

Short Story 191*: Comber

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

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6725>

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 — 22 Apr 2015, 14:44

COMBER

“Comber” was published in *Postscripts* Spring 2005 issue and has never been collected.

SUMMARY:

A nameless point of view character wakes up to the same news he heard the previous night: the floating fragment of a continental plate upon which he lives with his pregnant wife Mona has topped the crest of the wave upon which it floats and is temporarily flat. He looks at his wife's peaceful face and quietly prepares for work. Driving his car to the tall buildings at city center, he passes through a tollway. He thinks that the last crest had been before he was born, on a different wave, and thinks of the possible damage falling from the top of the wave might wreck on the city and its spumecathers. At work, probably at an architectural firm, he sees that the inclinometer he once bought is exactly at zero and notes a memo that the new angle will soon grow steep, the opposite of the accustomed angle (since they have spent his lifetime moving up the wave, and are about to crash down). Everything is to be reinforced with the new angle of descent in mind.

He activates his work device, and instead of getting to work opens the designs for his dream house for Mona, “waiting there to be tinkered with, as it would not have been if anyone in authority had found it.” His friend Phil interrupts him, asking to look at his inclinometer and commenting that it is the first time in his life the plate has been flat. Phil asks if he wants to go up to the roof and look, and our main character declines the offer, wondering what would happen if the plate actually overturned during its descent:

If the building did not break up when it hit the water, it would point down and would be submerged. Water would short out the electrical equipment, probably at once — rooms and corridors might (or might not) hold some air for a few hours — most [of] it down on what were now the lower floors. He might, perhaps, break a window and so escape; if he lived long enough to rise to street level, the end of the plate, and air, would be what? Thirty miles away? Forty?

He thinks it would be better to die at home with his wife and their unborn child. As the week passes, he sees that the inclinometer becomes much more extreme in its reading, but on Friday his next door neighbor Edith Benson calls to tell him that she has driven his wife to the hospital — her labor has begun. By the time he returns to work after a brief vacation, the inclinometer is but a pencil's breadth from the extreme end of its reading — a reading which, according to the man who sold it to our protagonist, need not go further, for there will be no one to read it if it does.

That night they discuss college and a career for their son Adrian, and, looking in on him, kiss several times as they exchange endearments, claiming that Adrian's future would be his own to choose (“But would not their own attitudes, the training they gave him, and their very

table-talk, influence Adrian's choices?").

The next day he combs his hair and thinks only of Adrian and the plate, pondering that the taller buildings his firm was planning could only be built if there was someone alive to build them. At work, a group of coworkers are "marveling at the vastness of the tossing green waters that stretched to the horizon in every direction". The CEO's secretary remarks that they will never be able to see so far again, and never be so high. An executive vice president tells him to look on and let it inspire him to "think big". "Yet he found himself looking at the people who looked, and not at the boundless ocean."

An elderly man named Parsons lets him peer through his telescope, and he is able to make out another floating city far away, for an instant even catching a glimpse of a cross atop a spire amidst pigeons and gulls. In alarm, our protagonist considers that certainly the city, which Parsons speculates might be *Les Sables-D'Olonne *from research done on his computer, must move before they crash into it. Parsons knows that it takes a long time to climb a wave, but that falling down was an extremely rapid process.

They discuss the possibility that a collision will break up their own plate, and the certainty that even a small bump would flatten all of the large buildings of their home city. The geologist Parsons consulted, Dr. Lantz, instructed him to refrain from speaking of it. Parsons says that to him it doesn't matter, as his life is over, but it will matter to our main character, still young.

He phones a geologist who lives nearby named Martin Sutton to ask a few questions about the threat of the city in their path. Sutton, after a reluctance to speak, reveals that it has been kept off of the TV and news venues, and that the chances of missing the city are only one in ten, but that yesterday they were calling it one in five. Sutton also confides that they are considering breaking up the other plate in advance, though he implores the main character to keep quiet about it. The protagonist realizes that the reinforcement crews have been acting at his office to prepare for just such a collision.

Sutton reveals that the plan is to attack with a strike force of about a thousand men and drill explosives a hundred feet into the other floating city, though it will clearly take them years to get there with their current level of working technology. Sutton also says that there won't be any young geologists for the task, as the university has shut down the geology program entirely.

Later the nameless main character confides to his wife Mona, indicating that there will be ten or fifteen years for each side to prepare and expressing a lack of confidence in the plan. Mona offers that the city in their path could break up their own plate, but the main character indicates that their own government could also break up the plate they live upon, and Mona responds, "How horrible! No, of course they won't."

Here he decides that someone must act to sunder their own plate and avoid war and disaster, using the force of an explosion to move their piece out of the path of the other city:

"Adrian would have a future. Don't you see, Mona" We wouldn't take just this residential neighborhood, but a piece of the infrastructure big enough to be economically viable. We could make things for ourselves then, make things to trade, grow gardens, and fish. That town the city's going to hit — people survive there. They even prosper. I've bounced this off of a man over on the next street, a geologist. He agrees it might be possible, and he's coming over to talk about it.

Mona thinks bumpers or bags of air might work instead. He says that nothing could stop the

mass of the plate, and even if it could, the resulting wave would drown everyone. Mona's voice is barely audible when he tells her that Sutton is coming over at eight that night.

An hour later Mona tells him to stop combing his hair with his fingers and pacing up and down. She begs him to go outside so he can see Sutton coming, and he agrees not to come back in until his friend arrives. He thinks of the details of the plan, and whether or not they will need to employ a chemist, sitting on the stoop of his house. Sutton arrives, claiming that the new angle has disoriented him. The wind snatches his baseball cap, and he asks the main character to help him find it. As they search, he believes he hears sirens traveling from the east to the north.

"One by one, the sirens grew louder — and abruptly fell silent. For almost the last time, he ran nervous fingers through his hair." He sprints towards his house to find that it is locked and dead-bolted against him. "Once only, his shoulder struck the unyielding wood. By that time the first police car had turned the corner on two screaming wheels, and it was too late to hide."

COMMENTARY:

In the introductory material to the story, Wolfe claims, "This story grew from the realization that the continents are islands of granite floating upon a sea of molten basalt- they drift and tend to break up — that gave me the image of a city on a floating chip of stone." The title, "Comber", denotes a long sea wave which curls, generally considered to be synonymous with a breaker. (The main character also keeps combing his hair, sometimes with his hands, in his nervousness and in his thoughts for the future. Clearly this character trait should serve as our mental designation for this otherwise nameless character — one who is always considering the small details of his dreams and goals.)

One of Wolfe's simpler tales, the gimmick of the floating cities and a society based upon them with limited resources is perhaps the most interesting concept on display here. There is definitely a libertarian strain in some of Wolfe's later fiction, and while this may or may not reflect his personal attitude, "Comber" shows a notable paranoia towards both authority figures and even family members. Those in power do not have the best interests of the people at heart, and would definitely destroy others and start a war rather than think of creative solutions or try to find a way to work with anyone else. While the situation they are in certainly seems to be a catastrophic one, with radio news and other artifacts of technology, certainly it seems that open communication might be possible — yet instead, the government favors concealment and covert hostility. Like many citizens of society, Mona thinks that it is the other city which should necessarily be broken up, but reacts in horror at the idea of breaking up their own plate.

The authoritarian presence looming in the background, while ostensibly having the best interests of its island city at heart, is clearly set on a course which discourages both inquiry and any innovative solutions besides the obvious destructive one. This is not the first time that the university has been the target of some satirical commentary from Wolfe — discontinuing an entire branch of a practical science like geology, perhaps in fear, certainly reeks of an agenda-driven education which is controlled by external forces. It is clear from the second page of the story that our main character already understands that those in authority are in the habit of suppressing personal dreams and goals from the care he takes to conceal his plans for a dream-house.

This dream house is associated with the most powerful imagery of the story - the way the protagonist views his wife, Mona. All of his dreams are geared towards their future happiness, and his pet project at work is specifically for her and their children. One gets the impression that his revolutionary actions are motivated primarily for her continued safety and

their child, and even when he leaves for work at the start, his thoughts are on a way to get past her without waking her from her happy slumber. Wolfe's love of irony is here on full display: motivated by love of his wife, letting her in on his plans has cost him his freedom and probably his life, judging from the authoritarian attitude of their city. (Also, the statement that he is combing his hands through his hair for almost the last time bodes particularly ill for his immediate future). Mona has both betrayed him and locked him out, perhaps indirectly guaranteeing a long and protracted struggle that might doom both their home and the city in their path. Just as with the design of his dream house, he must surely realize that his plans will not come to fruition and vanish if anyone in authority learns of them - and almost as tragic as the realization that they are headed for another city is no doubt his personal realization that the person he loves most has destroyed his dreams of a better tomorrow for her and their child. Certainly the observation our point of view character about the vegetation applies to his own ignorance: "Those trees were wrongly slanted now. Come morning, they would find themselves pointed away from the sun. He chuckled softly. It could not be often that smug suburban trees received such an unpleasant surprise." His own compass and goal has shifted, and no longer points in the same direction as that of his wife. Much like the trees, he is in for an unpleasant surprise.

Mona is one of the female characters which gives some credence to the idea that Wolfe's portrayal of women can be problematic, as clearly the dominant and controlling motivation for her betrayal is fear. Given the self-sacrificing motives of the protagonist, her betrayal is especially unsympathetic.

NAMES

Interestingly, the main character, who decides on rebellion by breaking up his own city and returning to a more simple manner of living, is never given a name. He is referred to as "Honey", "Darling", or "young man" by others.

His wife Mona's name has multiple possible meanings. Perhaps the most apposite is that of the Greek word for monad, meaning "singular" or "one". Mona can also be a female derivative of Simon, which can mean "God has heard."

Adrian can imply "dark" or, in its Latin origin, "of the Adriatic" - certainly appropriate given both the baby's fate and the watery setting.

The opposing city, *Les Sables-D'Olonne*, is a real seaside town in Western France on the Atlantic, and its meaning is "the sands of Olonne". This clearly sets the world as "ours". It does not seem possible to identify which (probably coastal) town our point of view characters live upon, as it seems the portions of the continent which have been broken apart and stayed afloat have been doing so for generations.

A man named Parsons shows him the city in their path — and this occupational surname indicates someone in a parson's household or a close family member of a parson. The geologist he phoned, Dr. Lantz, has a name which implies "land" or "territory".

The friend of our narrator who also works as a geologist is identified as Martin Sutton. Martin means "warring" or "warrior of Mars" and Sutton can imply "southern town" or someone from that town.

The woman who drives his wife to the hospital, Edith Benson, has a first name which is derived from an Old English name meaning "wealth" and "war". Her last name can imply the son of Ben (which in turns means "son of the south" or "son of the right hand"). Thus we have two names

meaning the same thing: war and the south. Clearly this future is headed for a destructive war even if the two land masses eventually collide.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Why have the continents been sundered, with small portions still adrift? Are there any larger land masses? While it is clearly our future, has a true catastrophe like nuclear war served to break apart the continents into small, porous sections? Judging from the thematic undercurrent of the story (that those in power would rather risk absolute destruction than voluntarily give up an iota of control or allow a concession) a technological weapon employed during war might be a viable reason for the current state of the world.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Is there any way to determine which city our characters live upon? They eat wieners and sauerkraut, but there is little reason to believe that it is necessarily German or even European, though it was perhaps originally a coastal city.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS

Certainly this bears a superficial resemblance to Wolfe's other "floating city" story: "Civis Laputus Sum". However, this has more in common with the slightly more libertarian themes of his later fiction, such as "Viewpoint" and even, more subtly, "Bloodsport". The infinite vastness of the ocean is on display in many of Wolfe's important works. His treatment of the abyss of space seems inimically more "parasitic" and transformative to humans but has the same feel of isolation. Looking at parallels such as "Silhouette", "Alien Stones", or "Leif in the Wind" might be interesting.