

Weird Words: “Wooden Boats”

Written by Christopher P. Garetano
Saturday, 16 April 2011 10:14

FANGORIA

Many of our Weird Words entries are the work of first-time authors. Some, however, are the product of pens whose names are already established. Writer, director and Fango friend Christopher P. Garetano shared this exclusive short, sanguinary tale with us; we hope it provokes at least one sleep with the light on.

“Wooden Boats”

“Forty ought six,” “Winchester,” “Over under,” “Buck-Ager.”

Cal, short for Cahil, planned this mantra of essential machismo hunting terms; they whirled around inside his skull like the barrel of a well-oiled Sam Colt.

He focused on esoteric images within his mind’s eye that were designed to help memorize each word, a technique he learned while reading a book called BRAINFIT.

For instance, “Buck-Ager,” an arcane term for freezing up before the kill, was represented by an image of a frozen egg with elk antlers.

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Suddenly, long tendrils of smoke tunneled through his meditation visage like viral worms.

He was distracted by a rolling plume of pitch-blackness, rising above the lonely mountain road ahead.

It was a horrible accident of fire, twisted metal and shattered glass, a conflagration that produced a vapor so thick it was as if a coal-dense fog had suddenly devoured everything.

The wagon rolled through it, slowly.

A large section of forest had succumbed to the flames, and sharp peaks of orange danced above their obsidian atmosphere. The noxious odor of gasoline mixed with myriad toxic fumes, slithered into the wagon through Venetian vent covers.

Abruptly, they all coughed, but not one of them dared roll down the windows. Ulysses reached for the vents and quickly flipped them closed with his cut and calloused fingers.

"This must have just happened, they'd close the road otherwise," said Aldo through hoarse respiratory convulsions. He held the wheel with one hand and covered his mouth with the other.

The pulsating glow of colored lights from within the soot cloud accentuated silhouettes of emergency men, who moved like cosmic specters through stygian dust.

With his shirt pulled above the bridge of his nose, Cal pressed his face against the window to peer out toward the core of it all, but he could now see nothing but infinite black smoke.

Suddenly they were reaching shafts of God's light again, as the dark mist began to dissipate.

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Ulysses gripped a small manual hand crank located on the inside of his door and rolled the window wide open. The remaining fumes in the car escaped out into the clean country air.

"Open your damn window, Al," croaked Ulysses as he coughed thick phlegm from the back of his throat.

The wagon hit another bump in the road.

A pain in the ass.

Cal's ass was numb with two distinct points of sharp discomfort on each cheek, a result of three straight hours of compression and an occasional angry pothole.

He was squashed-sitting in the rear compartment of his father's ancient but well-preserved Ford Ranch Wagon, while covertly trying to remember those venerated terms through a tattered paperback of *ULTIMATE CHESS STRATEGY: 4TH EDITION*.

The back seat was flipped down to accommodate not only Cal and the weekend supplies but Gunther, a gargantuan, almost jet-black German Shepherd which was twice any normal size for that breed. The Spartan hound stared through Cal and would not stop. It was an opaque hairy beast that reminded him of an old horror film, where an ogreish vampire commanded several lethal hell dogs to tear the jugular. Gunther left a real uneasy feeling; the great canine had a gaze as void as endless space and testicles the size of grapefruits.

The remaining room in the wagon was filled by two ex-Marines about three times Cal's age. Behind the wheel was Aldo, Cal's father, and in the passenger's seat was Ulysses, Aldo's war buddy and an avid hunter.

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Cal never murdered anything. He presumed that if men like Ulysses weren't talking about sports, eating, their jobs or screwing, they were talking about killing, and he was right.

His attention shifted to a tattoo on Ulysses' forearm. It was of a faded-blue Third Reich eagle, minus the swastika. He thought it was quite strange for an American military man to have this.

Cal did his best to prepare for the weekend that Aldo assured would "change his perspective." He didn't want to go at first, but as always, Aldo would offer his son a friendly challenge to his intellect.

"A hunting trip that only the greatest of minds could appreciate," said Aldo. "You would be a genuine fool to pass up this life experience."

Aldo was an enigma to his son.

Ulysses fancied himself a raconteur. He lit a cigarette, puffed it a few times, and began his latest yarn. "So, I finally found my paradise, finally had a moment to get my rocks off after six damn months in the shit. I did her every which way of the Kama Sutra, and after I was finished, this dink whore sat in a chair and ate from a large bamboo bowl of pan-fried rice and vole. That's rat meat in case you're wondering, squirt."

Ulysses looked to Cal briefly, and continued.

"She was Southeast Asian elegant and dainty. She had tits like little flowers that peeked through her violet kimono, and she smelled like rosewater. So I'm laying on my back in her red silk bed of iniquities and she had a soft goose feather between her toes and she's just rubbing this thing against my ankles and feet, and just giggling like a horny little schoolgirl. I was in heaven.

"That's when the Ruger came out. That tiny bitch hid a piece in her goddamn rice."

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Ulysses began to laugh out loud and followed his guffaws with "Just my luck."

Suddenly Cal interrupted and calmly blurted out. "You murdered her, didn't you?"

The car was dead silent for a moment.

"Did you ever get the Buck-Agar before you killed?"

"Human or animal?" offered Ulysses.

"Either or, what about that woman?" Cal said coldly.

"Well now, these are some tough questions coming from a 19-year-old chess champ. I hope you're ready for tough answers.

"She was a Vietcong officer posing as a whore. She was certainly going to kill me, so it was my duty and it was my survival to take her life. I blew a hole in that little doll face big enough to see through. To tell you the truth, most of her head came clean off. It's not like it is in the movies. I'm sure you never saw anything like that. At least not in real life."

"No I didn't," said Cal soberly.

"No, you didn't," returned Ulysses.

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He stared at Cal for a moment and then continued.

"But, there was this one time. I was walking through the streets of Saigon, only three days out of the bush and very salty. A Buddhist monk exited his zendo and slapped me in the face with a full blast. He hit me so hard that I dropped. So, the fraud walked out into a busy intersection and began a ritual protest of self-immolation. I wanted to kill that slope with every inch of my soul, but I froze and I don't know why. He did his thing. I watched him burn for a few seconds and then I shot him right in the temple, just before the flames took him."

There was a disturbed innocence in Cal's eyes.

Ulysses continued.

"Nobody hits me, not after what I went through. So, to answer your question, it only happened for a minute. You can call that one a delayed mercy killing."

Cal had no response.

Ulysses reached underneath his shirt collar to remove a silver crucifix. He held it up to Cal, and then brought it to his pursed lips for a kiss.

"That's what got me through."

He took a long drag from his cigarette, exhaled and continued. "Your father, on the other hand, he cared too much. That's all he did out there. He cared for a hurt dog once, he cared for the South Vietnamese villagers, he cared for our boys and even a few injured NVAs up north. Didn't you, Al?"

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Aldo quietly responded with a smile and then looked to Cal from the rearview mirror.

Ulysses pushed a cassette tape into the wagon's nearly antique stereo. Johnny Cash's "America" overcame the silent mechanical drone.

A peculiar illness began to take its toll on the men. It started with headaches followed by tiny pains that shot throughout their musculature.

As he looked out the window, Cal noticed something strange about the mountains.

Sections of them seemed unusually enormous, charcoal-black and jaggedly out of place. It was as if they couldn't exist in that part of the world.

The late afternoon sun was strong, blinking its descending golden rays from behind monolithic hills. He shut his eyes, and that thin membranous layer of delicate flesh wasn't enough to tame the onslaught of strobing light.

A roulette blast of sun-haze and mountain shadow invaded his eyelids with a painful opalescence. Pop, pop, pop, snap, snap, snap, shutter, flutter.

It was quite cold when they arrived at the cabin. A dark grey overcast formed as the sun fell almost completely behind the mammoth peaks, leaving its last bronze breath.

The faint sound of thunder rolled many miles away.

The lake on the edge of the property was mysterious as it reflected parts of the forest and mountains like an onyx mirror.

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All three of the men were pale and lethargic.

As Aldo parked the wagon, an amorphous shape caught Ulysses' peripheral. "Al, kill the engine now, and don't anybody move," he whispered.

Aldo also noticed the shape in the rearview and slowly turned the key backward, shutting off the engine.

About 100 feet away, a majestic elk with antlers of mythical proportions was feeding on a thick patch of grass.

"I don't think I've ever seen one of these up here. Pass me my bow, squirt."

Cal handed Ulysses the case containing his bow and arrows.

Ulysses unzipped the case, his movements slow and methodical.

Distant thunder cracked as hail bounced against the windshield.

Ulysses slowly stepped from the wagon as he carefully loaded an arrow into his bow.

Gunther immediately snapped out of his statue pose, exited the wagon and ran past his master.

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"Gunther!" hissed Ulysses.

The dog ran deep into the woods and vanished.

Ulysses' attention almost immediately returned to the elk.

He pulled the arrow back with great strength, causing the vascular system to pop out from his forearm and bicep.

"I'm gonna to cut out your heart." he said while gritting his teeth.

Hail smashed against the bow, the arrow and his knuckles. He tried to focus on the elk, but the increasing hail was falling too fast and thick.

The elk calmly lifted its head from the grass and looked directly at Ulysses.

The ice stones fell in a battering rapidity, so thick that the elk seemed to gradually disappear into the storm.

Ulysses released the arrow and it plunged forward into the void of hail like a rocket.

He screamed louder than the storm.

"Goddamn you!"

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The elk was gone.

With arms full of supplies from the wagon, they all hurried to take shelter inside the rustic cabin.

After night fell, so did more hail and then a light snow.

The log walls of the cabin were adorned with several trophy heads of the formerly hunted, and weapons of hunters from long ago hung in the shadows.

The fireplace was filled with crackling wood that was burning bright, but the men were dead cold. Cal kneeled by the fire, trying to warm himself. Ulysses sipped from a small bottle of bourbon and looked out into the storm.

"Goddamn dog," he said to himself.

"Dad, I don't feel too well," said Cal.

"Neither do I."

"Why don't you get some rest."

Cal was clearly weak and sick. Aldo helped him up from the floor and planted a kiss on his forehead.

Cal slowly walked down the hallway and entered one of the rooms. He collapsed into the small bed and immediately fell asleep.

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"Weather is a little strange, don't you think, Al?" said Ulysses in a tone that suggested a distinct awareness.

"Yes, it is," said Aldo, soberly.

The two men looked at each other and seemed to speak without words as the wind blew colder.

Cal awakened, suddenly.

The cabin was dark.

A faint unintelligible whispering entered his ears and seemed to have no specific origin.

Inhuman cries echoed throughout the cabin, and even though Cal was startled by the sounds, the unbearable temperature commanded his attention.

Great steam escaped his mouth with every breath.

His clothes were soaked with sweat from a high fever. His nose was stuffed with a cement-thick mucus.

He swallowed and felt pain in the glands beneath his jaw.

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His throat was raw and his muscles ached as if a vicious flu infected every cell of his body. The sweat that covered him and his clothes also soaked his bedsheets; he had never experienced such cold.

There were patches of frost forming on the outer layer of Cal's blanket, but he kept it draped around his shoulders.

"Dad!"

He fell to the floor and crawled out of the room into the hallway.

"Dad! Help me! Please!" he cried.

His senses were dulled by his illness.

His nose began to bleed.

Ulysses' crucifix lay broken on the floor.

Glowing embers from the fireplace lit the room in a dance of mute-red shadows.

Crimson drops from Cal's bleeding nose covered the silver cross as he passed over it.

The door was open and a cold wind blew throughout the darkened room.

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Ulysses appeared in the doorway, carrying a red gasoline can with him.

Cal stopped and pleaded.

"Help me."

Ulysses poured the gasoline all over himself, soaking every thread of his clothing.

He struck a match on the cabin door and, without hesitation, lit himself on fire.

He ran from the porch into the yard, screaming in a bright blaze.

He fell to the cold mud and burned.

Cal crawled weakly toward Ulysses with his wet blanket in an attempt to put out the flames.

From out of the falling snow and the surrounding darkness, Gunther appeared and savagely attacked Cal.

Fangs first punctured Cal's wrists and then the palms of his hands.

The sharp canines entered his cheek muscles as the power of Gunther's bite cracked several bones in his face.

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Blood spurted from his wounds.

As Cal blacked out, Gunther continued to bite.

The sun rose and was beating down on Cal's broken face. He awakened to the sound of buzzing insects.

A flurry of snow fell gently.

A swarm of flies congregated in, on and around Ulysses' charred and twisted carcass.

Maggots dripped from the black flesh and a white froth flowed from his eye sockets.

The larvae resembled small writhing pieces of rice, and there were hundreds of thousands of them.

Cal vomited a mixture of dirt, blood, skin tissue and small pebbles.

Fluids poured from his nose and mouth.

On the surface of the black lake, he could see three exquisitely formed wooden boats. They were almost indescribable and could only be articulated as something that grew from the mind of God.

Two of the vessels were floating to the shore and the third was moving away. In the third boat was a beautiful bird with golden wings, and it was drifting toward the rising sun. The bird gave

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out a cry as it vanished from Cal's sight.

A grisly female corpse sat in one of the remaining two boats. Its skin was pale with patches of bruised rigor mortis. Its head and face were mostly severed and it was wearing only a violet-colored kimono, caked in dried blood.

As her boat reached the shore, she walked past Cal toward Ulysses' remains.

She buried her deathly hand deep into the reservoir of maggots that was once his chest. She removed a perfectly round, shiny-black sphere from the squirming crevice.

Once she returned to the boat, it began to float in the direction of the dark jagged hills.

The grass grew first in Cal's eye sockets; thousands of tiny green fibers began to inch their way out of the tender corners. The soft orbs trembled, then burst with a warm, sharp and painful pop.

Steam, pus and strings of his orbital eye muscle sprayed out from the bleeding cavities.

Cal screamed an inhuman screech and landed on his knees.

His teeth exploded within his mouth like firecrackers. Shrapnel of broken molars and incisors ripped through his soft palate and lips.

His hands moved to his chest as it began to expand and contract. Cal's wails were more like a steam-train whistle than something that a human voice box could ever produce. His chest burst open near the sternum, the flesh tearing as his ribcage snapped outward like a bear trap in reverse time.

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His neck and face began to spasm, and the screaming was now coming directly from within his chest.

The vegetation fibers slithered from his hollow mouth and eye sockets like thin parasitic worms.

Several long insect arms with hawklike talons appeared from within the open cavum.

With a loud gurgle from his enlarged throat, the upper half of Cal's remaining husk fell backwards to the ground like the loose texture of a freshly skinned animal hide.

The newborn creature emerged covered in its placenta of Cal's blood and sinew.

Remaining pieces of the placenta dripped off onto the ground and wings began to flap.

A glorious kaleidoscope of iridescent colors, like stained glass, shone on its wings, and a small fleshy mouth beneath its body screamed like a newborn infant entering the world.

As soon as it landed on the only remaining boat, the giant insect was silent and quiet on its perch. The strange creature seemed calm as soon as its talons grasped the wooden vessel.

The boat changed its direction and began to flow against the current toward a river that connected to the lake.

The only sound was the wind.

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Christopher P. Garetano is the producer/director of the 2005 documentary HORROR BUSINESS as well as the soon-to-be-released MONTAUK CHRONICLES. He's also the director of the short horror film COTTONMOUTH, based on the Steve Bissette short illustrated story, and is the writer/creator of the soon-to-be-released graphic novel SOUTH TEXAS BLUES, based on the making of THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE. In his spare time, he likes to write, paint, read and visit the cosmos.