

# URSULA K. LE GUIN

## The Barrow

Like Zelazny, Ursula K. Le Guin started publishing in 1962 in the pages of Cele Goldsmith's *Amazing*, but her career would rise in a less meteoric way, even if, in the end, its arc would take her as high or higher. Her first novel, *Rocannon's World*, published in 1966, was another one of those garishly covered Ace Doubles, and was resolutely ignored. Her next few novels, the excellent and still-underrated *Planet of Exile*, and the complex (perhaps too complex) and Van Vogtian *City of Illusions*, were also mostly overlooked, and would only be discovered retrospectively by most readers (in the same fashion as was Delany's early work) after her plunge into wide public notice was accomplished by the publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness* in 1969 as part of Terry Carr's new Ace Specials line.

Rarely has a novel had as sharp and sudden an impact, or been accepted as widely as a modern masterpiece. *The Left Hand of Darkness* won both the Hugo Award and Nebula Award that year, and it deserved them. A starkly poetic, emotionally charged, and deeply moving exploration into the nature of humanness and the question of sexual identity, it would be the most influential novel of the new decade, and shows every sign of becoming one of the enduring classics of the genre—even ignoring the rest of Le Guin's work, the impact of this one novel on future SF and future SF writers would be incalculably strong. (Her 1968 fantasy novel, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, would be almost as influential on future generations of High Fantasy writers.)

By the middle of the decade, Le Guin was possibly the most talked-about SF writer of the '70s, rivaled for that position only by Robert Silverberg, James Tiptree, Jr, and Philip K. Dick. By the end of the decade, she had won Hugo and Nebula Awards, for her monumental Utopian novel *The Dispossessed*, two other Hugo Awards and a Nebula Award for her short fiction, and the National Book Award for Children's Literature for her novel *The Farthest Shore*, and was probably one of the best-known and most universally respected SF writers in the world. She won another Hugo in 1988 for her story "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight?"

"The Barrow" is an almost unknown Le Guin story, but it is a stunning evocation of period and place, and it packs a powerful impact into a very short package. Like all Le Guin stories, it is about responsibility and consequences—and the making of hard choices.

Le Guin's other novels include *The Lathe of Heaven*, *The Beginning Place*, *The Tombs of Atuan*, *The World for World Is Forest*, *The Eye of the Heron*, and the controversial multi-media novel (it sold with a tape cassette of music, and included drawings and recipes) *Always Coming Home*, which critics seem either to love or loathe. There are four collections of her short work: *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*, *Orsinian Tales*, *The Compass Rose*, and, most recently, *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences*. Her most recent novel is *Tehanu*, a continuation of her Earthsea trilogy.

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Night came down along the snowy road from the mountains. Darkness ate the village, the stone tower of Vermare Keep, the barrow by the road. Darkness stood in the corners of the rooms of the Keep, sat under the great table and on every rafter, waited behind the shoulders of each man at the hearth.

The guest sat in the best place, a corner seat projecting from one side of the twelve-foot fireplace. The host, Freyga, Lord of the Keep, Count of the Montayna, sat with everybody else on the hearth-stones, though nearer the fire than some. Cross-legged, his big hands on his knees, he watched the fire steadily. He was thinking of the worst hour he had known in his twenty-three years, a hunting trip, three autumns ago, to the mountain lake Malafrena. He thought of how the thin barbarian arrow had stuck up straight from his father's throat; he remembered how the cold mud had oozed against his knees as he knelt by his father's body in the reeds, in the circle of the dark mountains. His father's hair had stirred a little in the lake-water. And there had been a strange taste in his own mouth, the taste of death, like licking bronze. He tasted bronze now. He listened for the women's voices in the room overhead.

The guest, a traveling priest, was talking about his travels. He came from Solariy, down in the southern plains. Even merchants had stone houses there, he said. Barons had palaces, and silver platters, and ate roast beef. Count Freyga's liege men and servants listened open-mouthed. Freyga, listening to make the minutes pass, scowled. The guest had already complained of the stables, of the cold, of mutton for breakfast dinner and supper, of the dilapidated condition of Vermare Chapel and the way Mass was said there—"Arianism!" he had muttered, sucking in his breath and crossing himself. He told old Father Egius that every soul in Vermare was damned: they had received heretical baptism. "Arianism,

Arianism!” he shouted. Father Egius, cowering, thought Arianism was a devil and tried to explain that no one in his parish had ever been possessed, except one of the count’s rams, who had one yellow eye and one blue one and had butted a pregnant girl so that she miscarried her child, but they had sprinkled holy water on the ram and it made no more trouble, indeed was a fine breeder, and the girl, who had been pregnant out of wedlock, had married a good peasant from Bara and borne him five little Christians, one a year. “Heresy, adultery, ignorance!” the foreign priest had railed. Now he prayed for twenty minutes before he ate his mutton, slaughtered, cooked, and served by the hands of heretics. What did he want? thought Freyga. Did he expect comfort, in winter? Did he think they were heathens, with his “Arianism”? No doubt he had never seen a heathen, the little, dark, terrible people of Malafrena and the farther hills. No doubt he had never had a pagan arrow shot at him. That would teach him the difference between heathens and Christian men, thought Freyga.

When the guest seemed to have finished boasting for the time being, Freyga spoke to a boy who lay beside him chin in hand: “Give us a song, Gilbert.” The boy smiled and sat up, and began at once in a high, sweet voice:

King Alexander forth he came,  
Armored in gold was Alexander,  
Golden his greaves and great helmet,  
His hauberk all of hammered gold.  
Clad in gold came the king,  
Christ he called on, crossing himself,  
    In the hills at evening,  
Forward the army of King Alexander  
Rode on their horses, a great host,  
Down to the plains of Persia To kill and conquer, they followed the  
King,  
    In the hills at evening.

The long chant droned on; Gilbert had begun in the middle and stopped in the middle, long before the death of Alexander “in the hills at evening.” It did not matter; they all knew it from beginning to end.

“Why do you have the boy sing of pagan kings?” said the guest.

Freyga raised his head. “Alexander was a great king of Christendom.”

“He was a Greek, a heathen idolator.”

“No doubt you know the song differently than we do,” Freyga said politely. “As we sing it, it says, ‘Christ he called on, crossing himself.’”

Some of his men grinned.

“Maybe your servant would sing us a better song,” Freyga added, for his politeness was genuine. And the priest’s servant, without much urging, began to sing in a nasal voice a canticle about a saint who lived for twenty years in his father’s house, unrecognized, fed on scraps. Freyga and his household listened in fascination. New songs rarely came their way. But the singer stopped short, interrupted by a strange, shrieking howl from somewhere outside the room. Freyga leapt to his feet, staring into the darkness of the hall. Then he saw that his men had not moved, that they sat silently looking up at him. Again the faint howl came from the room overhead. The young count sat down. “Finish your song,” he said. The priest’s servant gabbled out the rest of the song. Silence closed down upon its ending.

“Wind’s coming up,” a man said softly.

“An evil winter it’s been.”

“Snow to your thighs, coming through the pass from Malafrena yesterday.”

“It’s their doing.”

“Who? The mountain folk?”

“Remember the gutted sheep we found last autumn? Kass said then it was an evil sign. They’d been killing to Odne, he meant.”

“What else would it mean?”

“What are you talking about?” the foreign priest demanded.

“The mountain folk, Sir Priest. The heathen.”

“What is Odne?”

A pause.

“What do you mean, killing to Odne?”

“Well, sir, maybe it’s better not to talk about it.”

“Why?”

“Well, sir, as you said of the singing, holy things are better, tonight.” Kass the blacksmith spoke with dignity, only glancing up to indicate the room overhead; but another man, a young fellow with sores around his eyes, murmured, “The Barrow has ears, the Barrow hears...”

“Barrow? That hillock by the road, you mean?”

Silence.

Freyga turned to face the priest. “They kill to Odne,” he said in his soft voice, “on stones beside the barrows in the mountains. What’s inside the barrows, no man knows.”

“Poor heathen men, unholy men,” old Father Egius murmured sorrowfully.

“The altarstone of our chapel came from the Barrow,” said the boy Gilbert.

“What?”

“Shut your mouth,” the blacksmith said. “He means, sir, that we took the top stone from the stones beside the Barrow, a big marble stone, Father Egius blessed it and there’s no harm in it.”

“A fine altarstone,” Father Egius agreed, nodding and smiling, but on the end of his words another howl rang out from overhead. He bent his head and muttered prayers.

“You pray too,” said Freyga, looking at the stranger. He ducked his head and began to mumble, glancing at Freyga now and then from the corner of his eye.

There was little warmth in the Keep except at the hearth, and dawn found most of them still there: Father Egius curled up like an aged dormouse in the rushes, the stranger slumped in his chimney corner, hands clasped across his belly, Freyga sprawled out on his back like a man cut down in battle. His men snored around him, started in their sleep, made unfinished gestures. Freyga woke first. He stepped over the sleeping bodies and climbed the stone stairs to the floor above. Ranni the midwife

met him in the ante-room, where several girls and dogs were sleeping in a heap on a pile of sheepskins. "Not yet, count."

"But it's been two nights now—"

"Ah, she's hardly begun," the midwife said with con-tempt. "Has to rest, hasn't she?"

Freyga turned and went heavily down the twisted stairs. The woman's contempt weighed upon him. All the women, all yesterday; their faces were stern, preoccupied; they paid no attention to him. He was outside, out in the cold, insignificant. He could not do anything. He sat down at the oaken table and put his head in his hands, trying to think of Galla, his wife. She was seventeen; they had been married ten months. He thought of her round white belly. He tried to think of her face but there was nothing but the taste of bronze on his tongue. "Get me something to eat!" he shouted, bringing his fist down on the board, and the Tower Keep of Vermare woke with a jump from the grey paralysis of dawn. Boys ran about, dogs yelped, bellows roared in the kitchen, men stretched and spat by the fire. Freyga sat with his head buried in his hands.

The women came down, one or two at a time, to rest by the great hearth and have a bite of food. Their faces were stern. They spoke to each other, not to the men.

The snow had ceased and a wind blew from the mountains, piling snowdrifts against the walls and byres, a wind so cold it cut off breath in the throat like a knife.

"Why has God's word not been brought to these mountain folk of yours, these sacrificers of sheep?" That was the potbellied priest, speaking to Father Egius and the man with sores around his eyes, Stefan.

They hesitated, not sure what "sacrificers" meant.

"It's not just sheep they kill," said Father Egius, tenta-tively.

Stefan smiled. "No, no, no," he said, shaking his head.

"What do you mean?" The stranger's voice was sharp; and Father Egius, cowering slightly, said, "They—they kill goats, too."

"Sheep or goats, what's that to me? Where do they come from, these pagans? Why are they permitted to live in a Christian land?"

“They’ve always lived here,” the old priest said, puzzled.

“And you’ve never tried to bring the Holy Church among them?”

“Me?”

It was a good joke, the idea of the little old priest going up into the mountains; there was a good deal of laughter for quite a while. Father Egius, though without vanity, was perhaps a little hurt, for he finally said in a rather stiff tone, “They have their gods, sir.”

“Their idols, their devils, their what do you call it—Odne!”

“Be quiet, priest,” Freyga said suddenly. “Must you say that name? Do you know no prayers?”

After that the stranger was less haughty. Since the count had spoken harshly to him the charm of hospitality was broken, the faces that looked at him were hard. That night he was again given the corner seat by the fire, but he sat huddled up there, not spreading his knees to the warmth.

There was no singing at the hearth that night. The men talked low, silenced by Freyga’s silence. The darkness waited at their shoulders. There was no sound but the howling of the wind outside the walls and the howling of the woman upstairs. She had been still all day, but now the hoarse, dull yell came again and again. It seemed impossible to Freyga that she could still cry out. She was thin and small, a girl, she could not carry so much pain in her. “What good are they, up there!” he broke out. His men looked at him, saying nothing. “Father Egius! There is some evil in this house.”

“I can only pray, my son,” the old man said, frightened.

“Then pray! At the altar!” He hurried Father Egius before him out into the black cold, across the courtyard where dry snow whirled invisible on the wind, to the chapel. After some while he returned alone. The old priest had promised to spend the night on his knees by the fire in his little cell behind the chapel. At the great hearth only the foreign priest was still awake. Freyga sat down on the hearthstone and for a long time said nothing.

The stranger looked up and winced, seeing the count’s blue eyes staring straight at him.

“Why don’t you sleep?”

“I’m not sleepy, count.”

“It would be better if you slept.”

The stranger blinked nervously, then closed his eyes and tried to look asleep. He peered now and then under half-closed lids at Freyga and tried to repeat, without moving his lips, a prayer to his patron saint.

To Freyga he looked like a fat black spider. Rays of darkness spread out from his body, enwebbing the room.

The wind was sinking, leaving silence, in which Freyga heard his wife moaning, a dry, weak sound.

The fire died down. Ropes and webs of darkness tangled thicker and thicker around the man-spider in the corner of the hearth. A tiny glitter showed under his brows. The lower part of his face moved a little. He was casting his spells deeper, deeper. The wind had fallen. There was no sound at all.

Freyga stood up. The priest looked up at the broad golden figure looming against darkness, and when Freyga said, “Come with me,” he was too frightened to move. Freyga took his arm and pulled him up. “Count, count, what do you want?” he whispered, trying to free himself.

“Come with me,” Freyga said, and led him over the stone floor, through darkness, to the door.

Freyga wore a sheepskin tunic; the priest only a woollen gown. “Count,” he gasped, trotting beside Freyga across the court, “it’s cold, a man could freeze to death, there might be wolves—”

Freyga shot the arm-thick bolts of the outer gates of the Keep and swung one portal open. “Go on,” he said, gesturing with his sheathed sword.

The priest stopped short. “No,” he said.

Freyga unsheathed his sword, a short, thick blade. Jabbing its point at the rump beneath the woolen gown, he drove the priest before him out the gate, down the village street, out onto the rising road that led to the mountains. They went slowly, for the snow was deep and their feet broke



through its crust at each step. The air was perfectly still now, as if frozen. Freyga looked up at the sky. Overhead between high faint clouds stood the star-shape with a swordbelt of three bright stars. Some called the figure the Warrior, others called it the Silent One, Odne the Silent.

The priest muttered one prayer after another, a steady pattering mumble, drawing breath with a whistling sound. Once he stumbled and fell face down in the snow. Freyga pulled him to his feet. He looked up at the young man's face in the starlight, but said nothing. He shambled on, praying softly and steadily.

The tower and village of Vermare were dark behind them; around them were empty hills and plains of snow, pale in the starlight. Beside the road was a hillock, less than a man's height, grave-shaped. Beside it, bared of snow by the wind, stood a short thick pillar or altar built of uncut stones. Freyga took the priest's shoulder, forcing him off the road and to the altar beside the Barrow. "Count, count—" the priest gasped when Freyga seized his head and forced it back. His eyes looked white in the starlight, his mouth was open to scream, but the scream was only a bubbling wheeze as Freyga slit his throat.

Freyga forced the corpse to bend over the altar, and cut and tore the thick gown away till he could slash the belly open. Blood and entrails gushed out over the dry stones of the altar and smoked on the dry snow. The gutted corpse fell forward over the stones like an empty coat, the arms dangling.

The living man sank down on the thin, wind-scoured snow beside the Barrow, sword still in hand. The earth rocked and heaved, and voices went crying past him in the darkness.

When he lifted his head and looked about him everything had changed. The sky, starless, rose in a high pale vault. Hills and far mountains stood distinct, unshadowed. The shapeless corpse slumped over the altar was black, the snow at the foot of the Barrow was black, Freyga's hands and sword-blade were black. He tried to wash his hands with snow, and the sting of it woke him. He got up, his head swimming, and stumbled back to Vermare on numb legs. As he went he felt the west wind, soft and damp, rising with the day around him, bringing the thaw.

Ranni was standing by the great hearth while the boy Gilbert built up the fire. Her face was puffy and grey. She spoke to Freyga with a sneer: "Well, count, high time you're back!"

He stood breathing heavily, slack-faced, and did not speak.

“Come along, then,” said the midwife. He followed her up the twisting stairs. The straw that had covered the floor was swept aside into the fireplace. Galla lay again in the wide box-like bed, the marriage bed. Her closed eyes were deep-sunken. She was snoring faintly. “Shh!” the midwife said, as he started to her. “Be quiet! Look here.”

She was holding up a tightly wrapped bundle.

After some while, as he still said nothing, she whispered sharply, “A boy. Fine, big.”

Freyga put out one hand towards the bundle. His fingernails were caked and checked with brown.

The midwife drew the bundle closer to herself. “You’re cold,” she said in the sharp, contemptuous whisper. “Here.” She drew back a fold to show for a moment a very tiny, purplish human face in the bundle, then rewrapped it.

Freyga went to the foot of the bed and knelt on the floor there, bending till his head was on the stones of the floor. He murmured, “Lord Christ, be praised, be thanked...”

The Bishop of Solariy never found out what had become of his envoy to the northwest. Probably, being a zealous man, he had ventured too far into the mountains where heathen folk still lived, and had suffered martyrdom.

Count Freyga’s name lived long in the history of his province. During his lifetime the Benedictine monastery on the mountain above Lake Malafrena was established. Count Freyga’s flocks and Count Freyga’s sword fed and defended the monks in their first hard winters there. In the bad Latin of their chronicles, in black ink on the lasting vellum, he and his son after him are named with gratitude, staunch defenders of the Church of God.

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