

Short Story 178*: Calamity Warps

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 22 Apr 2015

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Marc Aramini — 22 Apr 2015, 14:00

CALAMITY WARPS

"Calamity Warps" first appeared in *Realms of Fantasy* in 2003 and is collected in *Starwater Strains*.*

SUMMARY

The story begins, "Calamity Jane is our dog, and she warps through space. I suppose I should say space-time, though that implies a level of expertise I haven't actually got." The neighbor, Bob Smith, agrees that she is a very fast dog.

After the death of his previous dog, a cairn terrier, the narrator's wife wants a new one, to which the narrator reluctantly agrees if she gets it herself. Calamity Jane is procured through Save-A-Pet for the price of shots. Her breed is indeterminate, but "if you dropped her in a pack of coyotes the coyotes would roll out the welcome mat, and brag afterward about their new member." She has wolf like ears and at times resembles a Belgian shepherd, and responds to the narrator with tolerant hostility.

He comments that at first he thought her warping was just extreme speed, and that she simply appears "without ever having gotten there". Deer will not eat the rosebushes when Calamity is near. He also describes her chase of a rabbit, which at first frustrates her with its superior agility and sharp turns. Eventually, Calamity catches the rabbit by simply running through a turn without actually turning and losing momentum, as if she had continued running in a straight line and poked a hole through space. The narrator praises the dog against his better judgment, and in an aside asks, "What would you have done" Would you want a dog like Calamity mad at you?

He relates that the people at Save-A-Pet had named her Calamity Jane, supposedly because of her tendency to get in things she shouldn't be in, but the narrator suspects that she brings even greater calamity. After this, he tries to chain her, but she warps out of it easily, then she begins bringing strange things home, such as a Japanese ID and money, an odd polished bone stick with bark-like skin, and a wounded pink furry invertebrate like nothing else the narrator had ever seen.

Soon she even brings a giant four armed shadow and a weapon that seems at times like a sword, an axe, a bat with a nail in it, and even a machine gun. When he shows his neighbor, she responds that it is terrible, but is also somehow beautiful. The narrator loses his own shadow, and the four armed, helmed one clings to him. He attempts to avoid notice, but when the lights go out at work one day, people scream at the shadow's stark appearance. When he holds the sword, he notes that the shadow holds it in three hands and it feels "about like a broom handle" to him, though it is 37 pounds.

He concludes by saying, "Now it's started talking to me at night. Is that what they call runes" It whispers late at night when I'm in bed, and that's why I'm telling you this now.

COMMENTARY

Wolfe's love of dogs extends to his earliest childhood, and he has regularly had at least one dog throughout the majority of his adult life. While his own name has definitely led him to experiment with both lupine and canine symbols, this affection for them occasionally overcomes the need for misdirection and subtlety and creates a tribute almost free of irony (which is something, alas, many of his human characters almost personify). Of this story, Gene has said:

When I sent "Calamity Warps" to Kathe Koja, she said it seemed very autobiographical. Which in a way it was. Calamity Jane was really Rosemary's dog, and I never liked her as much as I should have. She was a better dog than I deserved; let's leave it like that. And fast! Why, when she was young -- well, you wouldn't believe me. For the first three or four years she was determined to learn Human and used to practice her language lessons when she and I were alone in the house and I wasn't looking. Calamity could give you the creeps.

Given that, despite Gene's affection for dogs, he is capable of preferring some to others definitely shows us that his overall lack of affection for Calamity Jane and her general weirdness had an impact on him and his tone for this story. (Calamity Jane was obviously named after the famous American frontierswoman active in the wild west in the late 19th century, but her name here is more important for its association with "calamity"). This particular dog does not receive the same treatment as the noble Triskele, who becomes a symbol of selfless devotion in **The Book of the New Sun.**

More importantly for this story, it seems that there are definite Viking and Norse significations to the four armed shadow and the mysterious weapon which seems an ax, a sword, and a bat with a nail in it which is described as both "terrible" and "beautiful". The shadow, with its horns, as well as the runes, all resonate with Norse culture and myth. While the four armed shadow certainly echoes Burroughs Barsoom books and the warlike, four armed Martian cultures that John Carter finds there in his own astral jaunts through space, I think Calamity Jane is actually a harbinger of the final battle so central to Norse myth. The Cerberus-like hound Garmr in the Poetic Eddas escapes his bonds to precipitate Ragnarok and the end of time (just as Calamity escapes her chains easily) and humanity is thus described:

Brothers will fight and kill each other, sisters' children will defile kinship. It is harsh in the world, whoredom rife "an axe age, a sword age ?shields are riven" a wind age, a wolf age? before the world goes headlong. No man will have mercy on another (Dronke 19). There are runes carved on Odin's spear, Gungnir, but the spear does not resemble the weapon Wolfe describes, though Odin usually has a horned helm. Other famous swords in Norse myth include Sigmund's Gram, but the weapon in Wolfe's story seems to be more like an amalgamation of destructiveness rather than any specific weapon. Its terrible beauty and the way that it feels light to him and has even begun to whisper to the narrator at night indicates that he is being changed by it, and Calamity has succeeded in setting in motion a great and terrible force. The idea of a bound dog is reiterated several times in Norse myth, most notably in the Fenris Wolf, a child of Loki. He was bound by the duplicity of the gods, who offered him Tyr's hand as a gesture of their good faith until he could be bound in Gleipner. A sword was also used to prop open his mouth, to aid in binding him until Ragnarok could begin — and it is this wolf which shall at last slay Odin when the final battles are fought. While the Norse gods are not normally portrayed with four arms, there is a lack of humanity in many of the jotnar, or giants, who hold a similar place in Norse

myths to the Titans in Greek myth, being formed of primeval matter and at war with the younger gods or Aesir. The jotnar are monstrous at times, and the fire jotnar will also have a role in Ragnarok. Once again, Wolfe's blending of science fiction, biographical information, and myth creates a story that also shows another aspect of his world view that is really not commented upon in light of its absence from his larger series. The pink fluffy invertebrate grounds the later mythic shadow in an ostensibly science fictional tale, but the majority of the resonance strays from realistic mimesis and comes closer to fantasy. Underneath the veneer of ordinary appearances, there is a sinister shadow of mythic import. While this doesn't make Wolfe's universe that of paranoid dread and sublime fear (as one might describe Lovecraft's horror), it also serves to highlight the dualism for which Wolfe is famous. Ordinary people doing ordinary things cast a shadow tempered by myth and spirituality, and there is a looming significance to this. Every day, in the mind and in the heart, something of a high stakes battle between poorly understood forces comes into play, some good, some evil, and some a complicated, hidden impulse — in this case, to destruction and armageddon.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Are there any particular gods or science fiction characters that the shadow most resembles? While there are superficial similarities to Burroughs Barsoom books in the use of astral warping and four armed schematics, the runes and the whispering weapon (which seems somehow to be all weapons and is very light for our narrator) creates an effect of impending calamity and battle in a particularly Norse vein.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS

The ordinary hiding a shadowy underbelly of mythic stature is nothing new in Wolfe, and is especially prominent in “real world” stories which eventually violate the laws of reality such as “Houston, 1943”, the Arimaspians tales, or “A Fish Story.” The heavy influence of Norse myth is quite clear in *The Wizard Knight,* and the use of dogs is especially prevalent in Wolfe's fiction, such as “Rattler” or “The Dog of the Drops.”

RESOURCES

Dronke, Ursula. *The Poetic Edda Volume II: Mythological Poems*. Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford University, 1997.