

Short Story 98: At the Point of Capricorn

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Marc Aramini — 19 Aug 2014, 02:42

"At the Point of Capricorn" first appeared as a chapbook in 1983.

SUMMARY: Visitors from all ages and places come to an icy cave at the end of the world, where an old woman entertains some children with stories on the winter solstice.

COMMENTARY: The story telling tradition holds immense importance for Wolfe, and his introduction to **Endangered Species** casts an enormous amount of insight into "At the Point of Capricorn", where he says:

"Stories are far older than any classroom. They came to be at a time when the storyteller knew his (more correctly **her**, for the first were almost certainly women) audience thoroughly, and was not in the least averse to altering his narration to fit it. The hearer — is more central than the monstrous beast slain on the other side of the mountain, or the castle upon the hill of glass, or the mirror beyond which Gene's sister glimpses an ocean in **The Sister's Account**." Therefore, let me describe the reader for whom I wrote all these stories. I wrote them for you. Not for some professor or for myself, and certainly not for the various editors who bought them, frequently very reluctantly, after they had been rejected by several others. You see, I am not an academic writing to be criticized — This is simple truth: Tonight you and I, with billions of others, are sitting around the fire we call "the sun," telling stories, and from time to time it has been my turn to entertain.

This set up is the entirety of "At the Point of Capricorn", sun imagery and all. We have children around a fire listening to an old storyteller, on a day when the sun wanes and then begins to gain in strength again, and the obsession with the bonfire becomes a symbol of that vital luminous energy as well.

The speaker begins by assuring the children that there is no reason to be afraid, even though the days have been getting shorter. The oldest boy boasts that he has no fear, casting a bone into the fire, and feels mocked when the old woman says he has grown wise from listening to her stories. The smallest girl pulls a wolf-skin cloak around her in the cold.

The point of Capricorn is of course the southernmost point at which the sun can be directly overhead throughout the year, at the winter solstice on December 21st. Here the old woman says, "All the world comes here to the end of the world just to hear my stories," and the cold of winter accumulates a kind of apocalyptic imagery. This idea is nothing new in myth and even Christian religion, and Frazier's **Golden Bough** examines the concept of myth and sacrifice as a way early mankind explained the incomprehensible seasons — the solar myth and the cycle of fertility, in which the king, a solar deity, mystically married the earth, and the cycle of death and rebirth continued — the days grew longer and the crops prospered. Fear of the cycle ending prompted religious and mythic ceremonies and sacrifices. Here in this cave we have the world at the end of its solar cycle.

Since this is a mythical kind of story, a varied cast appears as necessary. A Viking named Knute's son walks in and says, "Tell them why we kindle bonfires in winter to bring back the youth and life of Tyr Odinson the one-handed, who was stolen from us by the Frost Giants of Niflheim." (Knute can mean knot). Here we are given the significance of the fire: to summon back something from the wintry cycle of death, to return to life and youth. Of special note is the story of Tyr, a god of law and glory, at one time possibly the chief god in the Norse pantheon before losing that position to Odin and Thor. He lost his hand to Fenrir the wolf when the gods bound it — something only possible if a god agreed to keep their hand in its mouth.

We have the idea that the bonfires summon back warmth and life and signify that mythic cycle Frazier chronicled throughout human societies everywhere, even in Christology. Next a lexicographer comes in and asserts that the word bonfire comes from the bones burned in them at midwinter (ironically, something which the oldest child did at the start of the tale). The Viking kills him with his sword, Legbiter (the sword of the historical monarch Magnus III, considered the last true Viking King. Magnus died in 1103 and extended his influence through a large portion of the British Isles. However, Magnus III was known as Olafsson rather than Knute's son, which probably refers to Cnut the Great, a king of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and England, dying in 1035). This refutation of the origin of burning bones in a fire reeks of finality, though there is probably some accuracy to it. Regardless, bonfires are used throughout the world in a variety of religious and holiday celebrations, and the lexicographer was balefully unaware of their true importance

The old woman asserts that the fire does warm bones, and a French pastry chef who appears from the back claims that this is why they are called *le bonfeu* — the good fire. Then, in a fashion similar to the shifting of sign and signifier in "To the Dark Tower Came", the chef immediately asks how to get to Paris, Texas. (Clearly, the introduction of the stereotyped chef is merely to introduce the French etymology of bonfire). Wolfe's childhood in Texas might have prompted this reference to the small Texas town, so proud of its name.

A druid crowned in mistletoe enters (mistletoe was sacred to druids and was harvested in Alban Arthan, the Winter Solstice) and tells the pastry chef that soon the sun will rise between Sacred Stones Fifty-Five and Fifty-Six (Stonehenge is aligned with the sun during both winter and summer solstices). He then request the use of the lexicographer's body for a sacrifice, and an academic shows up to deny that the druids ever practiced human sacrifice. The druid simply replies, "we really don't *need* the practice now, do we" But it seems such a shame to waste him.

Throughout all of the random appearances, there is a strain of black comedy that undercuts the modern scholars of the world as they are presented face to face with the figures and objects they deign to know so much about from history and myth.

The old woman says that the sun has gone into the south, following the birds in their migrations, and that "He will return when he sees the beautiful tree we have made — for he will know the birds will want to perch on its boughs."

Even though Knuteson asserts that the tree she speaks of is Yggdrasil, the world tree of Norse mythology which might have been the tree upon which Odin hung, here the old woman begins to tell a story at which the professor grunts, saying "Another solar myth. It is actually the inclination of the Earth, I believe."

Here, Mother Gaea herself rumbles to life, fulfilling the promise to some degree of the marriage of the goddess of earth with the solar deity to bring about renewal, for she reinforces the idea

that all of this is a result of her inclination and will. The story ends with the arrival of the sun, and the old woman's assertion that the Sun comes "to tell his own story, here at the beginning of the world."

The coming of the sun, when the days will grow longer and the winter fade to more fecund seasons, prompts new growth and renewal. There is also the hint, as we know, that on top of all these other myths there is a very particular Christian one that will be mapped to the winter solstice season as well, one involving birth, death, and renewal. The fire at which the group gathers symbolizes the heat and life-giving properties of the sun which will soon return in glory, and the stories told around it create a communal spirit that celebrates the entire solar cycle in the midst of deepest winter, so that hope will not give way to fear and the despair of an eternal cold.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Is the "beautiful tree [they] have made" to attract the sun a Christmas tree? If the old woman is telling the story of Christ there, then the professor's grunt dismissing it as "another solar myth" would still make sense. However, his next statement, that "It is actually the inclination of the Earth, I believe" would be something of a nonsequitur giving a physical explanation for why the sun goes no further south than the Tropic of Capricorn (and consequently why the seasons exist at all).

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

This story has much in common with "The Boy Who Hooked the Sun" and "To the Dark Tower Came" in its surreal dream logic, but is more like an exploration of a theme than a fable or dream story.