monkeys, the hundred toy soldiers in a footlocker, all of it promising something no parcel could possibly contain. Our advertisers price in mils, so a thing that costs thirty-six mils says thirty-six rather than a long row of zeroes with a three in it.

Four issues a year, by season, for as long as the kitchen table holds out. Fall is already in the drawer.

THE ALIEN ALBATROSS

Several metres of wing, most of a decade between landings, and a diet of other people's sunlight.

BY PATRICK MELO

Every spacer has a story about the bird. Mine came secondhand from a cargo pilot who swore that something crossed her forward window on the long leg out of the belt — no running lights, no transponder, no engine bloom, just a shape that blotted out the starfield and then did not.

She filed it as debris. Everybody files it as debris. The Alien Albatross has been filed as debris for as long as we have had forms to file, and it is the single most common reason we keep missing it: a creature that does not burn fuel does not look like anything our instruments were built to find.

What she saw, almost certainly, was a bird. Wings spanning several metres, held dead still. No wingbeat — there is nothing out there to beat against. The albatross does not fly the way a gull flies. It flies the way a glider does, except that the thing holding it up is light.



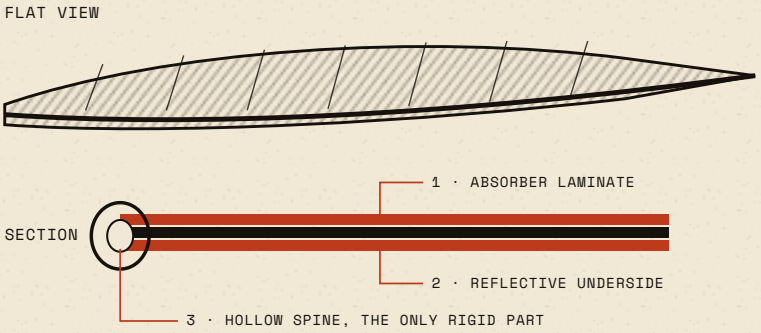
Adult albatross, wings fully extended, with a standard cargo tug shown to scale. Most sightings are of the silhouette alone.

WHAT THE FEATHERS DO

Call them feathers because that is what they look like. Structurally they are closer to a stack of sails, each one a few molecules of absorber laid over a stiffening spine, and each one tuned — this is the part that still keeps me up — to a slightly different slice of the spectrum.

A single feather is nearly transparent. Hundreds of them, overlapped the way shingles overlap, catch very nearly everything a star throws off. What the bird does not absorb it reflects forward along the wing, into the next feather down, and the next, until the last of it is spent.

The energy goes into storage. Where exactly is an argument, and a good one: the leading candidates are the hollow of the keel, the wing roots, and — the romantic option — the whole animal, charged like a cell.



One primary feather in cross-section. Absorber laminate over a hollow spine; the spine is the only rigid part of the wing.

> *"A CREATURE THAT DOES NOT BURN FUEL DOES NOT LOOK LIKE ANYTHING OUR INSTRUMENTS WERE BUILT TO FIND."*

THE LONG GLIDE

Here is the trick that makes the albatross worth an issue of its own. It does not fly to a star. It falls past one.

The approach is a long shallow dive into a star's light, wings wide, taking on charge the entire way down. At closest approach the bird turns its wings edge-on — the whole span presenting about as much surface as a knife — and slings itself back out into the dark on momentum it has spent months accumulating.

Then it coasts. Wings out again, drinking what little there is to drink between systems, losing almost nothing, because there is almost nothing out there to lose it to. The next star might be years away. The bird has years.

Nothing about this requires the albatross to be clever. A seed does something comparable and we do not call it clever. But watch the course corrections — small, early, and made long before the star they are aimed at is anything but one more point of light — and tell me honestly that the bird does not know where it is going.



A typical crossing: dive, edge-on turn at perihelion, and the long coast out. Not to scale; nothing about this is to scale.

HOW TO SEE ONE

Badly, is the honest answer, and that is part of the appeal. The albatross is matte, cold, and uninterested in being found. It has no engine signature because it has no engine. On most sweeps it reads as a gap.

So hunt the gap. Point at a crowded field — a globular cluster, the thick of the Milky Way — and watch for stars going out and coming back in sequence. An albatross crossing a rich field occults one star after another in a slow, orderly line. That line is the wing.

FIELD NOTES

WHERE
Crowded star fields, outbound from any young system.

WHEN
Any time. They are not seasonal; we are.

KIT
The widest field you own. Magnification is the enemy here.

TELL
Occultations in a line, evenly spaced, no radio, no heat.

NOT
Tumbling debris glints. A glint repeats. A wing does not.

ALSO IN THE FILE

ASTEROID AMOEBA
Shapeless, gelatinous, patient. Eats rock from inside cracks.

COSMIC KRAKEN
Colossal and tentacled. Bends the paths of stars for a living.

GAMMA-RAY GECKO
Thick-scaled; lives where the bursts go off and leaps between.

LUNAR LEAPER
The kangaroo of the regolith, armoured against small impacts.

NEBULA NARWHAL
Reads the gas ahead of it with a long spiralled tusk.

SOLAR SALAMANDER
Lives in the flame. Drinks flares. Scaled against the heat.

STAR SCORPION
Armoured for the surface of a star, and not at all friendly.

VOID VIPER
Long, cold and venomous. Wraps its prey and waits.

If you do catch one, write it down and send it in. A sighting is a date, a direction, and how long the line took to pass. That is enough. Enough of those and we will have a map of where the birds go, which is more than anyone has now.

In the meantime: there is something out there with wings, crossing the dark on nothing but the light of stars it will never return to. I find that worth the postage.

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Post paid — Free

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COMING NEXT ISSUE · FALL 2023

THE NEBULA NARWHAL

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