

Short Story 65: Tracking Son

The Urth list — 4 messages, 2 voices, 08 Jun 2014

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Marc Aramini — 08 Jun 2014, 18:20

TRACKING SONG

This was published in 1975's *In The Wake of Man* and is included in *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories.*

Before we begin, we might as well look at Wolfe's words about this particular story in a Joan Gordon interview:

"A pivotal story for me is one in which I feel I have succeeded in doing well something I have never really done well before — fairy material in "Thag", a certain religious viewpoint in "Westwind", the use of second and third person in "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories", the progression from realism to fantasy in "The Eyeflash Miracles", even the primitive inventions no one ever actually invented (and which no one now notices) in "Tracking Song". Just as "Tracking Song" is about uninvented inventions of the stone age, "Straw" is about (partly of course) uninvented inventions of the middle ages.

"Tracking Song is a wolf totem story, by the way. The protagonist gets his original orientation from a wolf tribe, then lives in a world in which the roles of moose, lion, deer, mink and so on are taken by semi-human beings. Wolves are winter symbols, or course, and birds symbols of springs."

This statement vastly simplifies our guesswork about which groups are which, so I am going to actually do some basic interpretation of that in the summary. Various Urth List members in the past have speculated on the nature of the particular tribes cutthroat encounters, some erroneously, but with Wolfe's statement it is pretty easy to determine, given the female totem nature of the otter/mink, which tribes are which, even if it might be ambiguous on a read-through without that interview statement, and the Wolfewiki seems to be fairly accurate in this regard.

(Wiggiki: Wolves, Lenizee: Deer, Nashwonk: Moose or elk, Mimunka: predatory cat such as a lynx, Ketin: Lion, Cim Glowing and Fishcatcher: Mink/Otter, Pamigaki: Boars, the vampires: cranes/herons [they have blue eyes and are unlikely to be bats, and fish with one leg in the water])

SUMMARY:

DAY 1: Cutthroat, so called because of the red mark from ear to ear on his throat, is found in the wake of a Great Sleigh's passing by the Wiggiki tribe of hunters. He has a recorder he speaks into and the presentiment that someone may find him dead, "though I do not know why".

DAY 2: The day begins with the women bringing him possibly medicinal sustenance culled from the trees, and Cutthroat indicating he wants to contribute more food than he takes. He

familiarizes himself with the club-bow and is surprised at the conglomerate nature of the vegetation, in which multiple trunks join in a single top. He is deemed too young to hunt with the men, and goes to forage with the women. A screaming "girl" from a different tribe distracts them, and Cutthroat uses the clubbow to kill her, with mixed feelings about her beauty and animality. Ketincha, a giant lioness-humanoid, is angered that her prey has been taken from her, but does not attack. Red Kluy, a matron of the Wiggiki, indicates that Ketincha and her mate Ketin used to have a son, who has gone away (probably because he reached maturity and could not be part of his father's pride). Cutthroat eventually eats some of the meat, and realizes his facial hair is growing, and disappears to shave so that it does not give him away as significantly different.

DAY 3:

Cutthroat joins the men in a hunting endeavor to go after the large Nashwonk, who lives in solitary fashion. Cutthroat comes across the huge, long legged humanoid first, sitting in his chair, which doubles as a weapon with multiple sharp points tied together by "man" sinew. The Wiggiki and the Nashwonk Mankiller engage in combat. The leader of the Wiggikki hunting party, Longknife, manages to hamstring and incapacitate Nashwonk, who does succeed in crippling the Wiggiki Firerock. They succeed in killing the Nashwonk and creating a sled to transport his meat back to the tribe. Here a statement by Longknife presages the quest that will dominate Cutthroat's destiny: "after we crossed Nashwonk's path we had to go where he led." This is where Cutthroat begins to obsess about the Great Sleigh's path, with its crushed snow. Longknife indicates that Cutthroat came from that huge traveling vehicle. Longknife has a discussion prompting Cutthroat to leave so he is not eaten at this point which brings up the idea of laws, and the attitudes of the Great Sleigh as well.

"The people of the Great Sleigh do not agree, but by our ancient law, every meat may be eaten but man's meat — The great law is hunger — those who break it die." It is clear the people of the Great Sleigh have at least hinted to the Wiggiki to cease consuming other sentient meat. At this point Longknife posits that Cutthroat might be cousin to Ketin rather than a "man". Cutthroat bargains his share of Nashwonk's meat for a sail.

DAY 4: Cutthroat returns his clubbow and leaves. He estimates the Great Sleigh is 60 hours in advance and learns how to sail his sledge. It is mentioned that there are two moons in the sky and he digs a hole in the snow after midnight in which to rest.

DAY 5: Cutthroat almost freezes in the night and knows he must never sleep thus in the snow again. He finds plants under the snow on an open slope facing south. He cooks them using hot stones, but longs for fat. He runs into the short, porcine Pamigaka, who extend their curved blades in friendship so that he might teach them wisdom.

They take him to their home and indicate that they eat the prey of Wiggikki as the Wiggikki leave them behind in the snow. They serve the largest portion of a burrowing animal (the Pummanga) to him. They live in a brush lodge that Cutthroat deems less satisfactory than the round skin tents of the Wiggikki. Eggseeker, the chief Pamigaka, indicates that Cutthroat is of the sled, and that they all resemble the Wiggikki, but they are not cruel as the Wiggikki are. The possibly lynx-like Mimmunka attacks, bargaining for the weakest of the Pamigaka. He wields a polearm ending in cruel hooks made from ribs.

Here the idea of laws come up again, and Eggseeker mentions that it is their law to preserve their kind from the beginning. Eggseeker attacks and is mortally injured. A younger male named Whiteapple does not go after Mimmunka as he flees.

Whiteapple reveals the people of the Great Sleigh are letting everyone know about the changing temperature and used their technology that shows a projection of the future planet. They showed a future with the men of the Great Sleigh walking peacefully with the Lenizee and the Pamigaka, but they must not eat foods that are not commonly found, and endangered species such as a particular bird which will be disturbed by the climate changes must be left alone. Whiteapple wonders if the law can “reach behind itself” in culpability, since they have hunted those birds often. Eggseeker laments that he had not expected to die in front of a fire.

DAY 6: Cutthroat indicates Eggseeker died in the night and the cheerful mood of the tribe in anticipation of the funeral feast. Cutthroat leaves when they begin cutting up his body. He runs into Cim Glowing, a mink or otter semi-human, running along the track seeking the Great Sleigh. He elects not to pass her even though he feels he might catch the Great Sleigh, and notes the stick which she holds. She jumps aboard with him and reveals that she seeks it because her mate Fischcatcher is dead. When she comments on Cutthroat's strength in pushing the sled, he remarks that he was heavier once (gravity from a different planet, no doubt) She reveals that he looks a little bit off from the other people on the Great Sleigh due to his wide mouth and teeth, though perhaps it is just his expression — that he is more like one of them [the semi-human beasts].

Those of the Great Sleigh cured her mate Fishcatcher after she struck him in the face with her strange endieva wand (only agreeing to help because their own presence and the hope she had as a result was causing her torment). Yet no doubt in another cruel mating, she strikes him again and kills him, so Cim goes to be a slave and menial for the people of the Great Sleigh. She is named after something that blows from tree to tree “like a soft star” by her mother, according to her story. Cutthroat speculates he would have overtaken the Sleigh if he didn't pick up Cim. She kills some fish by placing the wand in the water. [While she claims it is poisoned, things killed by it are soon safe to touch and eat, and speculation that it is electrical in nature has been raised, though this does not fit well with Wolfe's statement about Stone Age weapons.]

DAY 7: He notes that Cim rekindles the fire several times during the night. Both moons are in the sky when he goes to get more wood, and upon his return he sees a group of shadows abducting Cim. He strikes one only to realize he strikes metal, and is struck down. He is injured in the chest and reposes in the snow for several hours, though he thinks it was “only something like the blow from a whip or the sting of an insect”. He notes that whatever injured him did not exit his body. He decides to chase Cim over the fear that he has been exiled from the Great Sleigh or stolen those clothes. He takes Cim's endieva wand, the most puzzling of the semi-human weapons on the planet made of wood on the handle with a striking end that is “black, with eight or ten stubby projections like thorns, which are nearly white”.

DAY 8: Here Cutthroat may lose track of time because of the lack of clear day and night. He relates that he killed a snow monkey with the wand by hitting it, and it took about half a minute for it to seize up and die. However, he is still able to eat it. He follows the trail of the kidnappers into the crevice of a cliff. The air in the cave grows gradually warmer until Cutthroat opens his coveralls. He notes that he feels closer to the Great Sleigh — no doubt because the atmosphere and temperature are similar. He encounters the vampires with their meter long wing spans and fights them off with the wand, but his coveralls are ripped along the right forearm. They are described with long webbed fingers, long legs, dark blue eyes, and cruel pointed teeth. They stand on one leg and grab fish with the other, leading me to believe that they might be closer to herons or cranes than bats.

DAY 9: Cutthroat notes the underground towers and buildings with no walls or roofs, skeletons

of metal. The floor is composed of smooth shingle and the buildings exude light. He encounters silent machines. The towers seem to have grown from the floor organically. It is clear that the decay is vastly ancient, with even metal rusting away unless it is of a very stable alloy. He enters the skeleton of a building and finds a machine balancing on wheels with hooked and toothed hands, and it responds to him, and it speaks the same language he uses, though it has, as Cutthroat explains, "complexities in the pronunciation of certain words that I will not try to reproduce." Cutthroat says it does not seem strange to him to talk to a machine, though he knows Longknife would be terrified — further indication that he truly does belong with the advanced people of the Great Sleigh.

He asks how long it has stood there and for food. The machine picks him up and takes him, scaring a vampire in the process. When the food storage unit fails to admit Cutthroat, the machine rips its door open. He retrieves a box of white cubes meant to be dissolved for nourishment and returns to the crevice where he spent the previous night.

DAY 10: By far the longest and most eventful entry, Cutthroat begins by noting that he has three of the machines by the end of the day. He names the first machine Roller and begins the day by descending to encounter one of the creatures that took Cim. The creature is partially machine, and the endieva wand has no effect on it until he grazes the fleshly cheek, at which point the creature's eyes lose focus and the "human" part dies. The machine part continues to scrabble after him, reluctant to die. Cutthroat leaves and, hot from the struggle, slips his body out of the coverall on top to cool off. He claims this makes the cave comfortable and "now I believe this was extremely important" - probably because it makes Mantru fail to realize that he is from off- world and the Great Sleigh, seeing him without the atmospheric suit covering him, making Mantru respond differently to him.

He soon notices that the ground he walks upon is damp (is this due to his biological presence free from the coveralls, or simply because the Min wash it and decorate it with stone flowers at Mantru's bidding?). Only the street is humid in that way, and he notices "kluy" lying on the street. There are more stone decorative flowers on this street, and he goes to a different street to see that it has not been washed, and there are no flowers there. In front of him, he sees one of the half-mechanical Min lurch out of the building and place a pole with parallel horns in the center of the street. He takes up the staff, which feels as if he had touched a snake. He resists the urge to drop it and believes that if he had he would have been killed.

The Min come out en masse and prostrate themselves before him. They take him to a new building made from the salvage of the towers, with spiny turrets and balconies. The Min indicate they are taking him to the place of purity, and he questions whether they do not consider themselves perfect. He then realizes that they might be the remnants of men. They ask if he knows of any women, indicating that Cim Glowing is not a human woman. He meets the fat dwarf Mantru in his cushioned throne room with Cim chained to his chair.

He notes that Cutthroat will die of a chest wound, and the Min offer to treat him. The dwarf tells them to take and treat his wound and let him know when Cutthroat dies. Cutthroat insists on taking Cim, and the dwarf allows it. The Min indicate that they believe one of his lungs is punctured and offer to replace it with a mechanical one. Here Cim says, "I think there used to be far fewer of them — but they divided themselves and filled the gaps with those things that are unliving," which the creature denies.

The Min tell Cutthroat they bow to Mantru because they believe him to be the last man, but Cutthroat asks how they do not know if a group of true people live outside. Here Cutthroat knows there is something behind his amnesia, but the Min speculate that he grew up in an isolated valley and watched everyone die "and knew that when the last was gone you would be

alone, ringed by the beast men who grub roots or gorge themselves on blood. And at length, when that day came, your mind failed you, and you wandered away from your valley and the old woman dead by her fire. Then the Wiggikki found you. Now you are happy, because you see no difference between the beasts and yourself. But we will make you whole again.” [This is implausible for a host of reasons, including his Great Sleigh equipment, knowledge of being heavier, and a whole host of other reasons including his knowledge of what things like trees should be].

Here the Min indicate Cutthroat has moral force over the beasts, and Cutthroat denies it. The Min want to heal Cutthroat's perceptions of his equality with the beasts, so they take him to battle the lion Kettin.

However, they converse rather than battle. Ketin has heard of him from a victim he calls “friend”, and as Ketin approaches to attack, Cutthroat warns him of his weapon and the plot to make him see Cim and Ketin as different from himself. Cutthroat knows there must be a trap door in the ceiling for Mantru's amusement to cast those beneath him into a pit to do battle, and declares the place “pretentious, unplanned, seemingly built on whim, of parts stripped from better buildings put up long before it. Childish.”

Here Cutthroat notes that the semi-humans walk on the side of the rooms and the humans like Mantru and he walk in the middle. They climb into the throne room from the opening in the ceiling, Ketin aiding them. They go to look for Ketin and Cim's clothing. They escape into the city and the Min do not pursue them. Cutthroat realizes that the city is a storage facility with the builders once living on the surface. He finds Roller again and orders him to find more working machines. The two he finds are soon nicknamed Dragon and Bug. He sends them in to disassemble the dwarf's castle and find clothes. The Min bargain with him to stop the deconstruction. Here, Cutthroat goes against Cim's agreement with them, saying “She is an animal — her word is not even binding on herself, much less on me.” Mantru arrives and orders the machines to stop: “We are the only ones left — you should not have tried to destroy my home.”

Cutthroat voices his displeasure at being set up to fight Ketin, and Mantru claims his vizier was behind it, though they knew Cutthroat could kill Ketin easily. Here Mantru stutters in his desire for the future, and simply says that he hopes a human woman will be brought that they can share. He notes that the beasts are becoming more human.

Here Cutthroat challenges what the dwarf wants (possibly to be fixed or to see the return of those who have gone) and Mantru says, “If you laugh at me — I will kill you.” He wants to crush the beasts and erect new cities to the stars. At this point Cutthroat pulls up his tunic and the sight of it angers Mantru, thinking that he is being abandoned by those he has hoped and waited for. He attacks, and their staffs seem to telescope and intertwine. Cutthroat notes the cold — probably because it is powered by his body's own energy. His staff kills the dwarf and drains Mantru. Cim and Ketin do not see the staves telescope, merely the two men pointing at each other with them. The Min will build a tomb for Mantru.

They flee the city and return to the outside, riding the machines. He orders the machines to close the cave behind him. Ketin says that he will only follow their quest for the Great Sleigh to kill food for them.

Cutthroat finally realizes that when he speaks into the device he is communicating with the Great Sleigh. “I do not understand why you will not speak to me, but it is enough to know that you are there.”

DAY 11: Cutthroat dreams of being injured by the Min's rocket and when he awakes the machine Bug no longer functions. Ketin leaves to hunt for them after they find the track of the Great Sleigh. He brings back a tall beautiful woman for them to eat and wants none for himself. The hole in Cutthroat's suit from the "vampire" bite allow cold into the entire suit and this exacerbates his side wound.

DAY 12: Ketin is gone and he hears the sounds of the Wiggikki tracking song, though sung by another band. He cannot run as fast as he did due to his injury. Cim eats the woman's leg, but Cutthroat lives off the cubes taken from the city. She praises his knife.

DAY 13: Roller and Dragon freeze and cease functioning. The Pamigaka Whiteapple joins them. People of the tribes are talking about the quest of Cutthroat (supposedly followed by monsters — the machines) for the Great Sleigh and he has followed them. Cutthroat hears the someone walking in the night and keeps his weapon nearby, though it is only the Wiggikki Crookedleg. He hears breathing through the black box, and wonders, "Am I being tested" If I pass, do the right thing, if only once, will you talk to me then?

DAY 14: The day seems subconsciously significant to Cutthroat. He was plagued with terrible dreams of killing the Min with the endieva wand and being hailed as king. In the dream he struck over and over but the Min would not die. "I was frantic and ashamed, guilty because I was killing someone who only wished to be my friend — yet, at the same time, I wanted him to die at once so that no one need know." He realizes that the Great Sleigh is picking up speed. He tells Cim and Whiteapple to go alone, but they refuse, and Whiteapple forages for herbs so they can eat.

In the night Cim talks into the black recorder and says that she loves him, but not as she could love Fishcatcher, and that she does not wish to waste her life chasing the Sleigh if they cannot overtake it soon, following too far where her rivers and lakes will be gone from the possibility of return as the tracks fade behind her. She leaves in the night.

DAY 15: Cutthroat realizes Cim is gone without a struggle and has taken the endieva wand. Cutthroat speculates that the power of the staff has made him weak, that it draws from some kind of vital life force and that this is responsible too for Mantru's twisted small shape. Crookedleg comes and Cutthroat is very pleased, though he only spent three days with the Wiggikki. He reports that Cim was weeping as she left, and this causes Cutthroat to wish her well. They proceed with Crookedleg's larger sledge.

DAY 16: Cutthroat calls this day the happiest of his life, probably because he left the staff weapon behind.

DAY 17: In light of the increasing warmth, Cutthroat and his group continue and have a feast of the small cubes, herbs, and a snow monkey. When he cannot sleep, Cutthroat goes outside and sees "a tremendous silvery cloud — blotting out the stars — a reflector of bright, finely divided metal dust wrapping the night side of the world. The false sun is the reflection of the real sun", reflecting its light back to the planet.

DAY 18: The temperature is above freezing, and they eventually abandon their sledge. The water is rapidly melting, and Cutthroat tries to explain to his companions what is going on.

DAY 19: Cutthroat gets Crookedleg and Whiteapple to go forward without him by showing fear that they will eat him, though they have no intention to do so. He wants them to reach the Sleigh and tell them of him, which will be "the next best thing to having overtaken [it himself]".

He sees the false reflected sun lying on his back. He also sees something large coming, and finishes his narrative with "I know who you are now. This small planet is round, and you have come back, and the time for talking into this black box is over. I am going to talk to you face to face. Who is that tall man with you?" I think he has — wings?

DISCUSSION:

PROBLEMATIC NAMES: The names of the tribes are a headache to some degree — some seem culled from various Native American and other languages, but there seems no solid "meaning" attached to the majority of them in a way that seems unusual for Wolfe. For example, Ketin is Kurdish for fall, but a random Kurdish word seems almost coincidental. The others look Native American but are perhaps pulled from no set uniform linguistic system. (Nash wonk appeared in a translation of the psalms as, I think, He hath, but I am uncertain, and Pami and gaka signify "who" and "wings" in different dialects, little of which makes cogent sense and, I think, might justly be called reaching).

Individual names are much more easy to discuss, some obvious and some based on geology, with unusual ones like Flashing Aa indicating a form of basaltic lava rock or the name Firerock (problematic names include Red Kluy and Cim. Kluy are the stone flowers found underground — is that another mineral name like Firerock and Aa?) Incidentally, the cooking stones might perhaps be similar to charcoal in their properties, and it seems that the Kluy flowers underground might contribute to the warmth underground, given the heating and cooking properties of these stones throughout the story

THE IDENTITY OF CUTTHROAT:

Since Cutthroat begins as a cipher, it seems that it is worthwhile to touch on who and what he is. Every tribe accepts him almost as one of their own at first, especially the Wiggikki. It is only when he grows facial hair that they realize he is not just a juvenile of their tribe, but they still warn him to leave. In light of the scar on his neck, there have been several explanations posited for his amnesia. Since this is a totem story, it certainly plays with some Native American ideas. One possible translation for the Sioux tribe can mean "cut-throats", though it is also claimed that "little snakes" is another acceptable translation. I really don't feel that Sioux history casts any light on what is going on in the story, so we will leave this as a vague association, though perhaps the Sioux Uprising is the most well documented occurrence in our history of the tribe.

Back to the story, one of the first things to consider, from his name, is that Cutthroat has actually been cast out as a criminal, Cain style, from the Great Sleigh. Borski's **Long and Short of It** spends most of its focus on "Tracking Song" on this feature, indicating that he comes from the eastern lands (east of Eden) and ponders the possibility that he has been cast out as a criminal, then drawing parallels with the mark on his neck with the mark that informs biblical people to not kill Cain lest vengeance be revisited upon them seven fold. This does resonate with the idea that in the event that an "enchanted person" is killed, the enchantment will "flee up the weapon" to inflict the killer. Borski reads the final winged man as the guardian to the Garden of Eden, keeping the once-murderous Cutthroat from his earthly paradise. (Borski makes much of the resemblance between Ketin and Cutthroat, according to the Wiggikki, but does not mention that the Pamigaka note his [and all inhabitants of the Great Sleigh's] resemblance to the Wiggikki — perhaps because all of these tribes are "semi-human" at this point — they see the echo of humanity in Cutthroat). Despite these narrative resonances with the story of Cain, Cutthroat's innate behavior is to shun consuming flesh and to reconcile the different tribes as he casts off weapon after weapon, so I have never considered this the best fit for his character. However, he does dwell on the guilt of killing several other semi-humans over the course of the narrative in his dreams, living them over and over in dreams, and perhaps this

is indicative of some form of guilt, and does ponder if this is a test or he is a criminal. Cutthroat deeply regrets the murders that he commits through necessity over the course of the story, yet Borski's schema rather precludes the idea of redemption. (I do think he is undergoing a test, but not necessarily HIS test).

What of the scar? He resembles the Wiggikki according to both the Pamigaka and Cim Glowing, and the Pamigaka further assert that ALL the "men" of the Great Sleigh resemble the Wiggiki, leading some Urth List speculation to posit that Cutthroat is still below humans and is a raised version of the domestic dog. (Yet as already said, to the Wiggiki he brings to mind the lion Ketin). One explanation posits that "Tracking Song" is a retelling of *The Call of the Wild*, with thematic inversions (of course, we know the thematic reversal already exists in London's own *White Fang*). (This conclusion would indicate that thus those who run the Great Sleigh are semi-human dogs while the very tall man with wings is the only true human/post-human). I do not feel that Cutthroat's universal initial acceptance as human jives very well with this approach. Perhaps his features and face were modified slightly to wolf-like semi-humanity, however, possibly explaining the scar — though not a good explanation.

Call of the Wild features a dog being called to the bestial savagery of the natural world in becoming a wolf, and *White Fang*, its opposite, shows a wolf approaching domestication. The cold setting, the noose around the neck of the dog (the mark around Cutthroat's neck), a pack of wolves bringing down prey, and several other resonances have been explored before on the Urth List. (Matthew Groves delineates these narrative connections here: <http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/2007-June/007757.html>). This reading of Tracking Song shows a progression away from animal patterns into humanity as Cutthroat leaves each tribe and also abandons their weapons, finally giving up even the weapons of "true" men (It also shows a progression from tools of violence to abandoning them).

Taking it even further, Michael Andre-Driussi at one point speculated that our narrator might be less than human himself, but closer to human than the other animals (who all consider themselves somewhat human anyway). One line of speculation makes much of his resemblance to Ketin and the statement Cim makes that Cutthroat could be one of the native semi-humans rather than a member of the Great Sleigh. It seems unlikely that the Great Sleigh has taken one semi-human sample, the child of the lion, and altered it, given all the facts that Cutthroat subconsciously remembers about being heavier on another world (higher gravity) and how trees in reality were different than his ideal understanding of trees. I believe the child of Ketin simply had to leave at maturity to become nomadic, insufficient to challenge his father, as male lions must at maturity.

If Cutthroat is an emissary, a blank slate whom the people of the Great Sleigh are using to test if there is any chance that their creation is "good", then his amnesia is perhaps cultivated to see how the tribes will treat someone who has no knowledge of the world. He has the tools necessary to record his experiences and live, but no context at all. The test Cutthroat ponders might not be his test at all, but that of the people he encounters.

My own conclusion is that he is meant to be a mirror, probing the population of the planet for the recolonization of true humans, perhaps but not necessarily altered surgically to remove conscious memories and slightly modify his features, but nevertheless he still grows facial hair and has the means to remove them as well as a device which he intuitively understands has some two way functionality for communication with those in the Sleigh. They precede him and he then follows to see if the natives are following the "laws" given by the Great Sleigh.

The identity of the tall man with wings: his height jives with the height of the natives of the planet, and the turning to spring perhaps do indicate the time of the bird-man, and in light of

the fact that Cutthroat knows the people of the Great Sleigh but not the tall man, it seems that he could be the new native species symbolizing and suited to Spring. However, he could just as easily be like a post-human angel a step above all that has come before, towards a transcendent future.

THE SYMBOLIC QUEST FOR THE UNKNOWNABLE/REDEMPTION

Cutthroat spends all his time chasing the Sleigh, and at times working with those around him while dwelling on those he was forced to destroy. He casts aside the weapons one by one, injured and ailing, until he sends the semi-humans forward to meet the Sleigh without him, accepting his fate. It is only at that point, against all narrative logic, that the Sleigh catches up to him. Is this a metaphor for the spiritual world, chasing an impossible ideal only to have it inexorably catch up with you and appear from nowhere when life is done? It also seems that this works with the silent nature of the Deity in our world: laws clearly delineated to those who came before, but we ourselves never get to see these miracles and instead, if we are so inclined, chase the spiritual trail like a chimera, praying at times to a completely silent God, when the only answer (whether we can comprehend it or not) might come in death when we can go no further down the path.

From a narrative standpoint, was Cutthroat supposed to follow the Sleigh?

In chasing the Sleigh, has he unconsciously eliminated a feasible meeting point? It is possible that he has abandoned his unknown mission, and that the Sleigh might have picked him up (say, after 14 days) if he did not stray so far from its natural path? Or does his excitement at the 14 days resonate with the artificial warming satellite in the sky and its activation?

In allegorical terms, the theme of brotherhood and understanding and a putting aside of weapons and a cutthroat mentality are obvious, but are Cutthroat's distractions in seeking out Cim and descending for three days into the abandoned city necessary or extraneous and interfering?

THE TERRAFORMED PLANET

First we might as well get the basic SFnal idea out in the open: Cutthroat was once heavier, has superior technology, speaks the language, is surprised by the trees on the planet but understands the idea of trees, and there is indication atmospheric experiments are being used on the low gravity planet to heat it from a cold wintery state to something more tolerable to humanity. I feel that just as basic animals were raised to sentience in "Sonya, Crane Wessleman, and Kittee" and "The Hero as Werwolf" through genetic manipulation, these tribes are exactly the same: terrestrially earthen in nature, but modified "up" in the image of man as Kittee and the dog policeman were in their respective Wolfe stories. They all speak a slight variation of the language Cutthroat knows, and he understands intuitively how to use his advanced technology, and even believes eventually that those on the Sleigh are listening to his reports. His strength and shorter stature from growing up on a higher gravity world certainly assure us that he comes from the Sleigh and was probably sent to observe how the tribes would react to a man. The other possibility is that he was intentionally exiled for some transgression, but his intrinsic actions lead us to believe that Cutthroat is misnamed. The creatures are taller in all probability from being raised on this low gravity environment.

THE TOTEM PROGRESSION:

As Wolfe said, this is a totem story beginning in winter with the wolves who hunt as a pack, but who accept Cutthroat as one of them, albeit a child. They use the clubbow to hunt, with the women gathering the strange flowers under the snow, and this system of choice meat being given to the most successful hunter does not have the class stratification we see in the later

boar/Pamigaka people, who first apportion food to esteemed guests and those of high social class, with social pariah's getting little, as well as little protection from the others. We might as well look at the basic associations of these animals, since Wolfe brings it up in his Gordon interview.

First, the Wiggiki — he begins by being accepted as one of the pack, and the wolf totem implies being guided or misguided by instinct. As Gene claims, it is a winter symbol. It also indicates the need for freedom and a lack of trust in someone or yourself. Once again I could find very little clear derivation of the words, but the tracking song is repeated towards the end of his search, the same song from a different tribe.

The Wiggiki consume a deer, the Lenizee. The totem deer invokes gentleness, innocence, and vigilance, with the ability to change directions and regenerate. This sets Cutthroat on a different path to some degree. The female lion appears here, and the lion presages both strength and a threatening event, which will be repeated with Ketin later as they forge an alliance under the throne room of Mantru rather than kill each other.

After this the Wiggiki hunt down the Nashwonk, with its long legs and branching chair weapon, like a many pointed antler. The moose supposedly signifies movement and acknowledges truth, and involves identity. Its crushing power changes Firerock to Crookedleg, and after this Cutthroat must leave the Wiggiki because of his facial hair, which he has tried to conceal until this point. (The moose may also represent the equinox, where the day and night are equal).

After this he encounters the more rigidly structured pigs or boars, the Pamigaka. Boars can indicate organization, endurance, and self reliance. Their social structure is different than the Wiggiki, but more fair than the tyranny of Mantru and his Min, who completely disregard the beasts as far inferior to human.

When he encounters Cim Glowing, as a mink or otter, she represents the feminine principle and guidance, togetherness, and playfulness. Cim comes from the water. However, in reality minks are brutal in their mating, and her repeated striking of Fishcatcher with the endieva wand, which she calls "poisoned" is perhaps motivated by their brutality towards each other. She eventually returns to the water before she forever risks losing her natural environment.

The warm cave begins the progression to encountering both high technology and a debased remnant of humanity, and his orders to the machines are to dismantle the social structure Mantru has created with his half organic and half mechanical (or mineral, I suppose) "Min". (Sean Whalen once posited that this story of the Min echoed the Native American myth of a bear living in a cave with half its body made of flint, and that they were thus bears, though I find it perhaps more thematically appealing if these are minimized false men as their name phonetically implies, becoming less and less human as the other animals have become more and more human — they do not seem to be part and parcel of the beasts that Mantru so resents). The vampires Cutthroat encounters in the cave have blue eyes and stand on one leg to fish, and seem in that regard more birdlike, approaching the spring totems that Wolfe spoke of in the Gordon interview. Indeed, the cave is warm to the point of making Cutthroat's atmospheric suit superfluous and uncomfortable. I think they are more like herons or cranes, associated with a lesson in self reliance, but herons are also associated with the underworld.

Finally, we end with a Pamigaka and Wiggiki tribesman unified to go forward without Cutthroat, who has even gotten the cooperation of the lion to hunt for him. This unity leads to the final angelic vision of the Great Sleigh and the tall man with wings, both the spring totem symbol and the rather Judeo-Christian image of the higher world combined in a final incredulous observation as Cutthroat knows that the time for talking into his black box has ended, and that he can speak

with those he has sought in vain face to face.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

The Aeneid

The opening poem is from the Fifth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, which, as we know involves a long quest to establish a new homeland to the disenfranchised losers of the Trojan War:

Now is the seventh winter since Troy fell, and we

Still search beneath unfriendly stars, through every sea

And desert isle, for Italy's retreating strand.

In context: the goddess Iris descends during games being held at Sicily and takes the guise of the mortal elderly Beroe to stir up the women, tired of traveling endlessly, and declares that it is time to establish a new city and for them to stop searching, that the remnants of Troy have wandered too long. She incites them to grab brands and begin burning the ships, and they recognize that she is too strong to be the mortal woman Beroe.

Since the ships are lost, save four, Aeneas must leave many of his people there in Sicily to establish a new city. Perhaps this echoes Cutthroat descending to the lower species and being accepted as one of them as man prepares to make his new home here on this planet. Of course, he also seeks after the Sleigh interminably in much the same way those ships of the quote sought Italy's retreating strand, and in the same way that the machines, the min, and Mantru are waiting for something which may never come. It could very well be that the goddess' masquerade as a "lower" being is echoed as well.

CONCLUSIONS

I feel that "Tracking Song" is a theme story that can be extrapolated a bit in several directions. First we have the basic facts: an amnesiac in an atmospheric suit is dropped on a cold planet with a one way communicator to his ostensible origin point. He immediately feels that "if someone comes for me, and finds me dead, he will understand. I feel that someone may, though I do not know why." In other words, his innate understanding of his mission is one tantamount to a suicidal one. The Sleigh is going around indoctrinating the various tribes and testing the idea of men returning and walking among them in harmony, as well as instructing them on how to deal with the coming ecological changes, so they have left a "guinea pig" behind to see how he is treated. Every tribe/group speaks the same language and has a similar body language for ascent, the touching of the chin, as does this man, nicknamed Cutthroat because of the scar on his neck. They have laws in place in addition to the new instructions from the Great Sleigh, and these laws probably originated with those who raised each tribe from animality in the first place.

By the end, it is clear that the machines respond to Cutthroat as a true man, as they do to the aptly named dwarf "Mantru" — or "man true", though he has been twisted by his use of the staff's power, according to Cutthroat's speculation. Thus, debased as Mantru is, he is not someone that has been manipulated genetically from animality but a true descendent of man. Cutthroat is the mirror through which the masters on the Sleigh can look at the planet and see if their creation is "good".

RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS:

At one point Damien Broderick speculated that the significance Cutthroat felt on the 14th day echoed the 14 stations of the cross, with a piercing of the suit on the ninth day echoing the piercing of the side at the 9th station (though in reality that occurs on the 8th day), etc. However, the narrative continuing past this point to 19 days problematizes this association. His conciliatory efforts between the different tribes seems to portend a united effort for the future: the different semi-human tribes are banding together to live under the law and help one another, seeing all the different species as “human”.

He does descend into the cave for three days before sealing it behind him.

I do feel that the metaphor for a life of seeking the higher is pretty clearly implicit in the quest of Cutthroat for the ever retreating Sleigh — he cannot catch up with it in seeking it. Beginning life as a blank slate, he comes to understand nature and predation, the psychology of a hunting group, the structure of classes, the totalitarian whims of a pathetic ruler, all while seeking his ideal. His feminine ideal seems to have a common goal for a time, but ultimately does not persevere to the Sleigh. Only when he sends others forward and abandons himself to never reaching his goal through death does he find it — much as a person might search for answers all their lives only to have them forever beyond their reach, though at the end it is the cycle of life continuing and death that finds them individually.

It is clear from the treatment Cutthroat receives that cooperation amongst all these tribes is possible and perhaps likely, and that they will welcome humans as one of their own. Spring has come to the planet — beneath the caves it is clear that the suit he wears was designed to make men comfortable, an atmosphere the city maintains. The deep city cave is the only place where his suit becomes uncomfortably warm, similar to the one inside his suit.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

I believe Cutthroat to be a true human, but is he? Has his head been altered to look more like the natives, thus the scar? Has he been exiled for some sin? From his natural character and following his instincts, I would have to say no - his innate sense of fairness and good does not indicate is intrinsically murderous, though he does dream of slaying the Min and Mantru while he holds the weapon.

Is he really seeing the Great Sleigh? I think his impending death has prompted them to return and the Sleigh has accelerated greatly over the melting snow in light of his obviously deteriorating conditions — it speeds up after he casts aside the weapons.

What is the significance of the 14th day? Does he know that is how long the Sleigh should take to circumnavigate the world if he stays in the same location instead of seeking after it? Is it because he knows that on the 14 th day the heating of the world from the satellite in the sky that reflects the sun will begin in earnest? Something else?

I feel that the rough mink-like mating explains Cim's (double!) murder of Fishcatcher.

Are the mineral-flower kluys in the underground city a reaction to Cutthroat opening his suit? Probably not — the Min seem to have washed and placed the flowers there for the approaching visitor. Do they detect human life and “humidify” the air to create a warm and welcoming environment, or just serve as decoration? It seems that the import of Cutthroat opening his suit is more likely that later Mantru fails to recognize him as a member of the Great Sleigh until he pulls it on and says he is leaving, inciting the murderous rage of the dwarf.

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER WORKS:

“Tracking Song” takes the science fantasy approach Wolfe is most famous for in New Sun and casts it back to the stone age, but the theme of mankind seeking to survive after probable planetary desuetude and impoverishment is a pretty ubiquitous theme in his far future fiction. I feel that this story is in a definite moral dialog with “The Hero as Werewolf” and “Silhouette”. The underground or twisted dwarf recurs in a few Wolfe stories as well.

Gwern Branwen — 08 Jun 2014, 21:50 · in reply to Marc Aramini

An impressive overview as expected, but one point felt under-addressed.

On Sun, Jun 8, 2014 at 2:20 PM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:

“A pivotal story for me is one in which I feel I have succeeded in doing well something I have never really done well before — fairy material in ?Thag”, a certain religious viewpoint in “Westwind”, the use of second and third person in “The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories”, the progression from realism to fantasy in “The Eyeflash Miracles”, even the primitive inventions no one ever actually invented (and which no one now notices) in “Tracking Song”. Just as “Tracking Song” is about uninvented inventions of the stone age, “Straw” is about (partly of course) uninvented inventions of the middle ages.

Wolfe seems to think that the 'uninvented inventions' are a major theme of the story, but you hardly mention them. What are they? Just the endieva wand & club-bows? And how is 'Tracking Song' *about* them?

gwern
<http://www.gwern.net>

Marc Aramini — 08 Jun 2014, 23:33 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

As far as I can tell, these inventions include the cooking bag with the heated firerocks for traveling cooking, the club-bow, the man-sinew reinforced chair weapon that Nashwonk uses, the curved hook blade of the Pamigaka and the polearm of the Mimmunka, the brush lodges the Pamigaka live under, the sleds themselves with their tacking sails, and the inexplicable endieva wand (is it a mineral? a fast dissipating poison? Still wouldn't seem feasible to eat something recently killed by it) ...

It seems to me that the ingenuity displayed by these semi-humans in their ability to use tools makes them much more than animals who can speak, and that their facility in creating the tools is in some way a step towards humanity, though I feel that saying that the story is "about" uninvented inventions of the stone age is overstating the importance of these things - the Great Sleigh is clearly high tech, as is the equipment of Mantru and Cutthroat.

The sorrow Eggseeker expresses over killing the birds who will soon be endangered shows that consciousness of living an acceptable life that seems very far from savage.

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gwern
<http://www.gwern.net>

Marc Aramini — 08 Jun 2014, 23:36 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

Also, the mineral Kluy flowers underground are a bit mysterious - decoration for Cutthroat's
approach or actually useful for some purpose? They are only found on the wet street.

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