

Storylandia

The Wapshott Journal of Fiction

Issue 20



The Wapshott Press

Storylandia, Issue 20, The Wapshott Journal of Fiction, ISSN 1947-5349, ISBN 978-1-942007-11-1, is published at intervals by the Wapshott Press, now a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, PO Box 31513, Los Angeles, California, 90031-0513, telephone 323-201-7147. All correspondence can be sent The Wapshott Press, PO Box 31513, LA CA 90031-0513. Visit our website at www.WapshottPress.org to learn more. This work is copyright © 2017 by Storylandia. The Wapshott Journal of Fiction, Los Angeles, California. Copyright © 2017 Lane Kareska and is reprinted here with the copyright owner's permission. Cover artwork is courtesy of NASA and their Hubble telescope.

Storylandia is always seeking quality original short stories, novelettes, and novellas. Please have a look at our submission guidelines at www.Storylandia.WapshottPress.org or email the editor at editor@wapshottpress.org

Many thanks to editor John Griogair Bell for the proofread and editorial support.

Cover: Detail from the Carina Nebula by NASA (<http://bit.ly/2fFKRkN> and <http://bit.ly/1bvFXUG>)

Storylandia

The Wapshott Journal of Fiction

Founded in 2009

Issue 20, Winter 2017

Edited by Ginger Mayerson

Table of Contents

Cannonfire

Lane Kareska

Cannonfire

By Lane Kareska

Cannonfire

1899–1914:

Tribal... a dark and criminal mind... older brother... wandering alchemist... widow's humiliation... the larger world... gypsies.

You know my name.

For the record.

Doctor Khatanbaatar Namnansüren.

Aliases...

You know my aliases...

Your mask. Speak clearly please. Aliases.

Cannonfire Khan. Nam the Cannonfire Man.

Cannonfire Xan. Namnan Sussex. Doctor Eric Buck.

Doctor Arne Scholes-Young. Doctor Leon Southset.

Lord Conrad Sussex.

Age.

100. I think. Perhaps 101.

Education.

Informal.

Place of birth.

I do not know the exact place of birth.

Be as specific as you can.

Somewhere on the slopes of the Kharidal Soridag Range. Within forty kilometers of the Bolot village, or what used to be the Bolot village; my family members were tribespeople.

What do you remember of your childhood.

Thatch huts and yurts, the damp wooden smell of dung fires, my father's stone axe, my mother's tobacco pipe... Goats, pigs, rams, bears, eagles. Freezing winters, burning summers. Bandits. A wind that stank in the heat and seared flesh from your face. Imagine an arid ocean of grass and then fill the air with a melancholic howl.

You remember your parents? Siblings?

A brother and a sister. My sister died in infancy. She was eaten by a foal—my foal actually. I had an elder brother. Davaajav. I remember him very well. We were best friends. He was a strong young man with a quick mind but a withered leg. He should have died young but he did not; his cleverness kept him alive.

We once sunk a cart in a bog. I was six, he was nine—we were terrified of losing the cart but we had no way to pull it out. Our mule was as weak as we were. Davaajav's leg made him useless. But still, Davaajav saved the vehicle. He saw that we could pull it free if we wove the wooden spokes with rope and spun the wheels. The ropes coiled and we drove the cart out of the bog. It took a lot of time, but that was Davaajav: already an engineer at the age of nine.

Your parents?

There is not much to say about my father. He was just another one of the billions of persons who lived a short, meaningless life on Earth. He was an illiterate nomad, not the leader of our tribe, notable in no ways, not at all remarkable. My mother, though, there was something unique about her: she was blonde. She was undoubtedly European, or she had been at one point in her life. There was no history—or even story—that was ever passed down to me about her. As

a child, all I knew about her was that she did not look like anyone else in our tribe. She had a narrow face, blonde hair, blue eyes, clean pale skin that I found hideous. The rest of us were horsemen and women—the skin we wore on our bodies was the same color as the hides of our animals. We were all flat-faced Mongols, broad cheeks, vast foreheads and beautiful silky banners of black hair. I thought my mother was freakish, horrific.

Now I understand that what likely happened is that she was either a captive long ago brought to our tribe, or—and this is always the origin I chose to believe—she had voluntarily found her way to us and *wanted* to be there. There was a time in my life when I liked to imagine her as some young French runaway who, for no reason she could name, found herself *compelled* east. It is a little romantic, but one should not fault himself for feeling romantic about his mother.

There was something about a book...?

Yes. She had a book.

What book?

I had very limited exposure to my mother. I was around her for seven years only, and then I never saw her again. I was illiterate at the time, had no use for written language; I knew nothing but my own small life. However, I sensed indications—*clues*—about a larger world out there, just past the furthest edges of my vision. My mother's book was one of those clues. It was an object unlike anything else in our tribe's possession. I had no idea what paper was. Boards, binding, glue, ink. It might have seemed like an incredible piece of technology if I had a concept of technology. I could not read it of course, but in my memories, I remember the images of the words,

the *pictures* of the words, and now, looking back, I believe that the language was French.

What was the book?

I believe that it was Verne. *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

What kind of status did you have in your tribe?

None. I was the son of a tribesman with a white wife and two sons, one of them lame. Physicality was critical in my tribe. No one understood or appreciated mental heroics—the kind Davaajav could display. There were times, very early on in my life when I would witness the most minor interaction between my father and someone else, and I would identify that my father was not a respected man. Example: a group of riders did not make way for him and his horse at the well. No words exchanged, no looks, just simple inaction; they did not make way because he was not sufficiently respected. It is *difficult* to see that as a youth and to not let that damage your perception of your family, yourself, the world you inhabit. It is also difficult to feel sorry for your own parents. Recognizing the slight, but very real, social distance between my mother and other tribeswomen was at first heartbreaking, and then infuriating. I was a bitter child. It is laughable to think about it now, but when you are young, you do not realize how minor your world is, *it is just life*, but then as you age, your vision becomes clearer, sharper, and you begin to understand that your low status is not because you are deficient in anyway, it is because you are surrounded by *morons*, people of a lower mental quality than you, but there are just *more* of them. I ricocheted back and forth between wanting to leave them all, kill them all, and please them all. Because of this, it was not what

could be called a very happy existence for me.

Did your brother feel similarly?

I believe that for him it was much worse.

He was a young boy almost always ahorse because of his leg. He made himself an excellent rider to compensate for his own physical deficiency. I imagine that it is not easy to ride well with only one fully formed leg. The Mongol way to ride a horse is through the knees and thighs; the language with which we spoke to our animals was a language of touch, contact and pressures. Mongols are silent people. Davaajav could not ride this way, he had to invent his own system and he did so wonderfully. He spoke to his animals, and not in our language, but a language he *invented and taught* to his horse, our falcons, and the wild dogs that followed our tribe. This language of his was simple of course—shouts and grunts—but it enabled him to be a phenomenal rider, a spectacularly achieved boy nomad—this coupled with his natural skill with the bow made him a formidable tribesman, as long as he sat atop his horse. A side effect of his language with animals, however: he had no subtlety as a rider. Because he needed to speak to his animals, he sounded a little crazed while riding; this made him an even more *conspicuous* child. There were games the tribesmen used to play: horseback tug of war with the decapitated body of a goat, contests to see who could pick up a small tile from the ground while riding by at full gallop, trials of bowmanship while ahorse. These games were social constructs of our tribesmen, but of course as children we played as well, and Davaajav was a superior contestant because of his ability with the horse and bow. It was easy for me to have the impression that he was a whole child, as physically perfect as any of us because as a rider he

was *unchallenged* by any other children of the tribe. The way he rode made it seem that the horse was quite a seamless extension of his body—that he was a boy physically *superior* to all of us. Until—sadly and inevitably—he was not on horseback. Then, he would hobble about with his stick and lean on me or our mother for support. One night, I found him sitting at the edge of a thin brook, his fat cheeks tear-stained and his nose bleeding and swollen, broken probably. I asked him what happened. He said, “Nothing happened, go away.”

I knelt down beside him and held his face. He growled and pushed me away, scratched at my eyes. “*Away!*” he screamed.

I knew what had happened. He had been attacked by some boys. I did not know who or how many and I never would. Davaajav’s pride would never allow him to speak of it again. Later, he and I sat ahorse, alone, watching a family of falcons swoop down upon a family of field mice and he said to me or to himself or to both of us, very quietly, very severely, “We’re cursed.”

I said, “Say that again. What do you mean?”

He looked at me. “Our family is doomed.”

I knew what he meant and—I thought—I believed I knew what drove him to that thought, so I simply said, “What do you think we can do about it?”

“I don’t know,” he said. Then he clucked at his horse and turned it away, cantered off.

How did you come to leave your village?

When I was fifteen, a wandering alchemist entered the community. He gave his name only as Yg. He wore blue robes and golden bangles. Even though I was only a child, immediately I saw right through the man. He was a thief, a charlatan. My brother and

I recognized this instantly. We were suspicious boys. The alchemist was hired on by one of the village widows. Davaajav and I quickly saw that Yg was taking advantage of her—siphoning off what little she had with empty promises of gold and long life, love.

Yg had a long and terrible scar across one side of his face. It was red and ragged, and looked like it had been achieved by an unfinished knife. It was, of course, not uncommon to see men and women with scars, strange marks of life, enormous boils or growths. We knew nothing of medicine. But I found the scar of the charlatan a little striking. It reminded me of someone else in our tribe, an old man who every called “The Boy.” The name was what would have passed for a joke, not a cruel joke, but an irony. The Boy was an old man, in his late forties outwardly, but in his head he was only four or five years old. The reason for this was kind of interesting. When he was a young boy—or so the story went—he had been with his father walking along a game trail on a rocky mountainside. According to the story, it was a very clear day but storm clouds bubbled up suddenly and began dumping torrents of rain onto them. They took paltry shelter against a grouping of boulders and sat there shuddering under their hide blankets. When the rain abated and they pulled back the curtain of their coverings, a black eagle as tall as a child sat there before them. The bird screeched, flapped its wings and lifted into the air, and as it rose, slashed its talon down across the boy’s face, releasing an eye from his head and carving a deep and curving gash into his face. The bird flew away and the father did what he could—he pulled the boy’s eye free with a hard jerk and applied his own hand to the injury, he walked him back to camp where he sealed the wound with a hot coal and a

handful of grass. The boy grew improperly afterward. His body developed strangely: one half of his body aged and matured as it should have—the side opposite his injured eye and face—while the other remained locked in youth. He became misshapen, a lumbering monstrosity, totally imbalanced physically. This was his body. His mind however, was permanently fixed at the development level of a small child. For the rest of his life, he never developed beyond the character, personality, or intelligence level of a toddler. The Boy, he was called, even as an old man.

This creature's story impacted me because it was my first lesson in the outrageous absurdity of life. A boy like me, like any product of sperm and egg, *selected* by an *eagle* for a devastating injury that would reshape entirely his life going forward, forever. It made me profoundly suspicious of nature, of all life that I encountered. To see a similar scar on Yg's face, I think, *marked* him for me. It identified him as a personage of life's perverted tendencies. I knew him to be a villain from the first.

Who decided to murder the alchemist? You or Davaajav?

I do not remember and it does not matter. If one had not, the other would have decided to eventually. We shared thoughts like that. But what was our motivation? I still question it. As much as I hated my tribe, I hated Yg even more. Why? Was I defending the tribe or defending my sole (and imagined) right to be the one who saw them exclusively for what they were: hopeless, vulnerable, something to be owned.

How did you kill him?

The alchemist pitched a tent on a bluff near the widow's goat pen, but he did not sleep there. He slept in her hut, with her. Davaajav could not perform the

murder himself—his leg, you understand. It had to be me. After nightfall, Davaajav woke me and handed me our father's axe. In the moonlight, together, we walked toward her yurt. We knew, I suppose, that we were committing a crime—that we were going to murder a nomad in cold blood. But I suppressed those thoughts and, instead, considered only the necessity of our action. He was a criminal. A thief in all our homes, mocking us to our faces. The villagers would not persecute me. We would break this woman's heart, yes, but everyone knew what must be done. Davaajav lifted the flaps to her hut and I entered and found the man... He was disrobed, tangled up with her beneath a thin pile of animal skins. He had two penises. It was grotesque. She was a wide old woman and he a narrow, hairless man with those horrific, enormous sexual organs pouring forward from a thatch of white hair. The skin of his face was covered with scars and his black hair hung sparsely from his scalp. His skin was very bright and very gray, like the moon in daylight. He woke and saw me, identified the axe in my hands.

What happened?

I killed him. She woke and, screaming, tried to stop me. I panicked.

You killed her as well.

I was a child.

You were exiled from your village.

Davaajav and I both. The village elders might have endorsed our attack against Yg—but I had taken it too far. It was my fault. Davaajav understood this. But tribal law is still law. I know now that it was fate.

Fate?

I had to be exiled. I *needed* to be flung out into the world. My journey needed to begin. And so it did.

I do not want to be melodramatic but I do have

a memory about saying goodbye to my parents: it was dawn, my family rode out to the edge of a very flat, silvery lake—it looked like a coin flashing in the sunlight. We wanted to be away from our tribe. To have our final moment alone, I suppose. I was—and I remember this vividly—a little concerned that my parents (crushed by the shame Davaajav and I had brought them) were going to murder us. We all dismounted. My father gave us some supplies rolled in two rugs: rope, a few pieces of copper, a knife, a broken pocket watch (who knows where that came from), some bread, and the axe with which I had killed Yg and the woman. My father did not really speak. He just awkwardly touched our heads and looked at our mother.

She knelt down and kissed Davaajav. She clutched him tightly, then turned to me and stared, very hard, for quite a long time, maybe ten full seconds, and then whispered something, but not to me, to herself, and she turned away. It was as if she saw something in me, made some kind of decision about me then and there. Whatever that decision was, it was deeply final.

Davaajav and I watched our parents ride away, back to the tribe. But they slowed, stopped, and very far away from us—out of earshot—consulted with one another. It looked as if they were talking very seriously. And then they rode off, away from our tribe, and away from Davaajav and me. I never saw either of them again. I have no idea where they went, or what became of them.

Did you and Davaajav travel together?

At first. We had our one horse and a few days' worth of provisions. We traveled southwest along the steppe. For ten weeks or so, we encountered no

one. We ate what Davaajav killed. He taught me the bow. Eventually, we passed a tribe of nomads, then another. Finally, we reached what I now know was the Caspian. That is when a real disaster happened: we skulked around a fishing village for a few days, thieving. A band of gypsy men were sleeping in a field of weeds. Davaajav was convinced they possessed gold, some jewelry, something we could sell. He sent me into their camp one night, armed with nothing, thankfully.

You were caught.

Instantly. One of the men sat up—eyes shut—and grabbed my forearm. He twisted my wrist until I thought it would snap and then he opened his eyes, stared at me, and erupted into laughter. He was drunk. They all were. When Davaajav hobbled into their camp an hour later to rescue me, I was drunk on *grappa*. They built a fire and fed us, gave us more and more *grappa*.

That is how you became separated from your brother.

I woke up on a boxcar packed with children. Davaajav was nowhere to be seen—which, to my horror, made perfect sense: his leg made him useless. He would have been discarded like an apple's core.

I found myself with perhaps fifty other children. All different ages. Some were gypsies, some Chinese, Indians. I had this thought that there would even be someone from my tribe. Someone from my past, someone who knew me.

You were scared to be alone.

I was scared to be without Davaajav. I had never been apart from him. I was scared *for* him. What could he do? He was a child himself, and injured. I thought he was dead—I *hoped* he was dead. What chance

would an abandoned child with a defective leg have in the world? But still, he was a clever one... and good with a bow... perhaps he would survive somehow.

Where was the train bound?

We made three stops but the boxcar doors were never opened. We heard livestock being moved, men shouting in languages I had never heard. The other children were hysterical. At last, the doors opened and we all saw sunlight. Men in scarves and robes entered the boxcar and sorted the children. Girls were taken out first. I never knew where they were taken. Then they took us healthy boys. They left the dead in the boxcar, who knows where they were carried to after that. There were ten of us now. We were hooded and seated in a truck bed. We drove for hours—it was my first time in an automobile. When we stopped, they removed our hoods and marched us through the woods toward a bonfire. We were given turnip soup and bread. We stayed in the camp chopping firewood for days. Then, men in cars came and inspected us. I never knew the price I went for. That was the end of my childhood.

1914–1917:

***Logging camp... Nsaya... lust fever... Istanbul...
dawn of World War I.***

Who bought you?

I thought he was some kind of holy person. He wore a tie, he drove an enormous truck. He bought me and all the other boys, and drove us out of those woods. I did not know where I was going, only that I had been saved.

But you were not.

Lane Kareska received his MFA from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where he was also awarded a fellowship to live and write in Ireland. His fiction has appeared in ThugLit, Berkeley Fiction Review, Able Muse and elsewhere. He blogs about comic books at LaneKareska.com.

Thank you to the Wapshott Press sponsors, supporters,
and Friends of the Wapshott Press.

Muna Deriane
Ann Siemens
Suzanne Siegel
Debbie Jones
Steven Acker
Jennifer Bentson
Kathleen Bonagofsky
Carol Colin
Ted Waltz
Cynthia Henderson
Aubrey Hicks
Nancy Lilly
Jeff Morawetz
Patricia Nerad
Amanda Nerad
Elaine Padilla
Bradley Rader
Laurel Sutton
Deana Swart
Kathleen M. Warner

The Wapshott Press is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit enterprise publishing work by emerging and established authors and artists. We publish books that should be published. We are very grateful to the people who believe in our plans and goals, as well as our hopes and dreams. Our new website is at www.WapshottPress.org