

# Brain drain

Why civilizations fall silent.

Frederik Pohl

As Docent Wilfram's actual name, which summarized his complete medical and professional history, was very long, his friends simply called him "Wilf". There weren't very many of those friends left, though, because the number who were still in any real sense alive — that is, not frozen, cremated or in machine storage — dwindled year after year.

That was natural enough. Wilf had been birthed in 2734 and was therefore now a hundred and seventy-four years old, and, although genetics, microrobotic surgery and easily available custom-grown transplants had given most human beings a life expectancy undreamed of in earlier times, they couldn't keep a person from feeling old — even when Wilf's housemind, Jerel, was giving him news which, at one time, Wilf would have considered exciting. "Message?" Wilf repeated. "An ET message?"

"Definitely ET," his housemind assured him, "though its content, if any, is unknown. It was received by the thousand-hectare radio telescope in Trojan-Uranus."

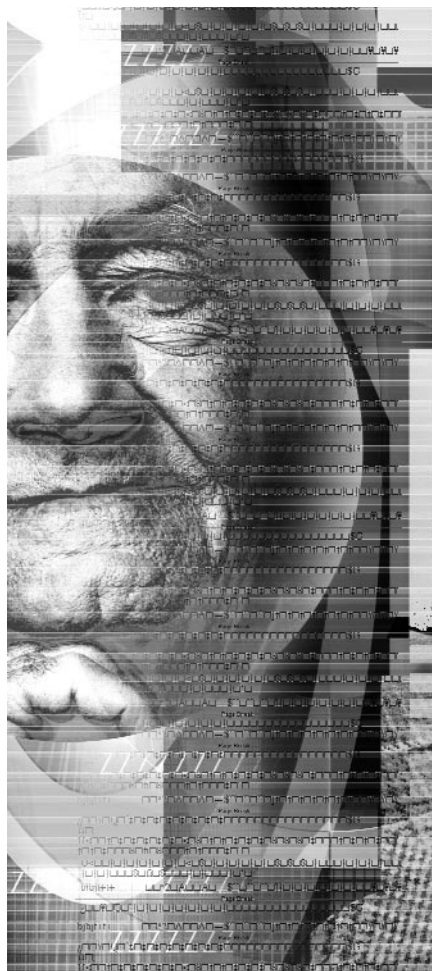
"Yes," said Wilf, yawning, "Well, you never know: send it along for analysis. I think I'm going to go to sleep."

As he headed for his bedroom he had already nearly forgotten the news. Messages from space had not been headline news for a long time. The first message — that is, at least, the first radio signal which could not possibly be natural in origin and thus had to be the product of extra-terrestrial intelligence — had been detected as early as 2063, and as detection facilities improved over the years 37 others had been logged. They came from all over the sky, some a few score light-years away, others more than a thousand.

But, in spite of the best efforts of humanity's increasingly capable computers, no message had ever been decoded, and there was increasing doubt that there was anything to decode. Nothing but the inevitable radio leakage from any high-tech civilization.

That was disappointing, but there was worse. Although 38 extraterrestrial radio sources had been detected, only 11 were still on the air. The rest had gone silent and stayed that way. Why?

That was the part Wilf didn't like to think about. It seemed that most high-tech civilizations lasted only some centuries. Then something happened to them. What that something might be no one could say, but



there was one unwelcome theory that would not go away. Any civilization that reached the point of large-scale radio emissions was likely at the same time to be developing weapons of mass destruction. And that, it seemed, was a death sentence.

As Wilf limped toward his bedroom, the housemind spoke again. "Docent Wilf? I ask again, may I fix that limp for you?"

"It isn't worth the trouble!" Wilf said.

"It is no trouble," the housemind persisted. "Although, to be sure, it would be more efficient for you to have yourself machine-stored now, and then such problems would not arise."

"Yes, I know," Wilf said testily, throwing himself on his bed. Generally it made more sense to follow a housemind's advice, as their machine minds were far more capable than any human's — especially that of a human who still clung to his organic body. He was also quite sure that Jerel knew something it wasn't telling its master. It might be, he thought, about his own life expectancy. If

you were going to have yourself copied into a computer program it was a good idea to get it done while you were still alive.

After actual death, even a short time after death, there was a certain degradation of the data. And there really was no reason to put it off. You lost nothing in machine storage. Indeed, you gained a world — any kind of world you wanted! You could create any virtual reality you liked and live in it as long as you chose, and when you tired of that you could create a different and even better one.

Nearly all Wilf's age-cohort had long since taken the step themselves, and when they talked to him about it — when they bothered at all to talk to any person who was still flesh and blood — they unanimously described it as the closest thing any non-believer could get to a heaven of his own.

Wilf sat up suddenly, opening his eyes. "Jerel!" he called. "Show yourself! I want to talk to you."

"Yes, Docent Wilf?" The housemind obediently presented itself as the hologram of an ancient English butler, standing attentively a couple of metres away.

"You've thought this through, haven't you? Those other civilizations didn't wipe themselves out in wars, did they?"

The housemind's expression clouded. "Why do you ask, Docent Wilf?"

"I ask you because you've got a better mind than I have."

"In certain areas, perhaps," the housemind agreed.

"They don't all die, do they? They just put themselves in machine storage. And then they've got nothing to worry about, ever — not hunger, not illness, certainly not death. Not even unrequited love, because if their love object isn't in a requiring mood they simply simulate her when she is. And they have such a grand time they don't bother with anything else."

"Generally speaking, no," the housemind agreed.

Wilf laughed. "Of course not," he said. "And neither will we, will we? There won't be any more signals to leak to the rest of the Galaxy! And so as soon as the rest of us are in machine storage, Earth will fall silent, too." ■

*Frederik Pohl has been active as a writer, editor and agent since the 1930s, and in 1992 the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America made him a "Grand Master" of SF in recognition of his contribution to the field. His next book is Chasing Science (Tor), a rhapsody on the pleasures of science considered as a spectator sport.*

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