## Dreadsong

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This piece was solicited by Byron Preiss for the Bantam hardcover volume The Planets. Because of a bizarre mix-up involving an ambiguous letter, a misprint of my address on a follow-up letter, and a short trip on my part, I was given the impression that it was an essay rather than a story that was desired of me. So I wrote one. I was rather pleased with it, as a matter of fact. There followed a phone call asking about the letter I’d never received, which had purportedly gone into specifics indicating that it was a story that was wanted. I did not feel like writing two pieces for the price of one, though; ergo, the following hybrid, which incorporated parts of my essay into a story. My assigned subject was the planet Saturn....

Return, two centuries hence ...

I sat on a breastwork of rocks I had constructed behind my home and I stared into the night sky; I thought about Saturn, as it is now and as it might be. There was a cool wind out of the Sangre de Cristos to the northeast. Something was feeding in the arroyo behind me—a coyote, perhaps, or a stray dog. Above me, the stars moved imperceptibly in their great wheel.

The center of a system of satellites as well as some fascinating rings, Saturn has probably changed little save its position in eons. But the next two hundred years are likely to represent a crucial time in the history of humanity, which, barring self-destruction or massive technological regression, is probably going to extend its influence through the solar system. What might we want of that giant primal ball of gases? What might we find upon it?

I live on a ridge, where I hear and feel all the winds. When the rains come, they run off quickly, which is why I hauled stones to construct a breastwork, preventing erosion to the rear of my home. I changed the pattern of runoff by doing this. Different channels were formed. A neighbor’s complaint to the city resulted in my constructing a bar ditch to deal with a problem this had caused him. The bar ditch created no problems that anyone has complained of, though it has benefited the growth of some plants by depriving others. What effect this has had on local animals and insects I do not know. But I was raised in the shadow of a depression and I recall the rationing of World War II. I grew up feeling it was almost sinful to waste food. I throw all scraps into an arroyo, to cycle them back into the food chain. Ravens will circle if there are any bones, descending finally to pick off shreds of meat. Later, something will carry the bones away. Breadcrusts vanish quickly.

Thus I alter the world about me in countless ways every day. Small things, these personal changes, hardly on a scale with those alterations wrought by industry or government projects. Yet the total of all our changes, from the burning of Amazon forests to provide grazing land for the cattle that fill our hamburger buns to the tossing of a few crumbs to local birds, produce a phenomenon sometimes called the Carson factor, named after Rachel Carson by writer William Ashworth to indicate the unforeseen secondary effects of primary human changes upon a part of our planet.

Yet—and even so—I am not a person who would like to see this or any other world embedded in Lucite for the benefit of future planetary archaeologists. Change is inevitable. Its alternative is death. Evolution is more and more a product of our own action or inaction. Living systems adapt constantly to the vagaries of our technological culture.

But what’s to evolve on a gas giant or a barren rock that we should be mindful of it? I don’t know, and things like that trouble me. I have spent much of my life creating scenarios. I even did it back when it was just called daydreaming—and this, too, I feel, is a very special part of the evolutionary process.

As a lifetime member of the National Space Society, I am in favor of space exploration and of cautious development of the solar system’s resources. I am also leery of the Carson factor: We must avoid the extermination of any extraterrestrial life-form, from the smallest virus to some supercooled Plutonian blob, not only for its own sake but for the wealth of genetic material contained within it, material that would have evolved over eons, developing unique abilities for dealing with its problems and, by extension, our own.

In that we are not yet wise enough to maintain proper stewardship of our own planet, I am particularly happy that these large-scale endeavors lie far beyond the horizon. I also take consolation in the knowledge that if a government is involved, heels tend to drag, inertia maximizes in accordance with Murphy’s, Max Weber’s, and Parkinson’s laws, and that the slowness which frustrates us so on the one hand provides time on the other, time for a measure of deliberation, for the development and pursuit of secondary concerns, for the occurrence of the proverbial second thoughts.

Yet Saturn’s ice and volatiles will have a value. Its helium is very scarce on Earth—and the rare form, helium 3, could provide a potent fuel for nuclear fusion in power generation. Some of its less exotic materials will doubtless be desired one day for terraforming purposes elsewhere in the solar system. The materials of the outer satellites of the gas giants are more tempting than those that lie far deeper within the massive worlds’ gravity wells. This means that Saturn’s outermost moon, Phoebe, would be a likely candidate for mining. And Titan, more Earth-like than any other planetary body, may well be an ideal place to set up a permanent scientific base. Those scientists lucky enough to be first on the base will have the initial opportunity to observe—and exploit—whatever lies within Saturn’s great interior.

Let us paint some fanciful pictures, then. Let us develop a scenario about Saturaian affairs some two hundred years hence. And let us talk of life—the big question, the one which comes first to mind when considering an alien environment or when speaking of preservation: Will we find any life when we give close attention to that great ringed world?

If higher life had evolved in such a place, it would have to be able to survive in a great range of temperature and pressure scales or else be capable of holding itself at relatively stable levels within the atmosphere. The absence of a solid surface would require a creature able to control its buoyancy in ways analogous to some of Earth’s sea creatures. It might achieve this by containing within itself enough of the hydrogen gas to match the density of the upper atmosphere. This would seem to indicate a tough-skinned balloonlike creature that could ride the planet’s winds and rise and fall within certain limits.

To enter the world of such a creature is to discard our entire culture. But we’ve already come this far, so let’s ...

She drifted, browsing, amid canyons of steely cloud whence flowed lightning discharges like instant bright rivers. Songs of the others filled the air about her with soothing rhythms. Below, the beat of the Everdeep pulsed at the heart of mystery, nether pole of existence, eternal dreamdark presence. That one day, perhaps soon, she would join the mystery, toppling down the sky, broken-bagged, from heat layer to heat layer, spinning the last life equations through lanes of mist and crystal, songless, descrying the lower wonders at long last, she knew, as all of them knew, there in the zone of song which was memory and the marriage of minds, knew, and was incapable of avoiding, there in the shoals of life, moving in the timeless present. And recently there had been certain twinges ...

Rick had come to the station on Titan, Earth-alien carbuncle facing across the sea of darkness toward the ancient king in yellow, Saturn, there to behold the instruments of his trade in yet another chamber.

A highly specialized mining engineer, more mathematician even than technician, Rick seldom looked through the station’s ports at the planet itself, preferring the cleaner picture, the precise representation of the mass and structure of that giant body as displayed by the section of monitoring instruments for which he was responsible.

He knew, for example, that the planet’s heavier elements—primarily iron and silicon—were concentrated in its small core, along with most of the water, methane, and ammonia, held in the form of very dense liquids by the high pressures and temperatures. And he knew well of the separation of helium from hydrogen, with the helium forming drops and raining down to even deeper levels—for he personally programmed the “plows,” those scoop-ships that harvested the exotic helium 3, which provided fuel for nuclear fusion in power generators.

Emerging from the dining room, he looked about quickly for a place of concealment. Dr. Morton Trampler— short and round, owl-eyed behind thick glasses—was approaching, and he was smiling and aiming the expression in Rick’s direction. For reasons known only to the gods of psychology, Morton had earlier chosen Rick for a confidant, cornering him often to deliver lengthy monologues on his pet theory and project. The fact that he had recited the same information earlier seemed not to bother him in the least.

Too late.

Rick smiled weakly and nodded.

“How goes it?” he said.

“Wonderfully,” the smaller man replied. “I should have a fresh batch of readings in a little while.”

“Same level?”

“No, a bit deeper than I’ve gone in the past.”

“Still broadcasting synthetic whale songs?”

Morton nodded.

“Well ... good luck,” Rick said, edging away.

“Thanks,” Morton replied, catching hold of his arm. “We could pick up something very interesting....”

Here it comes, Rick decided. That bit about the layer below the frozen salts and ice crystals where the complex organic molecules form, to drift downward like plankton to that area where the pressures and temperatures are similar to Earth’s atmosphere....

“The probe is going through that area where complex organic molecules form,” Morton began. “We’ve finally screened the transmitter against much of the static.”

Rick was suddenly reminded of the wedding guest and the ancient mariner. But the guest had been lucky. He’d only had to hear the story once.

Now comes the biology, he reflected. I am about to hear of the hypothetical living balloons with gravity-perceptive sensilla and electrical broadcasting and receiving organs whose waves penetrate surfaces—giving them a “texture sense” as well as a means of communication. I guess everybody needs a hobby, but ...

“... And the possibility of a life-form streamlined for constant vertical adjustments of position,” Morton was saying. “Point symmetry rather than line symmetry could well be the case, giving it a brain more like that of the octopus than the whale. Radial rather than bilateral symmetry would eliminate the left-hemisphere-right-hemisphere separation of the higher creatures on Earth. What this would mean in terms of modes of thought would be a difficult thing to guess at.”

A new twist. He was actually dashing after finer and finer illusory points of biology now. Seeing the opening simultaneous with Morton’s pausing for an inhalation, Rick plunged, satisfying months of irritation:

“There is no such creature, and if there were, there would be no point in getting in touch,” he said. “They could build nothing, they have nothing to experiment with. So there would be no technology. All of their culture would be within their weird minds, so they would have no history. If one of them ever had a great idea and none of the others appreciated it, it would die with him. They would know nothing beyond their sky, and not much about what’s down below either. Their dead would just sink and vanish. They’d have no homes, they’d just wander. They would do nothing but eat, make noises at each other, and think incomprehensible point-symmetrical thoughts. I doubt we could ever find grounds for conversation, and if we did, we’d find we had nothing to talk about. They’d probably be stupid, too.”

Morton looked appalled.

“I have to disagree,” he said. “There are such things as oral culture, and their communications could take the form of, say, a great oratorio. I would say it is impossible right now to imagine what they think or feel. Which is why it would be so great to communicate—to find out.”

Rick shook his head.

“Morty, it’s like the Loch Ness monster and the Abominable Snowman. I don’t believe they’re there.”

“And if they are, it doesn’t matter?”

“They’re not there,” Rick said. “The universe is a lonely place.”

Moving through food-fall to densest point. Eating here, singing location-vectors-coming-to-song. Crowding distant side spaces, clouds. Crackle song of storm far to rear. Flicker of storm in songs of other eaters there, arriving now, giving distance against sizzling.

Pain. More and more, with rising and falling, expansion, contraction, the notes of sharp, fiery pain ...

Grown, young of this voice, drifting, browsing free. Borne no more, bodyfed no more of this voice. To come forth no others; tightened, place of birthing; locking and dryness. Gone. With age the body-bag stiffens, weakness comes, song wavers. Long has it been so, this voice. Compute.... Soon now, very soon, the time of collapse and sinking, the end-of-songtime will come.

Pain ...

Pulsing, in the Everdeep, stronger, always stronger now. Voice of Everdeep, slow and steady. Calling, calling this voice to songs-end rest. Falling-to place of burst, stopped voices. Returning not ever. Never again.

Old, song of Returned Voice.... False song of very young? Or very old? Song of Reinflated, of fallen voices, rising, singing again, ofEvercalm, of food-full skies in place of no mating, no birthing, no bagburst, strifeless and eversong perfect. False song? Returned Voice? Returning no more, sing it, stopped voices. True song? Returned Voice?

Stiffness, slow-filling bag, slow-emptying. Stiffness. Pain, everpain. Soon. Time-matrix, there.... Soon to enter Everdeep, fall-place of all food and voices. Songs-end.

This is now. Pain. Eating’s cease.

To end song here? Drifting, filled ...

No.

To fill one time more? Rising, passing hard-filled particle-clouds? Rising, singing, to high place of food-fall source? Indeterminate intersection, fall-angles axes.... Find it, somewhere, up. Cease singing there. Find it, feel it, know it and fall. To mount sky-high, singing, wind-dance, end-dance, touching textures. Feeling, thrusting, calling. Better to fall from high than from some middle height, knowing perhaps, telling ...

Go then, high up, before bursting of bag. To know source. Understand mystery. Fall then, far, silent at last and knowing, down Everdeep, knowing. To have touched. Knowing source, life. Returned Voice? No matter. To know, at singing’s last.

Inflating now. Like jagged lightnings in body, the pain. To open. Calling, young of his voice, “Go not. Go not now. Stay. Browse and sing.”

Singing this, too, into storm and fall, counterpoint, inflating. Growing, pain like heat. To go. To go. High. To sense, to sing back, feeling ...

Rising, slowly. Going. Rising. Hello, hello. Going. Goodbye, good-bye.

Touching, textures of cloud. Soft, hard. Warm, cool. Rising, tower of warm air, there. Join it.

Easier way, thus. Mounting faster. Fountain of warmth. Riding, rising. Higher. Through clouds. Up.

Bright cracklings, wind-pushed clouds, browsers, food-fall. Higher ...

Soaring, expanding. Hot pains, creaking of bag. Faster. Tossed and spinning.

Song-dampening, clouds, winds, crackling. Voices tiny, tinier. There below, fire-flecked, cloud-dappled, wind-washed, fall-swept, small—young of this voice, listening. Listening.

Higher ...

Singing back, this voice. Telling. Telling, of lift and drift. Of rising. Below, young of this voice, hearing ...

Rising ...

... into heat, into continuing foodfall.

“Voice here, voice here”—singing of this voice, to singers there.

Going, down the song? Hearing, some voice, somewhere? Above?

Higher ...

Singing, more loudly now, within heat-rise. Reaching, reaching.... Expanding, creaking. Pain, hot and spreading.

Is heat, all...

Beat, beat, beat, beat, beat. Following, pulse of the Everdeep. Matching, pulse of this voice. Slow, steady. Calling. Sending song of this voice back down ...

“Voice here....”

Answers not.

Again ...

“Returned Voice? Breaking soon, this bag, this voice. Sing back.”

Answers not. Higher. Higher. So high, never. Below, all clouds. Evercloud. Smothered, songs of the young of this voice. Too far ...

Above, tiny. Something, something.... Singing, strange voice, strange song, never of this voice heard....

Understanding not.

Higher. Hotter ...

“Voice here.

Something, somewhere above. Far. Too far. Louder now, strange singing. Matching it, this voice, now. Trying. To it, “Mm-mm-mm-mm-mm? Returned Voice? To Ever-deep, soon, this voice. Bear this voice, bodyfeed this voice, down. Down Everdeep, Returned Voice. To place of ever-calm, food-full skies, no mating, no birthing, no bagburst, strifeless and ever song perfect. Hello, hello? Returned Voice? Returned Voice. Hello? Mm-mm-mm-mm-mm.”

Above and tiny. Above and tiny. Fast-moving. Too far. Too far. Goes not up, the singing. Varies not the song from on high. No answer.

Shuddering, creaking, tearing. Heat, heat. Now, now the breaking.

The pain ...

Buffeted, swept sidewise. Turned. Spinning. Collapsing. Grows smaller, skies, all. Falling. Falling. Smaller. Goodbye. The fall, the fall of this voice begins.

Down, twisting. Faster ...

Faster thanfoodfall, through clouds, back, cooler, cooler, unvoiced, shrinking. Lights, fires, winds, songs, fleeing past. Loud, loud. Good-bye. Pulse of Everdeep. Hello. Returned Voice? Falling ...

Spiral symmetry vectoring indicates —

Pulsing is all....

After dinner Rick, vaguely troubled, walked to the control center. It bothered him now, having stepped on the other man’s pet idea. Ten minutes’ penance, he decided, should be sufficient to sop his conscience, and he could check his own instruments while he was in the place.

When he entered the bright, cool chamber, he saw Morton doing a small dance to a sequence of eerie sounds emerging from one of his monitors.

“Rick!” he exclaimed as he caught sight of him. “Listen to this stuff I picked up!”

“I am.”

The notes of the creature’s death song emerged from the speaker.

“Sounds as if one of them rose to an unusual height. I’d figured them for a lower lev—”

“It’s atmospheric,” Rick said. “There’s nothing down there. You’re getting neurotic about this business.”

He wanted to bite his tongue immediately, but he could not help saying what he felt.

“We’ve never picked up anything atmospheric at that frequency.”

“You know what happens to artists who fall in love with their models? They come to a bad end. The same applies to scientists.”

“Keep listening. Something’s doing it. Then it breaks off suddenly, as if—”

“It’s different, all right. But I just don’t think anything could cut it down in that soup.”

“I’ll talk to them one day,” Morton insisted.

Rick shook his head, then forced himself to talk again.

“Play it over,” he suggested.

Morton pushed a button and after several moments’ pause the buzzing, humming, whistling sequence started anew.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said earlier,” Morton remarked, “about communication ...”

“Yes?”

“You asked what we’d have to say to each other.”

“Exactly. If they’re there.”

The sounds rose in pitch. Rick began to feel uncomfortable. Could there possibly? ...

“They would have no words for all of the concrete things which fill our lives,” Morton stated, “and even many of our abstractions are based upon the possession of human anatomy and physiology. Our poetry of valley and mountain, river and field, night and day with stars and sun would not come through well.”

Rick nodded. If they exist, he wondered, what would they have that we want?

“Perhaps only music and mathematics, our most abstract art and science, could serve as points of contact,” Morton went on. “Beyond that, some sort of metalanguage would really have to be developed.”

“A record of their songs might have some commercial value,” Rick mused.

“And then?” the smaller man suggested. “Would we be the serpent in their Eden, detailing wonders they might never experience directly, causing them some strange existential traumas? Or could it possibly be the other way around? What may they know or feel that we have not even guessed?”

“I’m getting some ideas for breaking this thing down mathematically, to see whether there’s a real logic sequence behind it,” Rick said suddenly. “I think I’ve seen some linguistic formulations that might apply.”

“Linguistics?” Morton observed. “That’s not your area.”

“I know, but I love math theory, no matter where it’s from.”

“Interesting. What if they had a complex mathematics that the human mind simply could not comprehend?”

“I’d go mad over it,” Rick replied. “It would snare my soul.” Then he laughed. “But there’s nothing there, Morty. We’re just screwing around.... Unless there’s a pattern,” he decided. “Then we cash in.”

Morton grinned.

“There is. I’m sure of it.”

That night Rick’s sleep was troubled by strange periodicities. The rhythms of the song throbbed in his head. He dreamed that the song and the language were one with a mathematical vision no bilaterally symmetrical brain could ever share. He dreamed of ending his days in frustration, seeing the thing cracked by brute computer force but never being able to comprehend the elegance.

In the morning he forgot. He located the formulations for Morton and translated them into a program of analysis, humming an irregular tune which never went quite right as he worked.

Later, he went to a port and stared for a long while at the giant ringed world itself. After a time it bothered him, not being able to decide whether he was looking up or looking down.