

This ebook is published by

Fictionwise Publications
www.fictionwise.com

The Short Fiction Leader

Visit www.fictionwise.com to find more titles by this and other top authors in Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, Mystery, and other genres.

Copyright © 2001 by George Zebrowski

First published in Analog, May 2001

Fictionwise Publications
www.fictionwise.com

Copyright (C)2001 by George Zebrowski

First published in Analog, May 2001

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. Making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, including without limit email, floppy disk, file transfer, paper print out, or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines.

Fictionwise offers a reward of up to \$500 for information leading to the conviction of any person violating the copyright of a Fictionwise ebook.

*Don't part with your illusions.
When they are gone, you may still exist,
but you have ceased to live.*
—Mark Twain

The dry veldt was a guilty patch on the planet, and no one went there much. Small plots of forest broke it up here and there, making cooler places of shade and water. Beasts went there to avoid the blinding sun.

We lay on our stomachs, looking over the top of a sandy, shallow rise. "From here," I told O'Connor, my team recruit, "we're sure to see the main group."

"Why 'sure'?" he asked, peering through the shimmering heat, face shadowed by the wide brim of his

hat.

“Because they've been in their plot of forest a long time now, living off the wildlife. They have to move.”

“Quite right,” he said, then was quiet for a while, reluctant to say whatever he wanted to say to me, as if the heat were trying to squeeze an unwelcome thought out of him. I felt his rivalry with me, but he seemed only distantly aware of his feelings.

“Why bother,” he said finally. “They don't want our help. Never did.”

There were such pockets left all over the world, of people who still didn't want to live on beyond the old human lifespans, as we did, making up our lives as we went along as we tried to mold the indefinite futures. It was hard for the majority to which I now belonged to see why these backwards hid from us, why they didn't greet us with open arms.

“They don't want us,” O'Connor said again, this time with a hint of reproach in his voice.

“Then why are you here?” I asked, thinking of the strange missionary I had become, bringing the gospel of longlife back to the nature dwellers.

“No ... why are *you* here?” he mumbled, hiding under his hat. “You've been at this longer than I have.”

I knew why. I had always known why. “It may trouble you to understand,” I said, “but their existence still tells us who we are. It makes us think about who they are, and why they are here, and why we have left them behind.”

He squinted at me from under his brim. “And that's your reason?”

“One of them. There is strength in these people that we should not lose.”

“Pretty abstract. I thought that somehow ... you cared, emotionally, I mean.”

“I do.”

“I don't see the care in your face,” he said.

“They're like us, as most of us were not so long ago. Still more like us than not.”

I looked out across the veldt to the forest that sat halfway to the horizon as if it had been driven to clump there by the arid emptiness of the plain. Behind his show of detachment, O'Connor probably cared too much, or too little. I couldn't tell which. Like most of us, he had too much life ahead of him to be disturbed by anything near-term.

And then we saw them, the largest group of old humanity that I had ever spotted, moving out of the trees and across the blazing Sunday afternoon like a single beast with a hundred heads. Their weakest were in the middle of the body, where they could be helped along by the stronger.

“It's not like they don't know about us,” O'Connor said. “They know and don't want us.”

“They don't really know any better,” I said, remembering. “They don't really see us.”

“Think so?” he asked with a laugh. “If they did, they wouldn't want to live out here like this, would they?”

I was thinking that hunting down these people was useless, that we had gotten hot and dusty all for nothing, in the season when it got hot and dry and the sun hammered the land and made you sure to keep your hat on your head.

“Don't worry,” he said. “I'll do my job, if only to see how it goes.”

“It's up to us how it goes,” I said as I watched the lumbering hundred-headed beast, “whether they live or die, whether we let them live or die out. It'll be up to us. Remember that.”

“So it's about all the rest of us,” he said grimly. “Not about them at all.”

“Since we can choose and they can't, yes, it's about us.”

“But will they all perish if we leave them alone? Is that so sure?”

I said, “The falling numbers show it—so it's up to us to prevent it. If we don't, then we will let it happen. And there's just enough of us willing to prevent it.”

The beast with two hundred legs was well out in the open now. It looked like a ship of some kind, legs like oars rowing through a sea of dust, obscuring the long-haired heads of the passengers. Some were dressed in scavenged shirts and pants, sandaled feet and bare. Most carried knives of one kind or another, some a spike or spear. The wind was toward us, hitting us with the smell of sweat and hot animal skins.

“But can we help them?” he asked. “Seems that anything we do will be no good, or do harm. I don't think many people will sit around feeling guilty when ... these are gone.” It troubled him to say it. He could still go either way, and maybe take me with him.

I said, “We still have a voice, some of us. You and I are here, right now.” But I was a bit puzzled by what was going on inside me.

He was silent for a moment, then said, “What about this bunch?”

“We're going to catch up with this group,” I said, “—and talk to them, for starters.”

He smiled under the shadow of his wide brim, and his face showed only that smile. “What if we have to defend ourselves?”

“Maybe not with these,” I said.

“Then you know more than I do.”

“If we can talk to ... this leader ... in a certain way, then maybe we can ... make it go easier for them.”

“He's been scouted?”

“Yes,” I said. “It'll take them a while to reach that patch of forest over there. We'll wait there for them.”

We got up from our vantage point, made our way to our flitters, went up in silence and came down on the far side of the forest. Our vehicles were silent and fast, but we were not trying to hide our presence. We parked them at the edge of the trees, took our backpacks, and entered the patch. Halfway in, we found a small clearing, made a campsite, and waited for the group to arrive.

O'Connor said little during the rest of the afternoon, but I felt that he was working himself up to provoke me in some way that would ease his mind, or help him in some way that I would understand only if I let him provoke me. His very presence wore away at me, probed me, making me uncomfortable. He was irritating me with his repetition of my old mental motions, as he prowled down paths that I had worn away some time ago. He made them raw again for me. But I knew that he had to live with himself, one way or another. He was well aware of what could go wrong, what had gone wrong with contacting unchanged human beings.

At twilight we lit a fire from the wood we had gathered. It was blazing away by nightfall. The silence between us continued to unsettle me, but it gave me time to think things through from scratch.

“Again,” O'Connor said, “why not just leave them alone?”

“Because so much human variety died in this century. We are responsible for these bands, for what will happen to them if we don't draw them out and raise them up.”

“But if they refuse,” he started to say, as if he didn't know the drill.

“Even letting them think that way is our fault,” I said, “because we can change their life. They can't do it themselves. At best they achieve a static equilibrium with the wilderness. It's a prison to them, however much they feel part of it.”

It was all in the skin, I reminded myself, the sun and wind on your skin that made you feel at home. It wasn't a prison when it was your skin. It was a mother's embrace—when you weren't starving.

He sighed. “Maybe there are no good solutions for these remnants, or any kinds of answers.”

“Perhaps so,” I said, “but how we treat them says what we are. We have to try.”

“So you don't think it's a lost cause, do you?” he asked. “You think there is an answer, even if it's only to make us feel better for trying.”

“It's never a lost cause. We must never let it become a lost cause.” Yet I knew that there were problems that might have no solutions. Not now, or ever. Even with a remedy in hand, one might feel wrong about it, for no good reason.

He sighed. “Well, there's enough wilderness to leave them alone in. We've seen to that.”

We waited until we saw the tribe creep in through the trees toward us. Silently, they sat down in a wide circle around our fire, well back in the trees, and watched us. A slight shift in the breeze brought their smells to us. I began to distinguish faces in the firelight, until one old man became distinct. Two younger men sat at his left and right, two others in back of him, and two in front. The few women all sat in the back, treasured guardians of the tribe's future.

I looked at his bearded face, and saw him watching me unblinkingly, as if he had fallen asleep with eyes wide open.

“What are they doing?” whispered O'Connor.

“It's pride,” I said. “They want to see how long we'll tolerate their presence, their silence, before we begin to talk.”

“Pride?” he asked.

We sat there for over an hour. Finally, the old man said, “You've been following us for some time. Why?” He spoke perfectly, as if he had just stepped up to lecture at a university, to ask his students what they were doing here, following in the footsteps of the truly learned.

“Quiet,” I whispered to O'Connor.

The old man smiled. “My hearing is acute, son. If you have something to tell us, please do so. Have you brought some bad news?”

“No, there's no bad news,” I started to say.

The world was filled with fewer and better human beings, able to live with the planet's violence.

“What do you want from us?” the old man asked, making it sound like a crime, and I felt the weight of dismay before insoluble problems. It was all about how we would live with each other after the last of these wretches died out. I knew the answer, of course. We would lament their passing, until we lived to forget that we had once imagined a solution. And that would be the end of listening to the past.

But for now I was here, set on doing something.

“You're afraid,” the old man said, “that we will die.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Our children will replace us,” he said as if it had already happened, but all I could see was the cloud of dust his band had stirred across the veldt.

I said, “We fear that all will die, that none will survive.”

There were not enough of them for a viable population, but I knew that if I explained that to him it would only sound like a challenge.

“Don't you want our help?” O'Connor blurted out.

There was a long silence. Then the old man smiled. “I've seen enough of your world, with its beautiful people who know nothing of nature's true face, nothing of their own true face, nothing of reality.”

“Reality?” O'Connor asked derisively. “One wouldn't want to face what you call reality.”

He was right, I thought. We had come out of a cauldron, an evolving slaughterhouse that Darwin himself had disliked even as he had ferreted out and described its mechanism. It was no wonder that religious visionaries had sought to escape the life given to us through deluded imaginings. We had more than that now, yet we worried about the demise of tribes like this one. O'Connor's reaction to the old man had

shaken me, because I saw through both O'Connor's eyes and those of the old man, and once again struggled against the feeling that our effort here was both useless and wrong. Truth speared my animal heart. There was no going back, not for me or any of these here among the trees.

The old man laughed suddenly. "I can see by your faces," he said, "that you don't know what to think, that you don't even know what it is that you *do* think!"

He was right. I was here to find out, and O'Connor was going to help me, and himself, by helping me retrace my own old steps. Maybe there was something I had overlooked, I told myself with a futile hope.

"You don't have to die," O'Connor said with a strange and sudden kindness in his voice. I had never heard it before.

The old man laughed. "We all die."

"Do you truly believe that?" I asked. "That dying can't be helped?"

He shrugged. "Something you can't fix will kill you all one day. Your cities will stand empty, and we will come to laugh in them."

It was a delusion, but I didn't have the heart to say so to his brave, beautiful, bearded pride.

"Why do you think you will live and we will die?" O'Connor asked as if he almost believed it possible.

The old man grimaced at him but responded to me. "We're not many, and we don't need as much as you do. That will save us."

"Poor fool," O'Connor muttered, and I wanted to explain to the old chief that death belonged to an earlier life of competition, to a way of blindly shuffling the genome that was no longer relevant. He smiled at me as if he were Ulysses refusing the gift of immortality from the gods, committing himself to a mortal life. *Get over it*, I wanted to say to him, *give up these old views of death. Time to move on with the life of your kind. Try new views.* But I held back. Words would be useless. He would have to see for himself.

"Do you really believe that we will perish?" asked O'Connor. "You must know it's not possible, or even likely."

The old man licked his lips. "There is a flaw that will kill you all."

"What is it?" I asked.

He shrugged again. "We don't know—but we believe it to be waiting."

"Where is it?" O'Connor demanded.

"Deep inside you," the old man said with a terrifying conviction. "You are all weak and afraid that if you leave us alone we will grow strong and come out to kill you. That's why you want our death. But when you kill us, all that is strong will go out of the world."

Ignorance can imagine anything, I said to myself as I gazed into his eyes, where it seemed to me that every second glance looked inward and saw death approaching; yet he seemed without fear, secure in

his story.

There were those who feared these scattered tribes for the possible diseases they might harbor and one day release; and those who simply couldn't stomach the life of any unchanged humankind. Its simple existence was an insult. Here was humanity at its default setting of behavior, able to survive anything except our indifference, which was as good as malice. I thought, maybe the best thing we can do is disappear from their minds, like an old devil. They would then die away in peace, or come up in some different way.

I was lying to myself, of course. Humanity had to do things in steps. First had come the genetic therapies that no one wished to refuse. Then came a double lifespan. And now that indefinite lifespan was the norm, population was in serious decline, for reasons that horrified some of us and encouraged others. Indefinite life was now a right, to be extended to all who wished it. And I was hunting down the last unchanged groups of human beings and offering them life, cutting them off, in some views, from the afterlife and the fellowship of God, enforcing human rights, including the right to our way of life. Offering was a kind way to put it. Yet if the squads failed to enforce life and preserve it, then we would once again make compact with death and all its past waste of humanity. Behind us stood uncounted millions of dead.

The old man said, "If one culture dominates our planet, there will be no place left from which a different culture may arise. There will be no new ground, as Toynbee once said, from which it might spring."

"That was true," I answered, "when we did not have a permanent, ongoing culture."

"We are looking outward..." O'Connor started to say.

"Really?" the old man said with a smile. "You believe this?"

"Yes," I said. "New ground waits beyond this world."

He smiled again. "Are you certain that you will be able to benefit from it?"

O'Connor looked at me and said, "He's read a few books."

I gazed into the face of our fathers, and could only think that we had come up faster and held them back and were now trying to drag them after us into the new heaven. Nothing more. It was, of course, a bitter half-truth's plea I was making to myself. I would have to be insane to believe what these people believed. Where the many will go, a few must go first. We were way past that. Today, no human being should die needlessly. With longlife, even the most ignorant of these sitting in the growths before us would have time to be raised again—taken by force if necessary and educated, made to see. When you lengthen someone's life, you help him see enough to change his mind. You give him time to think differently.

What we were here to do was good.

I peered into the darkness, hoping to glimpse a child in the foliage, thinking that if I saw a young face or two I might not doubt the rightness of my actions. A child that would never know anything better than what shone now in its eyes would tell me I was right.

But I saw no children in the dark. The tribe was not reproducing. If anyone could be saved, it would be these living—surviving to become their own posterity, after their eyes and minds were opened.

The old man suddenly made a terrible sound in his throat. He stood up and spat on the ground in front of us. There was blood in his sputum. It glistened in the dancing firelight.

“You have made it hard,” he said, “for all that is unlike yourselves, including the beasts. You have wounded the wind itself, as if you were angry gods...” He pointed at the bloody slime at his feet, then staggered back. “No one should be able to wound the wind,” he added as he found his footing.

I looked at him and wondered whether I could see him as anything but beastly, despite the ingenuity and courage that drove his life. It would be useless to tell him that the planet was recovering, that no new harm was being done.

He grinned at me through rotting teeth, and I knew pity. There was no life here, I insisted to myself, only a prison of nature that had reared itself to be a test of survival and selection, and was no longer sifting the generations. We had stopped its death-dealing scrutiny. It was all up to us now, how we treated each other, even the worst of us. These people no longer needed to test themselves, or to worship the environment that had long ago spun their genome according to a different wisdom, and now had small pieces of fabric left over.

“Are you all right?” O'Connor asked, leaning toward me.

I nodded as I stared at the old man, who stood over us like a bear about to strike. I showed no fear, and knew that O'Connor was determined to do no less.

“I was one of these, fifty years ago,” I said, “from this very area. These are their grandchildren, I suppose.”

“Your relatives?” O'Connor asked.

“No way to tell.” I turned and looked at him, feeling false, and said, “Aren't they all ours?”

The old man shouted, “You talk to each other as if I am not here!” He hated our words of concern.

I knew that by now this patch of forest was encircled by a barrier that could not be crossed. The catchers were waiting for first light, and would herd the tribe into transports as soon as O'Connor and I came out.

Decades from now these rescued would see the world anew; but in the protests that would erupt at sunrise, in the curses of the swiftly imprisoned, there would be no song of heaven.

The old man cursed at me, then went to his people. The four young men who had sat with him gave us fearful glances, then retreated. I heard him talking furiously as his people gathered around him, and I felt the futile loneliness of his leadership.

I stayed and listened to the explosion of cries that morning, to face my own feelings. I needed to stay and listen and force my feelings to march from darkness to light. And as I listened, I struggled to confront those protests with the reality of what would happen to these people, as they were awakened to a new life.

They would be taken to a center, washed, dressed, and fed, brought up to nutritional norms that would alter their mental performance, then educated for several years until their intelligence caught on by itself to who and what they were and what they could become. And from then on they would become partners in

their own transformation into longlifers, free of death's waiting blackness. Oblivion had waited a long time to open at their feet, but would now be cheated. They would live to awaken from a nightmare.

The past would die within them, and new pasts would begin to grow in their minds, I told myself as I defended plucking them out of this place where once I had lived. That life had been scarcely better than that of the marsupials of a hundred million years ago, eating the eggs of the dinosaurs, waiting for something to wipe out their large, tyrannical neighbors. And of course, those little mammals from which we grew could not have known, and it might have been otherwise.

And I wondered how we lived without ghosts, in spaces without too much past, free of bitter rights and wrongs. How had we learned to do this? How was it that the tides of failed times no longer washed through our souls? They still flowed and ebbed within me, carrying poison to my mind.

When the last cry of the captives was silenced, I came out of the patch of forest and looked around at the dusty plain, then up at the cloudless sky. The catchers were gone into the blue with their human cargo. Somewhere far above, the past's devils were still crying out to heaven. I heard them even though I could not hear them.

I looked back into the forest. A bush stirred.

And I realized that the old man had somehow escaped the roundup.

He came out to me with a knife in his hand, and for a moment we stood facing each other. He was sweating and breathless. His right hand gripped the knife below his breastbone.

"I do not want to have my eyes opened," he said. "I want to die as myself."

"But you don't have to die," I said. "You'll be a young man again."

He took a deep breath, and I saw that he was trembling. "So you say. But who I am now ... will die."

"But you'll remember."

I could scarcely remember, and I didn't want to think why I continued to come back to these places. Was it to test myself against the animals, to prove to some secret self that lived within me that I was still as strong and brave as they were? What longing had brought me before this man with a knife?

"Leave me be, son," he said. "It's up to you now. I don't have long."

"But that's mindless," I said. His willingness to die was fearful, yet I respected it. It was insane but admirable. It was that willingness, I knew, that had brought him survival, even victory. To risk death was a test of his world's willingness to let him live. But sanity required at least some agreement between one's inner life and outer reality. This man's environment was gone. His loyalty to it was an empty gesture.

"Leave me be," he said. "Count me dead."

I hesitated before him, as if he were a great judge. He had lost his tribe to a world he could not respect, but which still feared him. Knowing that fear fueled his resolve.

"What can it be to you?" he asked.

"I'll know." For a while, I thought, feeling ashamed.

"I'm no good without my people," he said. "I have led too long."

"You'll meet them again," I said, "and know them in different ways, in better times and places."

"Truly?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, feeling a liar. "You'll learn anew, live anew." I felt a rush of fear, but here was my chance to count, at least once, in a personal way, to open a nearly closed mind and see it flourish. If I failed, then I would have to live with a shameful memory, and one day delete it.

"Will I have to go ... in one of those skycars?" he asked, still holding the knife at his waist. Was he going to kill me, or himself?

O'Connor came out of the forest and stopped a dozen paces from us.

I looked away.

The old man saw his chance.

He raised his knife.

And as I waited to feel it pierce me, I wanted it to pierce me, to feel the pain of its point more than to die.

O'Connor stunned the old man and the knife fell disappointingly at my feet. The old man collapsed to the ground.

O'Connor looked at me, and I knew that he had heard our conversation.

The old man was strong. He stirred, then opened his eyes as if surprised to be alive.

"So what do you think?" I asked O'Connor.

He adjusted his hat and smiled.

The old man was on his knees now. We helped him to his feet.

"I don't want to fly," the old man protested.

O'Connor said to him, "Don't worry. You'll come with us. We'll go back the way we came, low over the ground."

The old man looked at us like a defeated but proud child.

* * * *

Some fifty years later, in the spring of 2154, I chanced upon the old man in Australia, during intermission for Mozart's *Don Juan* at the Sydney opera, and I did not know him. He was much younger, but still sported a beard. There was no gray in it.

“Say, didn't I once try to kill you?” he asked. A well-dressed young man who might have been his son stood next to him.

I gazed at them as if through a fog, but finally our first meeting came back to me, more feeling than image, carrying a sense of menace as I recalled my years of missionary work.

I nodded vaguely, and feared for an instant that he might want to finish the job.

He glanced at the young man next to him, then smiled at me through perfect teeth and said, “Whatever was I thinking?” as he shook my hand.

Author Notes to *Wound the Wind*

Together with “Augie” this story was my latest effort at the kind of elegance I believe a short story should have, while remaining loyal to the thinking that should belong to a work of science fiction. Human beings have a lot to answer for, to each other; it will no longer do for the generations to disclaim responsibility. The pattern of thoughtless behavior and greed is much too clear as we begin the twenty-first century.

And yet I found some hope to express as I finished writing this story. So this is another one that got away from me by working against preconceptions, leaving me on a shore of new problems.

At www.fictionwise.com you can:

- Rate this story
- Find more stories by this author
- Get story recommendations