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Spirostella According to Roger

By Leigh V. Salisbury

The following story is an attempt at a creative paper which seeks to illustrate how Greek and Latin word roots can be used to compose scientific names for biological entities. In the story our hero, Roger, has been “marooned” in a parallel universe by a defective *paracosmocentesiss*¹ machine—a device used to punch a precise hole into a parallel universe. In the months he has spent there, Roger has given appropriate names to the organisms he has encountered. The “PCCM” has been repaired from the Earth side, and an old co-worker comes through it to join him.

The electronic buzz-whirl of the PCCM woke Roger with a start, and he sat up in bed, trying to remember where he’d put the damned thing. He’d just pulled his pants on when someone walked out of his closet wearing full decontamination gear. The white helmeted figure stared in his direction, made a one-hundred-eighty degree turn and looked at the closet, then opened its faceplate.

“Nice, Rog. Four point seven billion dollars’ worth of research, and you turn it into a wardrobe.”

“John! Welcome to *Spirostella*²—say, what’s it been now, a year-and-a-half since I punched over here? Nice of you to think of me. John smiled uneasily. “Sorry about that—we had to wait for a part to come in. You named this place? *Spirostella*?”

“Yeah. C’mon, take that silly hat off, and I’ll show you around. I hope you wore a good pair of boots. We’ve got some pretty strange critters out here, and they don’t much like strangers. Wanna see my scars?”

Outside the cabin Roger stopped and pointed to a bunch of small, grass-covered mounds, each with a hole about four inches across at its center. At about ten-second intervals air blew out forcefully, making the grass flutter wildly around the perimeter. During the interim the blades drew toward the center, as if air were being sucked back down the hole. John nodded. “*Spirostella*—the ‘breathing planet.’ I see what you mean. So I suppose you have names for everything here?”

“Well,” Roger began, “I had to call them something, and they don’t quite fit into Terran classifications. Let’s start with the local flora, for example. I refer to one kind of usual group broadly as *mobilis herbae*³—the mobile plants. First, we’ve got *arboris volaticus*⁴—the winged trees. They don’t really move, per se, but my first impression was that they were animated . . .”

There was a loud cracking sound, and John looked up to see the top three feet of a tall tree breaking off and tilting toward the ground. Suddenly two fern-like branches flipped up and caught

the breeze, and the whole section of tree soared off into the distance. He gaped.

Roger grinned. “Now if that wasn’t perfectly on cue, I don’t know what is. You’ve just witnessed the unique seed-dispersal system of an *acopteron*⁵ tree—named for those winglike branches way up at the top. Pretty nifty, eh? Apparently that’s the only way they can spread themselves far enough apart to survive. The soil here isn’t very fertile, so that’s how they cope. And then there are the real mobile plants, like the *ambulofrutices*⁶—the walking shrubs. This is where things get weird. Look--see that red-leafed bush? *Erythrofrons frutex*⁷. Now, it sure looks like a bush to me, but I can’t explain its behavior, and I haven’t been able to catch one yet.”

John looked at Rog suspiciously. “Catch one?”

“Observe.” Roger picked up a stone and hefted it at the shrub about twenty feet away. There was a sudden spray of dirt, and the bush ran away on its roots—like an octopus in a cartoon. John made some inarticulate noise, and Roger huffed. “Makes landscaping kind of difficult, but it serves a purpose. Not only can they get up and move once they’ve depleted the soil in one place, but they can elude predators like the *symbionts*.⁸ They’re kind of an odd pair of animals who live off each other. One of them is an *herbivore*⁹ that eats these shrubs, but it’s not equipped to catch them, so it attaches itself to the second animal—which catches these shrubs, but can’t eat them. So get this—it chases down a bush, the *herbivore* eats it, then the hunter chomps down on him and sucks out some of his blood—its a *sanguinovore*¹⁰, honest-to-God!”

John was beginning to look pale, so Roger relented a bit. “Here. Let me introduce you to something a little friendlier.” He whistled sharply and a furry little animal came scampering out from behind the cabin, looking something like a ferret. “This is Patty—my house pet,” he looked down at the creature, which was now wrapped around his right knee, peeking up at an astounded John. “It’s short for *patellophile*¹¹, because this is his absolutely favorite position—I have to pry him off my kneecap every night. He even goes to sleep that way!

“At any rate, he’s one of the more normal animals here. There’s only one other one I’ve come across that resembles anything Terran, and I can’t say I’m thrilled about it. It’s some parallel-universe version of a skunk. I named it a *dysodiac*¹² because the varmint reeks to high heaven.” The two began to walk along a faint path through the grass as Roger continued his

narration. "Anyway, I'd rather show you some of the uniquely *Spirostellar* beasts. I'm sure we'll find one of the *bivertebrates*¹³ out here somewhere. They're very interesting—they actually have two distinct, separate spines running down either side of their . . . WATCH OUT!"

Roger yanked John to one side just as a large set of jaws shut where his thigh had previously been. The *patellophile* squealed, and all three of them scrambled hastily away from the tree where a well-camouflaged **thing** hung. John would have kept going, but Rog still had a hold on him. "Stop! Wait! Whoa boy—it can't chase us, these things move too slowly! Okay, calm down. You've just met the infamous *omniphage*¹⁴. I have yet to find any living thing that this puppy won't eat, given the opportunity." The scaly, brownish-green beast glared at them from where it had its thick tail wrapped around a tree trunk. It had no visible limbs.

"Luckily, these guys don't travel well—they kind of wiggle across the ground—or I suppose there wouldn't be anything left alive around here. Well, shall we move on?"

John took a deep breath and pulled himself together. "Of course,. Lead on, McDuff."

"All right, we were looking for a *bivertebrate*, and I think I've found one. Look!" Roger pointed down, and John looked up. "Roger. That's a rock."

"Ghotcha! That's a *pseudolith*¹⁵—cleverly pretending to be a rock! You see, it uses its two backbones to create an irregular shape, and combined with its markings and rough skin texture, it makes a perfect false stone. It can hide from its enemies and at the same time wait for insects to wander past for it to munch on."

John began to look more at ease. "Now that's kind of neat. Two backbones!"

If you think that's amazing, let's go see a *radiovertebrate*¹⁶!"

Roger led back up the path, skirting the sulking *omniphage*. "These things have multiple vertebrae that fan out from a central nervous system—kind of a hydra. This particular one I'm going to show you lives down in the tunnel system that connects those blow-hole mounds. I don't know what's down there to protect, but the *endopylars*¹⁷ won't let anything get in. That's why I call them the 'gatekeepers within'—kind of gothic, don't you think?"

They stopped by one of the mounds, and Roger tossed a small pebble down it. Immediately a snake-like head popped up and hissed, showing a mouthful of pointed teeth, then drew back into the ground. Roger peered in, then turned back to John. "I know it's all one creature because if you whack one, all the other ones pop out and make this hideous caterwauling." Starting to walk back to the cabin, Roger suddenly stopped. "Hey, I can go home now, can't I? Wow. Would I kill for a steak. A cow steak!"

"I'll bet. Say, what have you been eating here, anyway?" John asked.

"Oh, various roots and fruits, and quite a bit of *ornithosaur*¹⁸."

"What's that?" Some kind of half bird, half lizard?" John looked puzzled but willing to believe anything now.

"Well, no, it's just a plain lizard—looks kind of like an iguana."

"Then why an *ornithosaur*?" There was a note of disappointment in John's voice.

"It tastes a lot like chicken."

Notes

¹paracosmocentesis: <G *para*—beside, beyond; *cosmo(s)*—universe; *centesis*—surgical puncture.

²*Spirostella*: <L *spiro*—to breathe, blow; *stella*—star, planet.

³*mobilis herbae*: <L *mobilis*—mobility; *herbae*—green plant.

⁴*arboris volaticus*: <L *arbor*—tree; *valare*—winged, flying.

⁵acopteron: <G *aka*—point, tip; *pteron*—feather, wing.

⁶ambulofrutices: <L *ambul*—to walk; *frutex*—shrub, bush.

⁷erythrofrons: <G *erythro*—red; <L *frons*—leaf, foliage.

⁸symbiont: <G *syn*—together; *bios*—life.

⁹herbivore: <L *herbae*—green plant; *vorare*—to eat, devour.

¹⁰saguinovore: <L *sanguis*—blood; *vorare*—to eat, devour.

¹¹patellophile: <L *patella*—knee cap; <G *philia*—affinity for.

¹²dysodiac: <G *dys*—bad; *odia*—smell.

¹³bivertebrate: <L *bi(n)*—two, double; *vertabra*—joint of the back.

¹⁴omniphage: <L *omnis*—all, every; <G *phagy*—eating, swallowing.

¹⁵pseudolith: <G *pseudo*—false; *lith*—stone.

¹⁶radiovertebrate: <L *radius*—rays, spokes; *vertebra*—joint of the back.

¹⁷endopylor: <G *endo*—within; *pylaros*—gatekeeper.

¹⁸ornithosaur: <G *ornithos*—bird, chicken; *sauros*—lizard.

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