

Short Story 210*: Last Drink Birdhead

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Marc Aramini — 22 Apr 2015, 16:26

LAST DRINK BIRDHEAD: GENE WOLFE

Gene Wolfe's entry for the Jeff Vandermeer's *Last Drink Birdhead *appeared in 2009 and has not been collected elsewhere.

SUMMARY:

Originally designed to answer the challenge "Who or What is Last Drink Birdhead" He, she, or it, in 500 words or less proposed by Jeff Vandermeer, Wolfe's entry in the volume begins with some background on Damon Knight's Milford Writers Conference.

Wolfe begins by claiming that bartenders are "the great modern models of probity", but that the modern mind has been made suspicious by government pronouncements and network news broadcasts. He claims that we are furthermore distrustful of anything avowed by a writer of fiction: "I am one and I encounter the prejudice daily, particularly from my wife."

Wolfe identifies the cocktail as a "forgotten" beverage and claims there was a time, "not so remote as mead but almost as remote as bath-tub gin, when everyone over the age of ten drank cocktails." He lists several, such as the Rob Roy and the Pink Lady, and claims he still harbors an affection for the French Seventy-five, but no longer orders it, "and the reasons should be obvious." He goes on to ask "What bartender today can compound an Up in Mable's Room" What bartender would try (? rye whiskey, — gin, — honey)? I've been writing a book about a pirate, but I give you my word that I'll never sample the Yo Ho (equal parts rum, Captain Morgan's spiced rum, and apple brandy.)?

Wolfe goes on to say that Damon Knight (equal parts author, editor, and critic)? always ordered a White Piano whenever he was asked what he wanted to drink before he had made up his mind. When the bartender claimed he didn't know what it was, Damon would proclaim, "Well, I'm not about to drink your first one!" before ordering whatever drink he had decided upon. Gordon Dickson and Harry Harrison observed this, and Gordon told Wolfe about the following prank they played on Knight.

They entered a bar before cocktail hour and ordered White Pianos, and when the bartender confessed he didn't know how to make it, they told him it was a drink of equal parts sloe gin and milk with a teaspoonful of sugar. They tipped him well and complemented the drink, repeating this process several times.

"They took Damon to their favorite bar; and while he fooled around with the bobbing-head bird that had shared a last drink with the guy passed out in the corner, Gordie ordered beer, and Harry wine. You can imagine the rest. The moral of this little story is that we must never, ever deceive innocent bartenders. Or borrow other people's toys without asking. Providence will accord justice to them both."

COMMENTARY

Until the last few paragraphs, this is a rather simple and uncomplicated tale. Stylistically it is interesting how Damon Knight is described just as Wolfe describes the cocktails, with his ingredients in parenthesis after his name. However, once again Wolfe-as-narrator steps in and leaves us hanging. How did Damon react when the bartender produced a drink which he knew to be fake? Did he explode after tasting the tart Sloe gin? Certainly he must have. What did the passed out man do when he awoke to see Damon playing with his bobbing-head bird? Clearly Wolfe saved the image of Last Drink Bird-Head for this denouement, yet we are left guessing as to how exactly justice was served. Did Damon assume that the bartender was dishonestly trying to fake his way through the drink, given the first line of the story, which labels them as the height of honesty? Is the toy Wolfe mentions a double entendre referencing Damon's tactic of buying time by shaming the bartender for his own amusement besides the simple bobble-head bird of the drunken man (who was probably awoken by the ruckus)?

Sloe gin is another forgotten cocktail in the vein of the others that Wolfe mentions. Sloes are ripe English berries which are fairly astringent and reputedly taste terrible. Sloe gin is supposed to be a very tart beverage, and one can imagine Damon's reaction in receiving a drink he knows to be of his own invention to buy time as if it were real.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

What does Sloe Gin taste like with milk and sugar? This might be one Wolfe question the brave can answer on their own.

How true is this story?

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

Occasionally, Gene inserts himself into his fiction and recasts simple life events as narratives, such as in "Houston, 1943" and "How I Got Three Zip Codes." However, this is probably more essay than fiction, despite the Wolfe tendency to leave us to create the ending. Damon Knight plays a narrative role in Wolfe's Sherlock Holmes pastiche, "The Rubber Bend", and has always been listed as a huge influence for his role in both publishing **Orbit** and for giving Wolfe practical suggestions which actually improved his stories, specifically in the structure of "Trip, Trap." It was Knight who grew Wolfe from a bean one night, after all.