

# Short Stories 104-109: Redwood Coast Roamer/Four Wolves

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 26 Aug 2014

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Marc Aramini — 26 Aug 2014, 02:03

Redwood Coast Roamer/Four Wolves

All of these stories were written on a trip Wolfe took via Amtrak to Seattle, written in the observation car. They appeared in several different places, but ?In The Old Hotel: did not see the light of day until it became part of the collection \*Storeys from the Old Hotel.\*

## I. MY BOOK

"My Book" first appeared in Amazing Science Fiction stories in May of 1983 and is reprinted in \*Endangered Species\*.

SUMMARY: A rather eccentric writer prepares to write every day by beginning with some Mahler on the radio, and he reviews some of the essays and thoughts that inspired him. Ultimately, he decides on writing his book from the end to the beginning, starting with the final word, "preface", and working backwards. He ends by stating, "And so I have proceeded, step by laborous (delightful) step, chapter by chapter, until soon, perhaps this very year, surely before the coronation I will begin the preface."

## COMMENTARY:

Wolfe identifies our author as a madman in his introduction to \*Endangered Species\*, and besides the eccentric writing habits and thought processes, there are a few cryptic details. The pages which he sets out so carefully in their white glory are ruined when he returns to them, as if a part of him crumples them up in frustration, a frustration which is then suppressed. He researches things multiple times over and over but never seems to write, until he comes upon the most disjointed and inconvenient method of composition ever, one devoid of all normal and logical development. The neurosis of composition is stressed, and the literary allusions below make quite clear that his blockage has become the object of a particularly perverse negative obsession.

While the narrator might have written chapter after chapter as he claims, it seems as if the entirety of his book is simply presented from the last several words: all he has to write about is the process of composition — there is no depth or meaning to any of his labors. His book might actually be "My Book" - a three page short story about nothing but delusional struggles in composition. This stark barrenness is the height of pride and excess, a kind of neurosis that, though it references everything, never succeeds in growing beyond itself. The last line is ironic, for while it seems that he is going to finish his book when he begins the preface, it could be that for all that sound and fury he never quite begins the book he wants to write.

Since "My Book" refers to Rahv, Mahler, and Kafka (indirectly), there does seem to be a slight bias towards Jewish artists in its references, and the only truly inexplicable detail is the

upcoming coronation. Given that it is probably a contemporary work, the idea that this neurosis is growing in war time Europe on the cusp of a transition to the modern era is rendered unsound by the Rex Stout and baseball references. The literary allusions make the theme of the narrator's insanity much more apparent.

#### LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

The author claims that his project began with the idea that man only has a concept of religion as a historical force from a Philip Rahv essay. This essay may be found as the introduction to *\*The Selected Short Stories of Franz Kafka\** in which Rahv comments first on Kafka not only as a neurotic artist but as an artist of neurosis, driven by obsession. The desire of Kafka to destroy his work completely and the concept found in stories such as "The Great Wall of China" that explores the vast separation between authority and the orders to be followed, between a heavenly and corporeal limited viewpoint, emphasize the piecemeal and haphazard thinking definitely at work in the narrator of "My Book"

Since "My Book" refers to a fairly late Nero Wolfe novel, *\*The Father Hunt\**, in quoting, "It was nice to know the next step was obvious, but it would have been even nicer to know what it was," we know that the story is set after 1968 and is possibly contemporary with the time of its composition. However, the other behaviors of the writer, from listening to Mahler to being inspired by Rahv, certainly seem a bit more old fashioned. *\*The Father Hunt\**'s plot (a woman's mother is killed, and she believes her unknown father has something to do with it) seems to have little relevance to this particular story besides giving us a Wolfe reference.

The narrator compares his research to Injun Joe's Cave in Twain's *\*Tom Sawyer\**? a place where he has been lost for some time, unable to move from repetitive research to meaningful composition.

The most important allusion is quite explicit: Oliver Onion's "The Beckoning Fair One", in which a writer on the cusp of producing what might be his most significant work becomes gradually obsessed with his new living place and descends into madness, intermittently determining to scrap all of his manuscript and working further on it, but accomplishing little. Eventually, emaciated and demented, his lady friend winds up dead in his house, killed by his delusions (or possession, as the case may be, as the previous owner of the house starved himself to death rather oddly).

Ultimately the idea of a man obsessively writing about the composition of his book, which might be the book itself, seems like one of Borges self-referential mazes rendered meaningless, signifying only itself, though we have some very interesting quotes about mankind's experience of the divine in history.

#### RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS:

I wonder if the preponderance of Jewish artists mentioned has anything to do with the theme of waiting for something so long (the Messiah and Redemption) and failing to recognize when the moment of validation and meaning comes, though this could be entirely unintentional (though the Rahv quote is quite suggestive — especially since the Jewish conception of the Messiah is so much more secular than most Christian ideas of Christ. The nebulous nature of the Jewish afterlife, perhaps developed in contrast to their death-obsessed Egyptian oppressors, is particularly based in the here and now rather than the later. Our writer wants to create a great masterpiece but his book will have no meaning beyond the story of its own composition. The coronation and ascension never comes.

#### UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

While our narrator is insane, how is he connected to the coronation? Is it religious, secular, or an imaginary delusion of grandeur?

"My Book" is extremely brief, and the idea that our narrator has unconsciously already written his book is clever without seeming earth shatteringly significant. It is perhaps the most difficult to parse thematically from all of the stories Wolfe composed on his train trip to the West Coast.

## II. THE RIVER

"The River" first appeared in *Amazing Science Fiction Stories* in May of 1983 and has never been reprinted.

### SUMMARY:

The short story begins, "Through all the countries that no map shows there runs Siith, the Infinite Stream. Some say that in the end, in farthest places, it runs back upon itself; others that it flows at last into the gulf. Both are correct." The rest of the story is a description of the river — at some places broad, in others narrow, but with no bridges, as only the current and birds can traverse it, "and the speech of birds is known only to those who have tasted dragons" blood. Once a century or so the current swirls some scrap of paper from a minor scribe and cities fall and rise, with temples and churches, and perhaps missiles fly, "but they are only scraps from the tables of the minor scribes. Althor-elmil is Lord of the river, and he takes all the boats built by people, and those who do not swear to serve him die. He casts feral beasts and those who live by stealth into the river, and sometimes people see strange things drawn from wells, blood drinkers, and hairy men."

"Of late it has been observed that Althor-elmil builds ships having wings and rockets, and these are taken by Marhoon, how is Lord of the Air."

### COMMENTARY:

This seems to be one of the literary myths Wolfe speaks of in a few of his essays and speeches, those things that are the opposite of allegory. He defines them as follows: an allegory posits that a giant might be despair, but a literary myth asks something like, "what if love were a woman?" This story does the same thing — we see the river, and we have to ask ourselves what symbolic association seems to satisfy this description? Is the river history, the exploration of the unknown, or is it actually the unknown and mysterious in life? It would seem to be perhaps exploring the question, "What if the unknown were a river?", since only those who have tasted dragon's blood can ask the birds what the river is like (fantasists, I suppose). The inference could be that the river is the border between the known and unknown. When a scrap of paper drops into the river, progress happens: buildings and churches go up, missiles and wars occur, but they still do not have a lasting effect on the river. The story has no concrete characters besides Althor-elmil and Marhoon, and it is interesting that they are differentiated between. When humanity seeks to explore and map the seas and face the unknown, it is still on its home planet, no matter how hostile and large the seas. Yet these air-ships, to the sky and moon, seem to represent something else. Now the river no longer seems a symbol of the unknown — it is the sky.

The Wolfe-wiki states that the river seems to represent the boundary between reality and fantasy, the known and the unknown, and this seems a good way of describing it.

Is there a meaning to the name Althor-elmil? Does it imply son of thunder, the thousand, or should we be looking a more Arabic root?

Marhoon is Arabic for mortgaged or pawned, something given as security for a loan.

In “The Boy Who Hooked the Sun”, Sith is another name for Kronos, and the word is also related to the Sidhe, or the Faerie Folk Wolfe employs frequently.

The scrapes of paper allow cities going up and to occur, as the boundary between the known and unknown shifts with new ideas and discoveries. Why should this infinite river suddenly give way to a different lord? Is this a spiritual statement or merely one dealing with the nature of the unknown as humanity leaves the earth behind?

### III. AT THE VOLCANO'S LIP

“At the Volcano's Lip” first appeared in the May 1983 issue of *Amazing Science Fiction Stories* and is collected in *\*Storeys from the Old Hotel.\**

#### SUMMARY:

The wife of the narrator complains that his loud talking prevents her from hearing the roar of the earth, and a planned flight is prevented because the pilot would not fly with “snow” on the mountain.

They drive down back roads and see devastation, the wife pointing out here the volcano's effects can be seen, but the narrator seeing only “the prim labor of saws — the tread of trucks” in a national forest.

They buy postcards and a Frisbee with a picture of the mountain. “She had exploded with the force of five million (or perhaps five billion) tons of TNT, with the fore of a hydrogen bomb, with a force equal to the combined forces of all the bombs dropped on Japan, plus that of the test that may (or may not) have been conducted by the Union of South Africa.” (The story is probably referring to the Republic of South Africa and the Vela Incident on September 22, 1979)

They buy a cup fired with a picture of the volcano and see a river of ash, and the wife repeats that they would have seen it if the husband had not talked so loud, “drowning the roar of the volcano, the roaring of the engines. But I love you anyway.” The story ends with the ominous, “The geologists had seen smoke and scented poisonous vapors, that their instruments all felt the earth trembling, trembling at the margins of the missile silos. It may be, I told my wife, that there are louder talkers coming.”

#### COMMENTARY:

Clearly designed around the explosion of Mt. St. Helens in the early 1980s, the narrator notices how commercialized the destruction of the earth is — the massive force of the land and the volcano serves mostly to create souvenirs for mankind, and he compares the destruction to what mankind has done — cutting up national forests, fighting and creating weapons of mass destruction like the missile silos mentioned at the end. While he may speak with a loud voice, the idea that louder talkers are coming is a threat of escalation — whether those talkers be the harbingers of war as the superpowers arm themselves against each other, or the earth itself, which trembles in disgust in all its might, ready to descend upon a creature who has spoken a bit louder than it should have. His wife cannot hear the natural sounds over him, but the

absurdity of this is revealed at the end, when she implies one man's shouting would drown out the volcano and the engines, and for this reason they were kept from witnessing the volcano's eruption.

It seems his shouting might be that of someone shouting out for peace, restraint, and understanding, as well as a considerate treatment to the environment, since the narrator sees the commercialization and destruction rampant in the world and feels the looming threat. The title, "At the Volcano's Lip" implies that humanity and civilization are at that precipice, since our couple never gets to approach the lip of the erupting volcano.

#### IV. IN THE MOUNTAINS:

"In the Mountains" first appeared in May 1983 in *Amazing Science Fiction Stories* and is collected in *\*Storeys from the Old Hotel.\**

SUMMARY: The narrator remarks that it is still snowing even in April. "The cliffs, the color of anti-rust primer, are dusted with white. Forests of Christmas trees run up them forever. Elk do not fear our train". These elks are now "good members of the Elks Club now" and silenced. He tells his wife he saw a tree that a bear had just walked around since "it had that look."

The narrator goes on to tell of a couple who wanted to live in the woods but her fear of bears kept them in the city, where the harsh chemicals and pollution ruined their health. "Once I asked his doctor if he would always cough like that. ?No," his doctor said. "Not always." He talks of the sharp blade of the old man's ax, dulled in color and varnish but unused.

"The wood of the frightful bears are gone now, cut to make houses and books, or perhaps only to clear the land (Why should land be clear, when each mirror shows an uglier face") No doubt the frightful bears are gone too, perhaps to the high mountains, the mountains of Montana, of Washington. May they with my heart abide here forever, stalking elk, dodging clumsily, slyly, around Christmas trees, leaving bear tracks in the snow.

#### COMMENTARY:

This is a conservationist piece that reveals the almost mystical associations the narrator makes at the beginning, about a tree looking as if a bear had just walked around it, are tied to real cause and effect: our narrator noticed the tracks — the wife merely thinks him silly because she understands neither him nor the natural world. The destruction of the forest and the loss of the wild frontier are juxtaposed with the story of fearful "Goldilocks", who has become gray and ill, her family ruined by city life, her children not turning out "well". While mankind desires a close relationship with the natural world, his fears keep him separated, constantly eradicating it, to show a world barren of nature, a barrenness that mirrors an ugly face.

While the Elk Club is not really a hunting organization, it does represent a fraternal, organized society that has merely adopted the Elk as a symbol of the American spirit.

While Christmas trees would normally have some kind of symbolic association, I feel that this story is satisfying in its simple message — the modern world is much more destructive and dangerous than the "frightful" bears, who leave tracks and signals that let us know about the natural world if we know how to look for them — at the beginning, the elk do not fear the train, but they should. Similarly, we do not fear the city, but perhaps we should. If there is any religious significance to the tree in nature, we see it in its living environment stripped of consumer driven greed; the bear sidesteps it without bothering it, neither resisting nor destroying it, but existing around the natural world, while the man in the city has his sharp ax

ready to cut down any tree that gets in his way.

## V. IN THE OLD HOTEL

"In the Old Hotel" appeared for the first time in *\*Storeys from the Old Hotel\** in 1988, though it was written with all of these stories.

### SUMMARY:

A couple is registered in an old hotel because English friends (unaware of their presence) are there too, a man and his daughter. The speaker compares the hotel to an old man resting and gasping for breath, the modern television out of place in the hotel's antiquity.

"Tomorrow and tomorrow. The old hotel is forever looking to tomorrow, striving to show it has a place in the future, that it need not be torn down."

An old man in the elevator comments on two pretty women that join them to the narrator:  
"They get better all the way down."

"But not for you, old man, I think, lying awake beside my sleeping wife. Your time with the girls is over. And I fall asleep."

"The old hotel smiles its tense smile, polishes its dark wood — an old retainer out to show he does not have to retire so soon, though he may be a little lame." The narrator says he would rather see false teeth than false smiles.

They meet the English friends on the street, and the girl says, "It was over by noon — I'm fit as fit."

COMMENTARY: The rustic allure of the old wheezing hotel striving to stay relevant as time leaves it behind, pushing off its dissolution and death just a bit longer, seems to be the primary impact of the central description of the story. Wolfe's narrative voice is sympathetic with the genuine honesty of the primitive world rather than the veneer of artificiality in the modern world. The primary question is a simple one: why doesn't the couple want the Englishman and his daughter from Devon to know that they are registered in the same old hotel?

There is a nice irony in the narrator falling asleep next to his sleeping wife thinking that the old man's days with the women are gone — while this old hotel attempts to look towards tomorrow and still eventually faces dissolution, the same drive to last in humans when they are young involves having children, and after that, striving to stay relevant in a changing world as their reproductive days fade into nothing but a dream and a memory.

If "it" was over by noon, was the girl pregnant? Something else? The Englishman has white hair, which seems to indicate he could be an appropriate age for having a grandchild, and since he and the narrator reside at the top floor of the hotel, and the girls get prettier as one goes down, it seems that this meeting on the street level would imply that perhaps there is some kind of new life outside the inevitable acquiescence of the hotel.

### UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Besides the purpose of the young woman's stay in the hospital (which would seem thematically to be most probably the birth of a child, or something related to the life cycle and reproduction), the narrator refers to the hotel as Kennedy. Is there any significance to this name?

## VI. ON THE TRAIN

"On the Train" appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1983 and is reprinted in *Storeys from the Old Hotel*.

### SUMMARY:

Our narrator glances outside of a train on which he seems to have spent his entire life and sees an earth become almost liquid, "rushing to flow over a falls that is always just behind the last car." The narrative claims the universe can be contained in three questions — "How long is the train" And from what station does it originate? We can assume the third is "Where does it end?"

The narrator does not remember boarding, but his mother said she recalled it, though she has now left his compartment. He says he "would go up and down the cars looking for [the doctor who delivered him] (and [his mother]), but one cannot look for a doctor without arousing the anxiety of the other passengers or exciting their suspicions."

There is a porter named Flip who "was once [the narrator's] dog, a smooth fox terrier", who makes the berths and serves coffee and knows more than anyone else about the train. If the narrator's wife and he try to make Flip stay to answer questions, Flip will call his Uncle, the Dawn Guard.

The narrator speculates that the train is "either very long or very short, since when it goes around a curve — I cannot see the engine. Possibly it is infinite — but it may be of a closed as well as an open infinity." After thinking that it seems both circular, in a circle going around the earth, and straight, extending into infinity among the stars, he notes that the mountains seem to crowd closer, "as if to ram us by night." He lies in his berth, "listening to the conductor (so called because he was struck by lightning once) come down the car checking — tickets in the dark."

### COMMENTARY:

We should mention once again Wolfe's comments about the story, which relate that he rode an Amtrak to Seattle and back on which he composed the short stories that are included in this entry. He states

"Flip was the ruffian clown who woke Little Nemo from his wonderful dreams, in one of the finest Sunday comics ever. My father gave Flip's name to the fox terrier we owned when I was very small: Flip's barking always woke my father up. There was no reason for you to care, to be sure, but for both you readers who have stuck with this until now — The earliest memory I have of my mother is that of a lovely young woman bending over me as I life abed on the seat of a railway car. Her eyes are blue. She wears a gray cloche; from under it peeps a stray lock of auburn hair. Would the year be 1934" I can't say for certain, but about that. Now I must stop, lest the afterword grow longer than the story.

Wolfe has here revealed the symbolic weight of the train: his earliest memories are on one, and thus its association with the start of life's journey, which at times seems a circular entirely earthly trip and at other times only a journey into an infinity almost incomprehensible, especially to a sincere dualist. The farthest echoes of his memory summon up that maternal face and the sound of the train.

The comic strip Little Nemo involves a boy who is summoned into Slumberland to be the

playmate of Morpheus? daughter, and at first the green and short-tempered clown Flip is something of an enemy that tries to wake him up before he gets there, but they become allies. Note that in Wolfe's comments, we see how the dog also woke his father from his slumber.

In some ways much of Wolfe's dream cosmology involves the concept of the ability to wake from the waking world into something that is perhaps less bound by the laws of the physical world but is "more" real nonetheless. The conductor who checks tickets is perhaps symbolic of the power of the gods, Jove, coursing through the one who drives the train, (which of course could be a reference to the divine power invested in the form of a man, the Theanthropos), though I am not familiar enough with Little Nemo to know if there is a reference there as well, with its treatment of slumber and myth.

Each family seems to create its own compartment in life, and his children have now formed compartments of their own, while his mother has left him, gone to an unknown place.

The Dawn Guard referred to in the dream has an identity in the comics, the Guardian of the Dawn, who breaks up the images of Slumberland as the sun rises — in this way, the train trip is certainly a dream image.

The symbolist in Wolfe has created a story where the earliest memory becomes a metaphor for the entirety of life, which we can certainly expect to haunt his fiction (my own is watching my grandmother heat up pot after pot of water on the stove to prepare my bath, since we had no hot water in our small apartment near Madrid).

#### UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

The flowing river that the objects outside the train appear to become seems a repetitive motif in Wolfe's fiction for something numinous and transubstantial, beyond ordinary comprehension. In this story, is that merely due to the artistic style of the Nemo cartoons?

#### CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORK:

This type of literary myth became increasingly frequent in Wolfe's writing in the 1980s and seems an outgrowth of early stories such as "The Green Wall Said" and "Cues", but they are closer to "The Old Woman Whose Rolling Pin is the Sun", "At the Point of Capricorn", and even perhaps "Love, Among the Corridors", all of which seem allegorical but are a bit more sophisticated than standard allegories.