



ROBERT GOLDSTROM

SILENT SPRING

*Clamoring soul caught groveling
betwixt lunar eclipse and Hale-Bopp
Eternal gratitude sweeps the cosmos
as all existence nonchalantly whispers
"It is nothing."*
~ARTHUR HONEYMAN

This Springtime of the comet (the second in succession) we worry about "a doomsday rock" that might burst from outer space and crash into Earth, one of many millennial disasters that are vigorously prophesied by the same sort of folk who mass suicided to catch a spaceship shadowing Hale-Bopp's circuit around the sun. Comets are apparently good and evil twins, some bringing the seeds of life to the planet from the farthest recesses of the solar system and who knows where else, others eradicating it with spectacular crashes on earth's surface. SciFi writers (which include H.G. Wells and Arthur C. Clarke) have created literary chaos with riveting tales of earth's danger from collision with celestial bodies while television and movies exploit the titillating themes of stellar and planetary cataclysm ending civilization and perhaps humanity.

But we and what we have wrought are our home planet's real problem for survival. For example, we have made the sun, beloved Sol the giver of life, our enemy, its warmth and light our death because our industry has torn holes in the thin fabric of upper atmosphere ozone that protects us from lethal ultraviolet rays intermixed with beneficent sunlight.

The rays screened by ozone are precisely those that are absorbed by DNA and cremate cells. Plankton and other organisms that live near the ocean surface are zapped in minutes by increased ultraviolet light and farm crops are critically damaged. Without sufficient ozone almost any exposure to sunlight will have shattering effects on the human population — one form of skin cancer (*melanoma*) currently results in death to about 25% who contract it.

Of course being burned up by the sun is only one of many methods humanity has devised to obliterate itself and its earthy environment: the variety is exotic — nuclear, biological or chemical warfare can put an abrupt end to us, of course; but our self-destruction will more likely be a long strangulation or baking from toxic pollutants that we have poured into the land, sky, oceans and rivers which return as acid rain and killer smog, not to mention such other byproducts as poisoned or irradiated soil and drinking water. We have pummeled and plundered our home planet as if it offered an inexhaustible feast without charge or cleanup, but the consequences of our careless and excessive self-indulgence are converging.

The funniest thing about choking on our affluence is that we think we are so smart. We think we have overpowered nature after centuries of pitiless struggle and are now able to crack the planet with our power. We don't want to give up the good life, the modern world of appliances and virtual reality. We ignore or trivialize warnings that we are fouling our nest, behaving with the hubris that afflicted the builders of the 'unsinkable' *Titanic*, which collided with an iceberg one April night 85 years ago. Our long feast on Earth's flesh is giving us gas, however. Mother is biting back!

Our proximity to extinction is not from any single cause or danger or combination of them but because we seem so helpless to undo the damage or change direction. Our paradox is that the good life is produced by methods that threaten all life; our bountiful civilization is based on processes that threaten to obliterate it.

We have built a global greenhouse and we dwell within. Greenhouse gases are emitted by human activity and magnify heat radiated back to earth from an invisible ceiling structured by chemicals released by the use of fossil fuels, pesticides and fluorocarbons that also eat away the upper level ozone. The weather heats up, particularly in the summers that are hot and dry; desertification is more common and droughts longer and more frequent (resulting in recurrent famine) — but the winters are colder and wetter near the poles. Polar/tropic wind systems increase as the tropics get hotter and the poles colder as evapo-

ration in the swelter zones causes increased winter rainfall, longer and colder winters and gradual buildup of polar ice sheets — before that, however, some predictions suggest the oceans will rise as the polar ice caps warm up in summer and most coastal ports and cities will be drowned. The potential upheaval and chaos to human society is immense and unfathomable.

So what can we do about our danger? What will we do about it? Our problems are so vast and complex the solutions are almost impossible to agree upon, yet postponing answers and action leads almost always, as has been said about racism, to denial and rejection of the problems and thus their solutions. The byproducts of our ways of life are of less concern that our unwillingness to reverse their harm. We have to stop abusing earth but we find infinite rationales for continuing to beat it up.

We know how to break the panes of our greenhouse jail. Stop clearcutting earth's remaining forests and replant forested areas; reduce eventually to zero reliance on fossil fuels in favor of non-polluting energy sources; stop using toxic defoliants that in half a century have been absorbed into everything. Strong measures to reverse direction are crucial. More than anything else, the most immediate and necessary measure is a change of attitude. The terms of our survival are quite simple: if we have the moxie to save ourselves we might survive. If we don't, we won't.

Think of it this way: the steady eradication of the world's tropical rainforests threatens to rid the northern hemisphere of most of its birds.

Each Spring fewer birds return from the south. Almost 200 bird species of North America alone are threatened with extinction. The rainforests are hosts to half of all bird life. Between 20–30 million birds fly south each Autumn, which is the most extensive and oldest migration of creatures on earth.

If the deforestation continues unchecked, future Springs will go unsung.

And future comets will fly past a silent and empty world, as all existence nonchalantly whispers, "It is nothing."

~MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER