



10.2478/abcsj-2024-0032

Speed of Light

REBECCA NESVET

University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, USA

(The play consists of one unbroken scene. A laboratory. A desk, a computer terminal, a printer and other IT equipment, a chair, and a board covered with star maps, photos, and printouts. There is a large open window. On the horizon, the sun is visible: it's noon. LUCY WILKINS types. She speaks with an English accent.)

LUCY

“Deep image surfacing of the three-star system Alpha Centauri, the closest to our solar system, has proved less conclusive than we at the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence – S E T I – Institute had initially hoped. In 2006, Dr Pierre Kervella and his team attempted, and failed, to detect any co-moving companion to Alpha Centauri B down to an absolute magnitude of 19-20 in the H band. Kervella et al.’s conclusion does not, however, mean that such a co-moving companion does *not* exist. It may be that modern astrophysics has not yet developed a technology with the sensibility to recognise a material body of this type.”

(to window)

Why haven't you returned?

MARINESCU

(entering)

Lucy?

LUCY

Dr. Marinescu. What is it?

MARINESCU

Noon. That means, lunch – before it gets too hot to go outside.

LUCY

I know the drill, thanks.

MARINESCU

Then save your work, we're going to lunch.

LUCY

I was just starting on the Kervella article.

MARINESCU

You have been here how long – three weeks? And you always work through lunch. Why?

LUCY

Yesterday I didn't.

MARINESCU

No, that's right. Yesterday, you didn't. Because yesterday, you spent lunch hour outside – by the radio telescope. Carmen saw from the balcony.

LUCY

I brought a sandwich.

MARINESCU

Lucy.

LUCY

I did. The weather was lovely.

MARINESCU

I read a study on the internet that said British people work the longest hours in all Europe. Try to remember you're not there anymore.

LUCY

I'll do my best.

MARINESCU

All right, then.

(MARINESCU heads off.)

Dr Marinescu?

MARINESCU

Yes?

LUCY

In that study, how did the Russians do?

MARINESCU

I didn't look.

LUCY

Sorry. I didn't mean to...

MARINESCU

I'm not Russian. I'm Romanian.

LUCY

Oh. I'm really sorry.

MARINESCU

That's all right. When it comes down to it, we're all simply earth-dwellers, aren't we?

LUCY

Yes. We all are.

(MARINESCU exits. LUCY addresses the audience.)

I used to think that stars are immortal. When I learned the truth, in my first year of Physics at the University of Arizona, it was terrifying. When you first comprehend how a star can go hot, then cold, then close into itself and stop *being* – or else explode – that is a worse awakening than the first idea of human death. And that is why the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence is so important. If there is life beyond our solar system, we might have someone to turn to in the event that we're still around when we lose the sun. If we can reach them in time. I hope I do. Reach Polaris, that is.

(The phone rings.)

S.E.T.I. Institute, Arecibo. Dr Wilkins speaking.

CARSON (voice)

Hey, Bright Eyes. How are you?

LUCY

Carson? Are you calling from Arizona?

CARSON (voice)

Where else?

(She picks up the photo; glances at it.)

LUCY

That must be expensive.

(She puts the photo down. It is a wedding photo. She is the bride and CARSON is the groom.)

CARSON (voice)

I needed to hear your voice.

LUCY

I miss you, too.

CARSON (voice)

Every day?

LUCY

Every day.

CARSON (voice)

And night?

LUCY

All the time. Are you taking care of yourself?

CARSON (voice)

Three more funding applications – then I can get some sleep.

LUCY

Don't make me worry about you.

CARSON (voice)

Then take a vacation, and see me.

LUCY

Carson –

CARSON (voice)

I'll send you a ticket. I'll e-mail it to you.

LUCY

I'll ask Dr Matthews when I can go.

CARSON (voice)

Honestly, Lucy. Do you believe you'll find anything, ever?

LUCY

We've isolated some of the more probable candidates for planethood, and I'm contributing to a tv documentary.

CARSON (voice)

No, I mean... *someone*... out there. Little green men. Or whatever.

LUCY

I'll tell you again: not green men, but yes, *someone*. I know it.

CARSON (voice)

If you do meet one, you be sure to tell him you're married. Let him down easy.

LUCY

I'll do that.

LUCY & CARSON (voice)

Love you.

(LUCY hangs up, then turns her chair
downstage and addresses the audience.)

LUCY

I may be obsessed, but I have a good reason. You see, once I had a – well, a sort of a lover, and I missed . . . well . . . A sort of a lover, by the name of Polaris. Yes, a star.

(The afternoon light outside the window
suddenly fades to dusk.)

I've always watched the stars, even when I was a younger woman, in Virginia. In the brand-new English Colony of Virginia.

(Puts on a floor-length apron of
some coarse material.)

One night, way back then, I looked sight with the North Star. I felt,
somehow, a bright eye looking back down. I didn't retreat from the
window.

(Starlight streams in.)

Quite the contrary.

(Now as herself in this past...)

What . . . are . . . you?

POLARIS (voice)

You see lots of us. Every night.

LUCY

You're . . . a *star*?

POLARIS (voice)

Of course. The North Star, to humans of your hemisphere. As the Alpha
Omega says.

LUCY

Is that a star?

POLARIS (voice)

No. The Alpha Omega is the system – the Orderer and the Order. On earth,
humans call him many names, he says. None of them are remotely
accurate.

LUCY

You don't mean God?

POLARIS (voice)

I think that is one of them. But you must forgive me for talking so much.

The Alpha Omega tells us we are meant to be seen and not heard. He tells us that all the time.

LUCY

And do you obey?

POLARIS (voice)

Most of us do.

LUCY

Do *you*?

POLARIS (voice)

I'm here, am I not?

LUCY

Yes. Is *that* not allowed, either?

POLARIS (voice)

I had to break some of the rules. There are so many.

LUCY

Here, too. I can't go anywhere.

POLARIS (voice)

Why?

LUCY

I'm not to leave the fort. None of the new-come women are, not without an escort of men with firearms.

POLARIS (voice)

Why?

LUCY

Because outside there are great dangers.

POLARIS (voice)

But I'm outside.

LUCY

That is different. You are not on earth.

POLARIS (voice)

Then come visit the sky with me.

LUCY

The *sky*?

POLARIS (voice)

Just for a visit. Aren't you curious?

LUCY

Yes. But I can't get there.

POLARIS (voice)

Why not?

LUCY

I don't think I could *live* – up there.

POLARIS (voice)

I didn't think I could visit *here*, either. It's not allowed. But I risked it.

LUCY

I can't.

POLARIS (voice)

Why not? What is the worst that could happen?

LUCY

Plenty. I could die.

POLARIS (voice)

What?

LUCY

You don't know what death is?

POLARIS (voice)

It's something humans do.

LUCY

Then you do know.

POLARIS (voice)

No. The Alpha Omega mentioned it, once. We saw some humans building something – something very big, and geometric, in a desert. After, the landscape looked different. I wanted to try. There is plenty of leftover Chaos. But the Alpha Omega refused. He said, that is what humans do. And I said, why? And the Alpha Omega said, because they die, so they think they must race against death.

LUCY

That's a foolish reason.

POLARIS (voice)

Why?

LUCY

Because – it doesn't help. All people lose that race.

POLARIS (voice)

Then why do they keep running it?

LUCY

They haven't got a choice – 'coz there's nothing outside it. Take my father. He helped built our house, back in Kent, yet he has died – passed

out of this world – perhaps, out of existence, though we are not to say that, nor *think* it, even. Now that I've crossed the sea, nothing seems at all like the place I was born, except for the pattern of the stars. And even *that* changed – except for you.

POLARIS (voice)

Is that why you always stare at me? Because I don't change?

LUCY

I don't *stare*!

POLARIS (voice)

You look.

LUCY

I'm an observer.

POLARIS (voice)

You're persistent in your observations.

LUCY

And what is wrong with that?

POLARIS (voice)

Nothing. Just most humans don't pay much attention. They keep their eyes on the earth.

LUCY

Most folks don't notice *me* neither.

POLARIS (voice)

How could they not?

LUCY

What do you mean?

POLARIS (voice)

You're so beautiful.

LUCY

Me?

POLARIS (voice)

Absolutely. You're so exquisitely *solid*. I have the impression that if I could touch you, you wouldn't melt away, nor burn. And the visible light of your visual-sense organs –

LUCY

You don't mean my *eyes*, do you?

POLARIS (voice)

Yes, that's the word. And the patterns of your molecules—

LUCY

My *what*?

POLARIS (voice)

They're so intricate. So many glittering electrons. Wow.

LUCY

Oh, really. There are many creatures like me.

POLARIS (voice)

Really.

LUCY

The way you see me – that's not how people do. Back when my father lived, they'd say, 'there goes Richard Wilkins' daughter. Poor thing.' Then, after he died, they said 'that's the Adams's girl. How slow she is!' And when I arrived on the boat, I don't know what they saw – those men, who had ordered us from England just as they ordered lead or gunpowder,

or nails. Most of us did as we were expected – married the colonists, but I didn't, so I work for the Forrests now. And most folks, except for them, don't recognize me at all anymore.

POLARIS (voice)

If you build something, they will.

LUCY

I build the fire every day, thank you.

POLARIS (voice)

Fire doesn't last.

LUCY

No.

POLARIS (voice)

Then why do you build it?

LUCY

For heat, and cooking. And because Mistress Forrest tells me to.

POLARIS (voice)

Who tells you to stand at your window looking at the stars?

LUCY

What's it your concern?

POLARIS (voice)

I'd keep it secret. I know what a secret is.

LUCY

I do have a secret.

(Removes a jagged board from under the desk. She has drawn a map on it.)

POLARIS (voice)

What is that?

LUCY

A picture of all the stars. I had to steal the ink, from the Governor's indentured man.

POLARIS (voice)

Where am I?

LUCY

Here. This one.

POLARIS (voice)

Me! You made a picture of me?

LUCY

Yes.

POLARIS (voice)

A picture, of me!

LUCY

Do you like it?

POLARIS (voice)

Oh, yes. Why did you make it?

LUCY

So I could find you easier.

POLARIS (voice)

And you did. Why am I in the centre?

LUCY

‘Coz – that’s where you *are*, in Creation.

POLARIS (voice)

In the centre?

LUCY

Yes.

POLARIS (voice)

The centre of what?

LUCY

The universe. Of course.

POLARIS (voice)

But I’m not really.

LUCY

No?

POLARIS (voice)

Not anywhere near.

LUCY

Preacher says the pagans thought there was more than one universe.
You’re certainly at the center of mine.

POLARIS (voice)

Since, just now?

LUCY

Of course not. Much longer.

POLARIS (voice)

How long?

LUCY

For – for as long as I’ve been looking. And much longer, I suppose.

POLARIS (voice)

And how long *have* you been looking?

LUCY

Since I got here.

POLARIS (voice)

To earth?

LUCY

No, silly. I’ve never left the earth. I’ve never lived anyplace else. But when I crossed the sea from Kent, everyone and everything I knew fell over the horizon and was gone. I stood on the deck at night and looked for something beyond the water. All I saw was the stars. I hadn't really noticed them before, you see, in Kent. One night, the captain saw me looking. He told me a few of their names.

POLARIS (voice)

Our names.

LUCY

Yes.

POLARIS (voice)

Did he tell you *my* name?

LUCY

Several of them. The north star – the lode star – and Polaris. I told him you were beautiful, more so than any of the others. He said that he agreed – and that on more than one occasion, you’d saved his life, and all his crew and passengers. Is that true?

POLARIS (voice)

Of course.

LUCY

Then you must like us.

POLARIS (voice)

You?

LUCY

Humans.

POLARIS (voice)

Why shouldn't I?

LUCY

We can be horrible, sometimes.

POLARIS (voice)

I suppose *you* aren't.

LUCY

Preacher says –

POLARIS (voice)

I don't care. sounds horrible. You're my favourite human.

LUCY

Why?

POLARIS (voice)

Because you always look for me. Can I touch you?

LUCY

How?

POLARIS (voice)

My light touches earth all the time.

LUCY

Is it very hot?

POLARIS (voice)

I don't think so. It has a long way to travel.

LUCY

The sun's is, sometimes. In summer especially.

POLARIS (voice)

Ah, Sol. That one is closer to earth. That's different. You see?

(The starlight flares brighter. LUCY
steps into its glow, becoming a
silhouette surrounded by it. To audience:)

In the early days of the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence, the researchers concentrated on stars that might have planets circling them. These stars were clearly affected by some sort of body, invisible but heavy, and led by their shining partners in fast and graceful dance. But there was no positive evidence that these unknowns were 'planets.' So instead of 'planets', they were called their stars' 'dark companions.' It is estimated that, of the forty stars closest to the sun, four have dark companions. Before the word was coined, *I* became the dark companion of Polaris.

(Then LUCY steps out of the light, and
back into the flashback.)

Where *are* you?

POLARIS (voice)

Up. On my way home.

LUCY

But you can't go! Not yet!

POLARIS (voice)

It's daylight, Lucy. Sol drowns out my light.

LUCY

Sol?

POLARIS (voice)

Your star.

LUCY

My star is you.

POLARIS (voice)

I can't be. For earth creatures, it's Sol.

LUCY

Can you come live on earth, with me?

POLARIS (voice)

I can't.

LUCY

I'll tell the Governor. He would not send any soul out into the wilderness,
'coz he calls himself a Christian.

POLARIS (voice)

It's impossible. *You* should come with *me*.

LUCY

Are you afraid of life on earth?

POLARIS (voice)

Maybe.