

Short Story 172*: The Dog of the Drops

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 22 Apr 2015

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6722>

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Marc Aramini — 22 Apr 2015, 13:46

Since I am reformatting these now, I wanted to get them out in case anyone had some excellent input that needed to be incorporated. Most of these presented out of order are fairly straightforward, however.

“The Dog of the Drops” first appeared in 2002 in *3SF* and is reprinted in *Starwater Strains*.

SUMMARY:

In a decimated future, an unnamed narrator reveals that his duties took him to the lands beyond the bombed cities where they have no accommodations for travelers and no cook shops. He asks at a farm and sees a “beautiful, very quiet young woman and five noisy boys who called her 'Ma.'” As he is leaving, an elderly man stops him and tells him a tale in a dialect which resembles Scottish.

The elderly man starts by asking him if he knows what a dog is. He once saw a picture of a small one, with ears like small rugs or earmuffs. It had no hands. His father told him those dogs could talk and do small errands for their owners as well as aid in hunting raccoons and watching the house when the master was away.

However, the “Life Man” did not like them, for they did not care for his taxes, only for the masters who fed them, and ultimately decided to kill all the dogs, claiming that they brought sickness and plague (which no one had noticed before). Those that kept dogs were hung. His father said that the dogs were “dead as cats”.

He tells the narrator of a man named Pet who went hunting out into uncivilized areas called “the drops”, which were once called the “barbs”, where people once lived around “fallinwalls”. There are holes everywhere out there, most filled with water, dangerous for a man to fall into if he is not paying attention. The speaker mentions how bad the drops are, where old folk lived before the “Bigkill”. On one of his hunts, Pet shot a wolf and followed its blood trail. . Pet stayed the night there and heard a girl talking to him. She said her mother was dead and there was no one left to feed her. She refused to come by his fire, but he threw her food. He promised to return the next day so that she would not die. Thinking that he would find a woman to take care of her, he doesn't want anymore than the five kids at home he already has, yet for a year he went back and left food for her.

Eventually, a bull gored Pet in the meadow, and his young wife, who came looking for him, saw a huge creature standing over Pet which would not let her approach. She grabbed the speaker to come look with other neighbors, and he made them put their weapons down when they saw the giant black dog-like creature over Pet, protecting his body. He talked to it, and told it he knew that she wouldn't harm Pet. The giant dog creature left like a shadow. When they recovered Pet's body, they knew that a bull gored him.

Soon thereafter, the young widow of Pet found fawn and raccoons left on her step some days. She was also left with the five children Pet had from a previous marriage. Soon a man named Sut started to like her, but then made the mistake of hitting her. The next day he was killed by a wolf. The elderly man, seeing that the narrator is interested in Pet's widow, relays all of this and ends by warning the narrator to take care and treat the young woman good, as well as Pet's kids, or to simply go home.

The narrator looks back at the cottage of the widow, where he hopes to return soon. He wonders where the Dog of the Drops lays, who watches the cottage with him.

COMMENTARY:

The challenging portion of this text is simply the dialect. Otherwise, it is a straightforward tale of a future torn apart by war in which dogs and other domestic pets were eradicated for fear of the diseases they brought. The criticism implicit towards a government which would eliminate pets which have come to have some pseudo-sentience due to their freedom from taxation is perhaps a barb at the concern of large government, but clearly some disaster has submerged humanity into a civilization that resembles the peasant life of the middle ages and pre-industrialization more than the life to which we are accustomed. It is conceivable that these pets are related to the speaking ones who serve mankind in "The Hero as Werwolf" and in "Sonya, Crane Wessleman, and Kitty."

The irony is that Pet may have killed the mother of the wolf cub or puppy whom he treats with such kindness afterwards. It seems unlikely that lycanthropy or fantasy is involved — this is a straight science fiction story in which the remnants of the dogs elevated to a kind of sentience (who outlive cats, certainly) are forced to survive in the wild after a destructive war just as the humans are. The bonds of kindness that Pet forges create a protective instinct in the Dog of the Drops towards his family.

It is conceivable that "The Drops" represents a kind of barbaric backwater, and that this is the meaning of the word "barb" which the elderly speaker uses to describe it. The dialect might resemble a Scottish one. The libertarian attitude of the speaker, criticizing the "Life Man" for blaming dogs for their problems, is perhaps presented without irony.

The idea introduced by the elderly speaker that dogs were already speaking to their owners might be taken literally in a science fictional environment as evidence that the genetic evolution of dogs to something "more" than they currently are was already occurring, especially given the government's disdain for them and their freedom from taxation.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

There has clearly been a war, possibly leaving large radiated areas. Is the giant talking dog a product of this a mutation as a result of the weapons of war, or is it a natural outgrowth of the dogs which had already begun to change under the guidance and manipulation of men, an advanced dog simply returning to a natural, harsh environment but still capable of love, affection, loyalty, and communication?

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS

There is certainly a strain in Wolfe which presents the future as a barbaric and less civilized past. "The Hero as Werwolf", "King Rat", "Tracking Song" and *The Book of the New Sun* all have features which mirror this post apocalyptic future. The animals raised up to something

higher with the ability to communicate with their human masters may be found in all of those works as well. The use of dialect and dogs will be repeated in "Rattler".

David Duffy — 22 Apr 2015, 23:35 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On Wed, 22 Apr 2015, Marc Aramini wrote:

The idea introduced by the elderly speaker that dogs were already speaking

I would interpret this as suggesting dogs had been deliberately genetically modified, given the size possibly for military purposes - in keeping with a later turning against them post disaster (?).

Cheers, David Duffy.

Gerry Quinn — 23 Apr 2015, 07:22 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On 22/04/2015 14:46, Marc Aramini wrote:

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I never read the original, but it occurred to me that 'Barbs' could be a corruption of 'Burbs'. They became the 'Drops' after heavy bombardment during the BigKill.

Fallinwalls sound like "fallen walls" but that seems a bit too obvious somehow, as if there ought to be something better. Then again, the conversion of other vowels to 'ah' fits with Burbs to Barbs.

Anyway, maybe from the story itself it is possible to tell whether the Drops could have once been suburban regions.

- Gerry Quinn

Stephen Hoy — 26 Apr 2015, 18:37 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

The barbs are littered with glass and fallen walls, leaving water-filled foundations that unwary travelers fall into. So there's a play on words available that allows falinwalls = fall in wells, as in: "what's the matter, Lassie? Timmy fall in a well again?"

On Thu, Apr 23, 2015 at 2:22 AM, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com> wrote:

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