

Ardis Dahl: American Monster

The Urth list — 5 messages, 4 voices, 07 May 2002

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Robert Borski — 07 May 2002, 04:34

It is only at the end of "Seven American Nights" that Nadan Jaffarzadeh is finally able to glimpse the totally-revealed body of his lover, Ardis Dahl, and this act in itself requires some trickery--Nadan must ignite an alcoholic drink with his laser pistol, viewing by the blue flames it generates her exposed glory. Far from enjoying the vista, however, Nadan deems Ardis a monster and kills her. But what exactly does he see that prompts this, and is it even valid? Quoting again from Kathryn Locey's NYRSF essay: "Nadan's last perception of Ardis is extremely suspect because he has seen her face and clothed body by daylight, and felt her in the darkness as they made love. What hideous deformity could she possibly have concealed from him?"

Indeed. On my first reading of "Seven American Nights" in 1978, I wondered if Ardis might not be a man. She's tall for a woman, and popular accounts from barroom anecdotes to movies like The Crying Game make it seem as if such sexual deception is at least possible, especially in the early stages of a relationship. However, in my readings since, I've abandoned this notion, not only because I believe Nadan would have discovered her concealed manhood before the above climactic moment, but also because of Bobby O' Keene's earlier-tendered remark, "Come and see me when you're ready for something more wholesome." Perhaps he means consensual male-male sex is more wholesome than inadvertent male-tranny sex, but I doubt it.

This led me to re-examine Locey's use of the term "hideous deformity." Because in fact Nadan never mentions anything about a literal deformity, although I suppose it's inferable enough given his reaction about how, contaminated by his contact with her, he can now never return "to corrupt the clean wombs of our enduring race" or even touch the miniatures of his heritage should his mission to retrieve them succeed. Plus we have the various deformed Americans Nadan has witnessed in his week abroad: hunchbacks, dwarves, clubfoots, a woman with supernumerary teeth, etc., etc. Still, given all of this, it's hard to imagine anything comparable--at least that would provoke as violent a reaction in Nadan as whatever he sees does.

I would therefore like to suggest something else to you. Is it possible that what Nadan actually notices by the ignited arrack is the burn caused by his own laser pistol and that Ardis Dahl is the werebeast he attempts, but fails, to kill on the night of the first egg?

Recall, for starters, that when Nadan goes out looking for Ardis's place of residence (for he's already come under her spell at the theater, where she's played Ellen in Gore Vidal's "Visit to a Small Planet"--note too how Nadan adjudges her to have a "wild and innocent affinity for the supernatural"), the moon is full and bright. Nadan senses something following him, although he also admits it might just be the effects of the possible hallucinogen-laced egg. Finding the home of Ardis's parents, Nadan knocks on the door, and is greeted by Ardis's shotgun-wielding father. Nadan devises a ruse about being lost and offers the couple a silver rial if they'll accommodate him with a bed and breakfast, but is refused, although Mrs. Dahl appears tempted. Claims Mr. Dahl, "I don't dare let a stranger in. Not with no one here but my wife and myself." But is he

really afraid of this benighted Persian, and enough so to spurn a silver rial? Or does he simply wish to protect the disclosure of his daughter's possible werebeast nature should she return? Possibly even the shotgun is meant to protect them from her--although given that he allegedly sells maps to the interior with its fabled hoards of treasure, perhaps he merely hopes to protect himself from thieves or brigands.

At any rate Nadan is about to leave (the Dahls having locked their door to him) when he turns and notices a creature on the very top of the Dahl residence. The creature immediately attacks him and Nadan fires his pistol at it. When Nadan comes to--for he's knocked unconscious by the falling creature--he's able to examine the beast, which he believes he's killed. "When I glimpsed it on the roof it had seemed a feral dog, like the one I had shot in the park. When it lay dead before me, I had thought it a human being. In the moonlight I saw it was neither, or both." In the first draft of my NYRSF essay, "Wolves in the Fold," I pronounce the beast a werewolf and will do so now again. But perhaps more saliently the details provided by Nadan to conclude his description of the monster are most curious: "It was a female, with small, flattened breasts still apparent on either side of the burn channel." But how would this story be any different if the werewolf was male? On the surface it wouldn't--unless Wolfe is trying to make the somewhat quixotic distinction that monsters come in both sexes. And notice the specific site and language Wolfe uses to describe the wound: a "burn channel" that runs *between* the breasts. Would such a channel (or its healing scar), nestled where it is, be detectable several days later in the dark by an importunate lover? A female colleague of mine with a zipper scar from heart bypass surgery tells me says it's quite possible, "depending on the nature of the foreplay, and perhaps even then," that such a scar would pass unnoticed. And we don't know how badly the beast is actually wounded or if laser burns cauterize the nerves so there's little post-blast pain. There's also an onomastic link between "burn channel" and Ardis, which derives from the Latin word for burning (ardent)--plus the laser link itself, the weapon revealing the result of its own earlier firing.

Nadan, of course, believes he's killed the creature, but when he goes back to see if he can find the body the next day he finds no trace. This may also be part of the romantic embellishment on his account, and though he persists in claiming he's killed the creature right on up until the journal's penultimate paragraph, he also has trouble shaking first impressions, calling the actor Bobby O' Keene Kreton all throughout "Seven American Nights." Moreover, in describing his reaction to the discovery of Ardis's secret, Nadan pens the following: "I now know that the thing I killed before Ardis's father's house is real." But how and why does he know this? What about Ardis leads him to conclude that the thing he "killed" is genuine? Is it the burn channel he finally sees between her breasts--even as he attempts to disassociate himself from bestiality by maintaining he killed the monster he now knows is real?

As the hallucinogen in the final egg begins to take its effects (and I do firmly believe that it's the sixth egg that contains the drug), Nadan sees what we might describe as the peri and the djinn: Ardis, small and bright, stepping from the candle flame, and a hairy face coming through the window--but both as dynamically linked as the single particle that may be either a positron or an electron, depending on its direction. And while in Nadan's heart he may prefer the peri version, it's a heart illumed with darkness now, and home to other things.

Robert Borski

Michael Andre-Driussi — 07 May 2002, 15:46 · follows Robert Borski

Robert Borski's heroine as werewolf theory seems very sound.

He wrote:

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FWIW, this has similarity to a bit in URTN, wherein Severian is attacked in the dark on the ship Tzadkiel. As no doubt everyone here recalls, "Idas" the albino (actually an undine juvenile) is the first assassin Severian discovers, but Gunnie-the-love-interest was another one, and Purn was the third (the one bitten). Point: Gunnie was the one who was burned when Severian fired his laser pistol against the assassins, and the burn covered her chest and abdomen.

=mantis=

David DiGiacomo — 08 May 2002, 17:55 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

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... in describing his reaction to the discovery of Ardis's secret, Nadan pens the following: "I now know that the thing I killed before Ardis's father's house is real."

If he had seen the laser burn, it would have been obvious beyond any plausible dissociation that he had **not** killed the thing earlier in the week.

Then there are the "few filthy rags of clothing" - Ardis would never have dressed that way.

What about Ardis leads him to conclude that the thing he "killed" is genuine?

I'm not sure, but I think he would have noticed a "blunt muzzle".

Michael Andre-Driussi — 08 May 2002, 20:44 · follows David DiGiacomo

David DiGiacomo quoted Robert Borski and wrote:

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You present your case well. It does seem odd, the disconnect between killed/not-killed and "gone."

Then again, I hope we can agree that there is some kind of linkage between Ardis and that werewolf which Nadan blasted. And that there were no remains of the werewolf when Nadan checked later--it was "gone."

Beyond that, we get into the murky realm of lycanthropy: transmitted by film, by books, and by history, we have various traditions. Some of them match up to each other, some of them are at odds with each other.

When Nadan fails to find remains of the beast, we are invited to think along two tracks: that the thing was imaginary (a hallucination from the LSD), or that the thing crawled away.

With Borski's theory in mind, it seems plain that the solution is a third way, a hidden fork in the fork of the path. The critter was killed, and being killed it disintegrated like a vampire with a stake through it. The either/or nature of imaginary/escaped gives way to something like "both": the creature was "imaginary" rather than corporeal as we know it, and it did vanish like a soap bubble popping.

I hope you can see where I'm leading with this. That Ardis might be physically sleeping in her room, or wherever, and her spirit-self werewolf goes out running around. (Like an Id-Monster, if you will.) The two are separate, but linked, such that when the werewolf gets lasered and implodes, Ardis gets the burn . . . even though she is physically nowhere near the place where the laser is used.

The werewolf is thus like a witch's familiar, in some senses.

What I have just described is not the standard wolfman of motion picture tradition, but I believe that it is supported in the older written tradition.

=mantis=

Sirius Fiction

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<http://www.siriusfiction.com/>

Roy C. Lackey — 09 May 2002, 20:12 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

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First, I would like to say that I'm glad to see Robert actively posting again, and look forward to more.

Second, as mantis has pointed out, David's arguments are valid. I have always been puzzled by the nature of Ardis's "deformity", if she had one. I concur with Locey that any significant defect could hardly have gone unnoticed during the course of their coupling in the dark, so her secret had to have been detectable only (or most easily) by sight. There must also be some connection between Ardis and the werebeast earlier killed by Nadan, but they do not have to be the same being. Ardis need only be the same type of creature.

Nadan spends two paragraphs relating Osman Aga's account of such a creature as attacked him, but does not then name it. By Aga's account, such creatures were the end result of genetic mutations caused by American scientific manipulation of the food supply, to keep food incorruptible as long as possible, and to reach market sooner. The werebeasts resulted from the genetic damage caused by the concentrated chemicals found in the human corpses which were being eaten by some people. So, the nature of the beast is that of some sort of ghoul.

On page 385 (Ace pb) Nadan calls the thing that attacked him a "druj". Druj means "lie" or "deceiver", and in early Avesta texts is a female personification of wickedness and evil thought to spread corruption in the world, inherently unclean. (Which is why Nadan viewed himself as unfit to lie with decent women or touch sacred works of art.) There is also a connection between the druj and corpses.

Nadan relates a dream in which he and Ardis are walking at night:

"One of the hideous creatures I shot night before last was pursuing us--or rather, lurking about us, for it appeared first to the left of us, then to the right, silhouetted against the night sky."

This implies that such creatures fly, as does the fact that Ardis "sprang up" when he lit the alcohol. Also, even a werewolf can't "leap" from a three-storied building without paying Newton his due, but a winged being could. I don't recall that werewolves can fly, but a similar American werebeast might. According to Aga's account, the type of werebeast that attacked Nadan had only been generated since the genetic pollution occasioned in America during the previous century. How can that fact be reconciled with the long-standing tradition of the garden-variety werewolf? I don't see how it can--probability is certainly against it, but perhaps Science, run amuck, has created what Fantasy only knew as nightmare, but with wings. In the antepenultimate paragraph of the journal, Nadan writes:

"Its [America's] eagle is dead--Ardis is the proper symbol of its rule."

In the same paragraph he refers to America as a "corpse-country". The sense of uncleanness he finds in Ardis is associated with corpses. Werewolves don't eat corpses, do they?

-Roy