Sun’s Trophy Stirring

Roger Zelazny

It was stark as all hell, cold as ice, bright as a chutney bubble by day, cellar-dark, charcoal, shade and ash by night, but not dead, never alive, Luna.

Then on.

Mars was craters, iron oxide, silicon, fantastic winds, wafting miles-high dust clouds, a little moisture at the Poles, and cold.

Mercury: half seething cauldron, half ice field, with a slender twilight belt between, still and bleak, bare and rocky.

Venus was scalding vapor, burning gases, geysers, mist, mist and more unliving mist.

The asteroids: drifting quarries, mountains, boulders, rocks, pebbles, gravel and grit. Nothing else.

Jupiter, so big, and crushing everything upon its surface pancake-flat, circled, empty and smooth, the great flame of the sun. There was nothing there, nothing for its miles and its miles, except more miles and miles.

Saturn’s sawblade rings spun ice and rock about the flat lifeless faces of that world.

Uranus, Neptune: cold, colder; dark, darker; frozen mazes of night, their uncitied wilderness of rock.

Pluto last. God of the dead. Coldest. Darkest. Farthest out. Hardest to reach. End of the line. Fittingly named.

And all the moons like Luna.

We were not truly disappointed, for we had not expected anything more.

The solar system was empty, except for man. We were alone. The place was ours, to do with as we chose. And we did.

We fought the cold and the winds, the heat and the gases; we mined the rock, we set cities in the wilderness, we broke the teeth of the sawblade; we even found ways not to be flattened, ourselves and our cities, on the steel-stiff plains of the big worlds. Finally even the coldest, the darkest, the farthest out, Pluto, admitted the embassy of man into those final canyons.

All of this is history.

For centuries we grew, spreading across the system like ripples, from that one living rock dropped into its middle, spreading, wave upon wave, outward, to stop at last upon the final rock, where the god of Death had built a dam.

Man could go no further.

Pluto, fittingly named, had drawn a line that we could not cross. The stars were too far out.

We smashed atoms and we put atoms together, but we could not move faster than light. We tried to warp space, but we found space to be unwarpable. We sought vainly after a fourth dimension through which we might shortcut across light-years.

We were shaking our spears at the stars, and we knew it. But we persisted.

We wanted more room, true. While we could synthesize nearly anything, we did want more raw materials. We wanted new maps, of course; man loves maps. We wanted, romantically enough, to look upon new horizons, to watch a strange sun climb from out of a strange east.

Most of all, though, we wanted someone else to talk to.

Out there, somewhere, there had to be another place where it had happened: a place, perhaps, where someone⁠—something⁠—else, looked out at the sky and the trillions of other stars, looked out, and felt as we did.

We shook our spears at the stars, and after a time we had bows and arrows.

Then on, crudely.

Alpha Centauri and a few of the other close ones. That was all, at first. Years, both ways.

Nothing. Neither insect nor blade of grass, lichen nor spore; not an animalcule cavorting within a tear-shaped drop of any liquid.

Then came the day of the power. It was not the heart of a sun imprisoned within a great-walled chamber, tending apart the parsecs to hurl us over Pluto’s dam.

It was a little box which hummed, tinkled and clicked, hummed, tinkled and clicked, as it carried an infinitely shrinking ship along the perpetual arc of the universal expansion, an infinitely expanding ship along the line of the Lorentz-Fitzgerald contraction, and arrived in one finite piece at its inconceivably distant destination a short while later.

I do not know how it really works. Perhaps there are three men who truly understand it.

It carried us beyond Pluto’s dam, however. It opened the way to the stars.

We went out there.

For centuries we went out there.

Dozens, hundreds of worlds⁠—then, after great fleets of robot-controlled scout ships were loosed from a dozen hundred worlds⁠—thousands, thousands. We visited thousands of worlds.

Notes

Pluto is the god of death in Roman mythology, the counterpart to Hades of Greek mythology. An animalcule is a microscopic animal. The Lorentz-Fitzgerald contraction is the shortening of a moving body in the direction of its motion, especially at speeds close to that of light.