

Short Story 99: The Boy Who Hooked the Sun

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 19 Aug 2014

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6631>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Marc Aramini — 19 Aug 2014, 20:50

The Boy Who Hooked the Sun

“The Boy Who Hooked the Sun” appeared as a chapbook in 1985 and is reprinted in **Starwater Stains.**

SUMMARY: On the eighth day, a boy from Atlantis casts his fishing line into the ocean and catches the long line of the sun as it rises. As the sun moves to escape, it plunges the earth into night, throws up sprays of stars, and even hides behind the moon.

The richest man of the village tells the boy to cut the line, for winter is wintering the blossoms in his orchard, and summer drying out the canals that water his fields. The boy pelts him with the stones of Atlantis. The strongest man in the village comes because the rich man hired him, and the boy, infused with the power of the sun, tosses him into the sea after also pelting him with the stones of Atlantis. Then the cleverest man in the village offers him a kingship in the empire they will form, but he receives the same response. The boy asks, “Oh really” A king. Who is to be emperor?

A magic woman comes, and mentions all manner of supernatural and mythic beings threateningly, and the boy tosses a variety of precious stones at her until she, too, leaves. A fool “who sang songs without words to all the brooks and boasted of bedding the white birch on the hill” comes expressing his fears. Instead of pelting him with stones, the boy lets him touch the fishing pole until he leaves.

His mother comes, and claims that she has not yet told him the finest story of all, the tale of “The Boy Who Hooked the Sun”:

“Come now to the hose the richest man in the village has given back to us. Put on your crown and tell your general to stand guard; take up the magic feather of the bird Tchataka, who opens its mouth to the sky and drinks wisdom with the dew. Then we shall dip the feather in the blood of a wild ox and write that story on white birch bark, you and I.”

He promises to do as she wants and release the sun for as long as they are both alive, but his thoughts run contrary to his vow: “I love my mother, who is more beautiful than the white birch tree and always kind. But do not all the souls wear away at last as they circle on the Wheel” Then the time must come when I live and she does not, and when that time comes, surely I will bait my hook again with the shining stones of Uranus and we shall rule the stars. Or not.

Thus, the seasons result — when the sun remembers its sore mouth it seeks to get away from the earth, and then when it sees the boy's line stretched across the sky and powdered with hoarfrost, it returns. “Or perhaps it is only — as some say — that it remembers the taste of the bait.”

COMMENTARY: We have already looked at Wolfe's take on allegory with "Love, Among the Corridors" (which he insisted was the opposite of allegory — a literary myth). In that story, it is easy to see that love is a woman. Here, we have a fable. The distinction between a fable, a literary myth, and a parable is perhaps of little use to a fabulist such as Wolfe — however, the personification of the natural world, with the sun as a kind of giant fish, tends to place this clearly in the camp of fables — which are nearly ubiquitous across all cultures on earth.

Here, the boy casts his line into the sea at the long reflection of the sun. It starts on the eighth day, the day after the creation story is concluded, even though years seem to have passed in the lives of the characters. We are in the province of man's dominion over the world exiled from Eden, and the description of the boy make him both fey and ordinary: "He was not such a boy as you or I have ever seen, for there was a touch of emerald in his hair and there were flakes of sun-gold in his eyes. His skin was sun-browned, and his fingernails were small and short and a little dirty, so he was just such a boy as lives down the street from us both." He is completely ordinary, but still magical.

The description of the father, who years ago had traded the stones of Atlantis for wine and ram skins of the Greeks, shows a turn away from untested value, wonder, and myth to pragmatic and ordinary concerns — the world of logic and bartered goods. Notice that the boy, even though he is poor because his father traded away those stones, still seems to have unlimited stones of Atlantis to repel the rich man, the strong man, the clever man, and the magic woman. The stones of Atlantis represent something like youthful idealism or a belief in something besides riches and trickery and mysticism. Perhaps the stones are the power of the fable itself to explain the universe in terms children can understand. At first glance this seems to be a belief in magic, that a fishing rod can capture the sun itself, but the magic woman who comes by and tempts him undermines that reading. At the end, when he considers the stones of Uranus, the stones seem to represent the dream of conquering the stars and mastering the natural world completely.

At the start, the fable attempts to describe why there are stars in the night sky, why sometimes the sun hides behind the moon, and why it grows hot and cold as the seasons pass. It shows the coercive power of riches, strength, cleverness, mysticism, and even parental expectations, all things which can sway children from following their dreams. It shows forbearance and patience for foolishness. Much like "At the Point of Capricorn", the movements of the sun through the heavens is given a kind of human back story, showing why the sun always chooses to return closer to earth and allow the cycle of life to continue.

Ironically, since the fable attempts to describe poorly understood phenomenon in terms that human beings can easily understand, a meaningful analysis is difficult — the story is simply the story, and when the mother finally gets the boy to cut his line, she does so by promising that they will write a wonderful story down — that of "The Boy Who Hooked the Sun". She calls upon material possessions, worldly might, magic, and the power of story to finally get the boy to release the sun, but one gets the sense that it is only because he loves her that he puts down that youthful dream and embraces the values of the world around him (even, ironically, spiritual and magical values). However, he vows, when she is dead, to defer his dream no longer and conquer the stars, in the vain hope that there is always a tomorrow. The dreams of progress and mastery over nature — are these the stones of Atlantis?

THE MAGICAL WOMAN AND HER DEITIES

The most difficult distinction to make involves the temptation of the magical woman — why are her pleas so ineffective in swaying the boy, who seems to hold the stones of Atlantis dear? Let's

examine the manner of her invocations.

She says, "Sabaoth sweats and trembles in his shrine and will no longer accept my offerings" - Sabaoth is the Greek form of a word which implies the Lord God of Hosts or armies — Jehovah as a God of battle who will crush Moloch, Baal, and other deities. This is a surprising reference to the Jewish God.

She then mentions that the feet of Sith, "called by the ignorant Kronos son of Uranus", are broken. Kronos ruled during the golden age of the titans before he was overthrown by Zeus, and Sith is another name for the Sidhe, fairies or elf-like beings who dwell in barrows or in an invisible world beside our own. The conflation of Greek myth with fairy stories or even talk of angels is fairly common in Wolfe by this point.

She also mentions a bird: "The magic bird Tchataka has flown. The stars riot in the heavens, so that at one moment humankind is to rule them all, and at the next is to perish." Tchataka appears in Flaubert's **Temptation of St. Anthony**, in which the gymnosophist says :

"I dreamed of the essence of the great Soul whence continually escapes the principles of life, even as sparks escape from fire. Thus at last I found the supreme Soul in all beings, and all beings in the supreme Soul; and I have been able to make mine own soul all my senses. I receive knowledge directly from heaven, like the bird Tchataka, who quenches his thirst from falling rain only." (Flaubert 54-5)

These magical and mythic references do not sway the boy. It seems that he accepts "traditional" magic in due course because of his mother's stories and expectations, but in and of themselves they do not serve his youthful dream.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

What is the hoarfrost covered fishing line which we can see in the sky when the days are shortest?

Is the bait the sun wants to taste the dreams and hopes of youth unfettered by reality?

At first, it seems that the power of Atlantis is in fantasy and even magic, but the mystical woman who comes to try and dissuade the boy makes it clear that it is not magic and spiritualism that the boy holds on to, but perhaps something else. Why, when he relinquishes the rod, do the stones become the stones of Uranus? He is the deity of the sky. Have they ascended beyond his reach or have they become the dreams of mastering the universe itself as humanity matures?

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

The fables and literary myths of Wolfe have a more nebulous and hallucinatory feel than his more concrete fiction, and "At the Point of Capricorn", "A Solar Labyrinth", "The God and His Man", "The Old Woman Whose Rolling Pin is the Sun", "Empires of Foliage and Flower", and the stories from "Mathoms from the Time Closet" and "Redwood Coast Roamer" as well as "The Arismaspian Legacy" and its follow up, "Slow Children at Play", all share a kind of impossible symbolist logic that verges on the dreamlike but is no doubt inspired by the earliest traditions in story-telling.

Flaubert, Gustav. **The Temptation of St. Anthony**. Google ebook.

Robert Pirkola — 07 Oct 2014, 15:58 · follows Marc Aramini

On August 20, 2014, Charles Gillingham wrote: "This story, I always assumed, is part of the Brown Book from New Sun. I only bring this up, so future stories commented on will be identified as such.

Your assumption appears to be correct as Wolfe confirmed as much in his "Introduction" to *Starwater Strains*:

"'The Boy Who Hooked the Sun' was written for the late Jan O'Nale, who used it in a greeting card. It's a brown book story, like those in 'From the Cradle.'"

Is there a list of all the brown book stories out there"