

Beyond the Wall

by Robert D. Shepherd

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.

—Robert Frost, “Mending Wall”

Colony 687, where Zhao Pe-ying lived, had become a model settlement over the previous hundred and fifty years. From an unfriendly terrain, descendants of Earthlings had carved a home both safe and increasingly familiar. Sidewalks, playgrounds, parks, lawns, schools, and small but comfortable geodesic houses now filled an area that had once been dense wilderness – a wilderness crawling with strange life forms and, according to legend, inhabited by a fearsome creature known as the Drant.

The giant ship that had brought the first colonists, a Class V spaceship called the Ararat, had been carefully designed both as an ark for those escaping the polluted and dying Earth and as a terraforming machine, capable of taking raw materials from most any environment and transforming them, via nanotech engineering, into an oasis for human habitation.

Pe-ying had, of course, seen the Ararat many times, for the original ship sat like a great ziggurat, or like a queen bee, in the middle of the Colony. She had read of how the ship had gone about the business of making a nearly self-sustaining living environment: When the Ararat first landed, it immediately set about clearing terrain, mining, and building from native materials the Great Wall that surrounded the Colony. Then it built the enormous sealed dome above the Wall and manufactured an atmosphere almost identical to the one that had surrounded Earth in the old days, before the Collapse. Only when all was ready did the ship awaken the

sleeping colonists, deep in its womb, among whom had been Pe-ying's great-grandmother and great-grandfather.

The Ararat was but one of many hundreds of ships that had been built in the last days of the Earth and cast out into the void. Often, Pe-ying wondered about the fates of those other colonists on the other ships. Did they, too, find homes among the stars?

For Pe-ying and her friends, Earth meant little more than a collection of stories told by the old-timers, and most of the stories weren't all that pleasant. Here's how Pe-ying's father put it:

"Back on Earth, there were tiny creatures called spiders. They would capture prey, such as one of those flying insects that were called moths, kill the prey, and then lay eggs within its body.

The eggs would hatch, and the baby spiders would feed upon the prey's body until they were big enough to go out into the world on their own. Earth was like that moth. Humans consumed it, using up its resources; then they escaped their ruined birthplace and headed off into the Cosmos."

"What was Earth like?" Pe-ying would ask.

"Don't ask," Mr. Zhao would say.

"Your great-grandfather used to scare us with stories about it – the blackened skies, the impoverished soil, the squalor and hunger and misery, the dead oceans. But some people say that it was once a blue-green orb, fresh as a park here in Colony 687."

Indeed, most of Colony 687 was parklike – a



self-regulating savannah that had become, for at least a few descendants of Earthlings, their own special place in the universe.

Beyond the Wall it was different. The Ararat had built the Colony in a forested valley. Beyond was what remained of the original forest—a ring of untamed, unfamiliar territory, thickly overgrown with tall plants, the most common of which had triangular trunks that sprouted profusely in strange, shimmering foliage. This foliage emitted gases that were poisonous to humans but evidently were just right for the strange creatures who lived beneath the tall plants.

From time to time, the Ararat would send a droid through the Wall to gather raw materials for some new project, and by this means the Colony expanded, becoming increasingly homey and pleasant for its inhabitants. Pe-ying had heard that little light ever broke through the foliage of the great jungle canopy that surrounded the Colony like an ever-thinning blanket.

Beyond the Wall, in the thick undergrowth, in perpetual twilight, lived the small creatures that Pe-ying had seen in the Colony Zoo—Kringlets, Zooboids, Warrentellas, and Bleezles. And beyond the Wall, or so the stories of the Colony told, lived the Drant.

No one alive in the Colony had ever actually seen the Drant, but most of the colonists thought they knew what it would look like, if it existed. It had a small head, a huge body, and beady eyes, they said. Most agreed that it had small, sharp horns covering all of its leathery blue skin. Some said it had no eyes at all and trailed slime. Some said it had teeth the size of a colonist's forearm and that before the Wall was completed, it had broken into the Ararat and stolen human babies.

Pe-ying was terrified of the Drant. All the colonists were afraid of it, but she felt that her fear was the greatest of all. The Drant occupied many of her dreams, both sleeping and waking. She even asked her father, once, if the Drant could get inside the Wall.

“Those are just stories,” said Mr. Zhao, but he didn’t look as though he were quite sure that this was so.

Another time Pe-ying asked him, “Do you think it might be true, what they say of the Drant – that it sleeps during the day and cannot be awakened?”

“That’s what people say,” Mr. Zhao agreed. “But as I told you, there is no evidence that the Drant even exists. Earthlings have always found it necessary to invent fabulous beasts – dragons and yetis and gorgons and minotaurs. It is a curious habit of our species.”

Another curious habit of humans, of course, is the tendency to deny what they most fear. So it was with Pe-ying. She bragged to her friends that she wasn’t in the least afraid of the Drant, as if saying so would make it true, but she knew better, and so did her friends. They saw how she shuddered when the older colonists told stories of the terrible beast. Finally, Pe-ying’s friends grew tired of her boasting.

“If you aren’t afraid of it, then why don’t you go out and look for it?” one boy challenged her. “It probably doesn’t exist, anyway.”

Pe-ying couldn’t bring herself to admit to her friends that she had been untruthful, that she was more scared than all of them put together. But what if the boy was right? What if the Drant didn’t exist? If she could see for herself that it wasn’t out there, she would be free of it, free from fear. No more nightmares. No more beast haunting her thoughts. She made up her mind to go through the Wall some time during the day, when the Drant, if it existed, would be in its deep sleep.

All days within the domed Wall were calm and sunny, except for holidays, when the Ararat created storms for the sheer spectacle of them. So, one calm and sunny day, Pe-ying’s need to face and overcome her fears finally got the best of her. She donned a portable breathing apparatus and slipped through an airlock into the jungle. Doing so wasn’t forbidden. There was just no reason to do it and too many reasons not to. In fact, no one ever went outside the Wall unless they

absolutely had to, on orders from the Ararat to retrieve something valuable or to make some repair in the Wall's exterior.

Passing through the Wall was like stepping from daylight into twilight. The sudden change left Pe-ying nearly blind. She had to feel her way carefully in the darkness, keeping her eyes on the ground for fear of tripping. She could only imagine how dark it would be outside the Wall at night. Walking slowly, Pe-ying moved farther and farther away from the Wall until she could not sense it anywhere near her. She advanced quietly, her senses abnormally heightened by the thought of the Drant out there somewhere. She was much more frightened than she had thought she would be – almost too frightened to breathe – but the thought of turning back never entered her head.

A rustle in the leaves above startled her, and she missed her careful step, upsetting one of the small creatures on the ground below. It squealed in alarm and ran away. Pe-ying screamed and then clapped her hands over her mouth. It was then that she saw the Drant, lying in a bed of shimmering foliage on the forest floor, not ten yards from her. It was as massive and ugly as she had been told, and more horrible than anything she had imagined. It was covered not with horns but with coarse, brittle hairs that stuck out in all directions. Its small head tapered conically from a huge, ungainly, potbellied body that lay heavily upon the ground. Was the skin blue? In the twilight, she could barely tell, but she was reminded for a moment of the movies she had seen of the whales of Earth. Did it have eyes? She crept closer.

That's when the Drant's eyes opened and fixed upon her. She froze as, in a long-forgotten day, roadside deer had done when startled by headlights of a passing car back on Earth. That was when Pe-ying heard the voice. It wasn't a voice, exactly. It was like a rushing up from the soles of her feet and into her brain, a sudden filling of her being to the brim with empathy, with knowledge of this creature and its plight.

The Drant was communicating with her. How? She did not know. What she did know was that the Drant was sad, incalculably sad and more than a little scared. Its valley, its place of refuge for thousands of years, was being eaten away by a great domed monster that had arrived one day from space. Soon, the Drant – this creature far older than the Colony, older than any of the forest plants – would have to go away, would have to seek another valley.

Pe-ying wasn't really aware of how she arrived back at the airlock in the Wall. She had wandered back, she guessed, in some sort of trance.

Later, amid the familiar sidewalks, playgrounds, parks, lawns, schools, and houses of Colony 687, she would often look beyond the Wall and wonder about the Drant. Was it still out there, in the dark, tangled jungle? Had it left?

I'm still afraid of it, she thought, but I'm sorry for it, too. I am sorry that it was afraid of us, of me. But most of all, I am sorry that it has lost its home. " 

