

Tracking Moon

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 02 Aug 1997

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Alice Turner — 02 Aug 1997, 17:36

THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR DEATH AND OTHER STORIES AND OTHER STORIES is newly out in the US in a trade paperback. I had never read it before, though I have read some of the famous stories collected elsewhere, for instance the three famous Island/Doctor/Death stories and "Seven American Nights." But there's a great deal of meat in this collection, and I hope we can chew on it happily. I thought I might start things off with a discussion of "Tracking Song," not a famous story (or at least I'd never heard of it). It was published in 1980 in an anthology with a fairly significant title, IN THE WAKE OF MAN. Spoilers galore follow, natch.

SUMMARY

The format of "Tracking Song" seems to be completely conventional, the adventures of a stranger in a strange land trying to find his way home---just like Odysseus or Dorothy. The epigraph is from the Aeneid, which has the same structure, though in it the hero is trying to find a -new- home. This hero is known to us only as "Cutthroat," after a birthmark, and he appears to have been a member of an anthropological expedition studying a small planet just as its Ice Age is coming to an end. Apparently, he fell off the "Great Sleigh," the expedition's planetary vehicle, and, hitting his head in the fall, has lost his memory, though he retains much of his training, including the language of this planet—which has low gravity, two moons, remnants of a technological past and at least five humanoid species, all living on a primitive, tribal subsistence level. Or lower. All of these species serve as food for the others; the only other food sources seem to be small animals and vegetation that grows under the snow.

Cutthroat records his journal over 19 eventful days. He is found in the snow by members of the Wiggikki tribe, taller and stronger than he. He helps their women to kill a Lenizee girl for food, sees the giantess Ketincha (wife to Ketin), then joins the menfolk in a killing raid on the giant (apparently a different kind of giant) Nashwonk (Mankiller), who has been killed "often before." Though Cutthroat acquits himself well, he is turned out by the tribe because he has hair on his face and is therefore "not a man"—i.e. he's potential food, so this is a well-meant gesture. With a sail-powered sledge, he sets off westward on the well-marked track of the Great Sleigh, hoping to overtake it.

He next encounters the short and stocky Pamigaka tribe, which also recognizes him as from the Great Sleigh—which has laid some dietary strictures on the tribe. They attack another, somewhat effeminate giant, Mimmunka, with uncertain results; a man of the tribe dies and they prepare to eat him. Cutthroat, disturbed at this, leaves after spending the night, then picks up, along the track, Cim Glowing, a woman of yet another tribe, who is also trying to overtake the Great Sleigh after the death of her lover, whom she killed with her endieva wand, a futuristic weapon which may electrocute victims (she says it "poisons" them, but game it kills can be eaten). Cim slows down the sledge, which now seems to be only a short distance behind the Great Sleigh. Cim suggests that he may not be one of the off-worlders, but may only be dressed in their clothes.

That night, Cim is kidnapped by the Min, and Cutthroat is wounded in the chest. He must decide

whether to follow the Great Sleigh (rejecting Cim's suggestion, he now sees himself as one of its crew) or to go after Cim, and he does the latter, having had to destroy his sail to bind his wound. The tall, thin Min live in a huge storeroom in a cavern infested with humanoid vampire bats, one of whom tears Cutthroat's uniform. The Min area is filled with mostly broken ancient machines, one of which comes to life and finds some futuristic food cubes for Cutthroat. The Min have replaced many of their own body parts with machine parts (hello Jonas, hello Rose). Stone flowers lead to a ramshackle palace built of rubble, and before it a Min places a strange forked shaft that Cutthroat grasps. They take him, as a "perfect" man (Cim is not considered human) to their leader, a dwarf named Mantru (He Who Rules) who claims to be the only true human on the planet besides Cutthroat (the Min have not, apparently, encountered the Great Sleigh expedition). They suggest that Cutthroat is the sole survivor of an indigenous human village, and that he has the right to kill Cim, or anyone else with his staff.

The Min imprison Cutthroat and Cim beneath the throneroom and release the beautiful, graceful giant Ketin, hoping for a duel to the death. Instead, they join forces and escape through a trapdoor. Cutthroat orders the three machines that still function to dismantle the palace, provoking the dwarf to appear with another forked staff. They duel, and the dwarf dies (seemingly it is the staffs which duel rather than the men—Cutthroat feels that "the fighting of the staffs was taking place outside the ordinary world.") Cutthroat, Cim, Ketin and the three machines leave the cave and continue on their journey, Cutthroat riding on the head of the most talus-like of the machines. The machines die from the cold, one by one, and Cutthroat suffers the cold on his wound through the rent in his uniform. Ketin kills a girl of yet another species for them to eat, then leaves. A Pamigaka boy, Whiteapple, joins Cutthroat and Cim, but Cim turns back the next day saying "I cannot love you as a husband" and that they have "little chance" of finding the Great Sleigh. Then the Wiggikki Crookedleg joins them, with a sail-sledge and a bow. Cutthroat intentionally leaves the strange staff behind at the last camp. They eat the last of their food. Cutthroat sees something that may be a spaceship.

The snow is melting and they must abandon the sledge. When Cutthroat cannot walk further, the other two build a litter for him, but he drives them from him by pretending to be afraid of them, and they continue without him. He makes a little camp and the friendly beasts come out...and the Great Sleigh, having circumnavigated the planet, comes toward him. "Who is that tall man with you? I think he has...wings?"

COMMENT

Well, that last line will send Nutria into an eye-popping frenzy, I dare say. There's St. Michael atop the juggernaut of Mother Church, coming to scoop up the Pilgrim who can Progress no more toward his Heavenly Home in the spaceship. Hey, it could be an illusion, Ratty, a deathbed hallucination!

But who's to say that this isn't the right approach? Cutthroat, at first an innocent, and pliable to suggestion, behaves with increasing virtue: he chooses to save Cim, to befriend Ketin, not to eat girls (he relies on food cubes, I infer); he momentarily brings members of four different tribes who eat each other together. It's the cold, corrupt staff that kills the dwarf rather than himself, and he abandons that staff. Etc.

But, if you don't mind, I'd like to bring up some other things. (Sorry this is so long, but it's a long novella, and I wanted to provide a framework for a good discussion.) First, I'm interested in how Wolfe has taken all this John Carter of Mars material and put it in a modernist context. Ordinarily, I'd agree with many here that he usually takes Borges as the master when in this mode, but in this case I'd argue that it is Kafka. Cutthroat's pursuit of the Great Sleigh feels very much to me like K's attempt on the Castle...though Kafka never, ever would have handed us that Nutrified ending!

Would love to hear more in this direction.

Second, as always in Wolfe, the names are interesting. Some of them sound Northwest Indian or Inuit (like many of Le Guin's names), some of them sound Finnish (Wiggikki), and some Slavic Russian (Ketin, Ketinsha) and some just sound sci fi (Minshu). Cim is described, but I don't quite get it, and it's not in the OED. But they're all northern. At times I was reminded of Gerda's pursuit of little Kay.

Apologies to those of you who know this novella well. I read it for the first time this week, and I'm sure I've missed key clues.

-alga-

m.driussi — 03 Aug 1997, 20:11 · follows Alice Turner

Reply: Item #9835448 from URTN at LISTS.BEST.COM@INET00#

alga!

Wow, great stuff. First off, to add to your notes:

Re: Ice Age, it seems that the Great Sleigh-ers (heh) are involved in climate controlling terraforming operations with that orbiting solar mirror (which you identify as "something that may be a spaceship"). They are ending the ice age now by technological means.

Re: John Carter, yes, this planet could be Mars (those two moons and the lighter gravity), previously terraformed and then not maintained so that it slipped into an ice age. We don't see enough starscape to form much of an opinion (contrast with that other Wolfe story set on Mars, where the savages are going to sacrifice the hero when the blue/green star [i.e., Earth] rises).

Re: circumnavigation. It is a little bit more ambiguous than that, isn't it? I mean, Cutthroat sets out sailing after the Sleigh with the wind blowing from the west; i.e., he is going east, isn't he? Then in the end he looks to the west as the direction of the Sleigh and is surprised to see it coming toward him from the east.

Re: Le Guin echoes. I agree--part of it has to do with all that snow (LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS; PLANET OF EXILE) which also reminds me of Joan D. Vinge's SNOW QUEEN. And all the stone-age hunter gatherer anthropology. The Min theory of Cutthroat's origins is the Ishi scenario, which is, of course, the "K" of Ursula K. Le Guin. But I don't think I've ever seen a Le Guin work where there was such carnivorous matter-of-fact savagery, which reminds me of A VOYAGE TO ARCTURUS as well as Wolfe's "Hero As Werwolf" (among others).

Okay, now for my own impressions. Adjust automatic filter as necessary . . .

Narrator. Who is Cutthroat? Most characters in the story assume he is a Sleigher, aka a higher human (since every group considers itself "human"). Cim Glowing casts doubt, suggesting that he is a changeling, a beastman who found the clothes. The Min say he is like Ishi, last of his tribe. Cutthroat has many doubts himself, since if he was from the Sleigh then why didn't they send a rescue party?

Two options, it seems to me. First is the sleeping sailor from the Odyssey (was it?) who fell overboard in the night, drowning, and nobody knew (until later they saw his shade?). Second,

much more likely, is that he was killed and tossed overboard, either as a "sacrifice" (ala Jonah) or as a "criminal."

If he is dead, then this becomes another Wolfean "Occurance at Owl Creek Bridge." Which would go some lengths towards explaining the shamanistic death-voyage tone/timber/elements of the story.

Tribes. Who are these humanoids? No surprise that this story seems a lot like "The Tale of the Boy Called Frog" from the brown book. It is an animal fable with things turned inside out and backward.

I'm not sure about the Lenizee, who seem birdlike. But the Ketin are lions, the Nashhwonk are great deer like Giant Irish Elk (that "chair" weapon is for the antlers), Cim Glowing's unnamed people are bears (they fish), the Pamigaka are either foxes or cats (cache raiders), the Mimmunka is some kind of intimidator animal (scavenger), and, yes, you guessed it . . . the running singing hunters, the Wiggikki who first adopt Cutthroat, are wolves (just like the ones who adopted Frog).

This story showcases Wolfe's electrifying grasp of stone age sensibilities. According to Campbell et ali., the early hunters started getting guilty feelings about killing animals. Empathy. And fear of retribution from the animal "families." So the hunters developed ritual and taboo to pacify the animal spirits and to thank them for providing the meat to feed the humans. Later on, when agriculture came along, they did the same thing to pacify and thank the plants (think of all that grain god/human sacrifice stuff).

So here's this Cutthroat, and he's embracing the stone age sensibility (in a way that would make a Christian or a Buddhist or a Taoist, et cetera . . . proud) and trying to personally break the cycle of blood and death. He says words to the effect that, "These dwarves want me to kill you so that I will see a division of categories between `animal' and `human,' but I don't see that division now and I won't be their puppet."

That's enough for now.

=mantis=