

There Are More Things

To the memory of H. P. Lovecraft

Just as I was about to take my last examination at the University of Texas, in Austin, I learned that my uncle Edwin Arnett had died of an aneurysm on the remote frontier of South America. I felt what we always feel when someone dies—the sad awareness, now futile, of how little it would have cost us to have been more loving. One forgets that one is a dead man conversing with dead men. The subject I was studying was philosophy; I recalled that there in the Red House near Lomas, my uncle, without employing a single proper noun, had revealed to me the lovely perplexities of the discipline. One of the dessert oranges was the tool he employed for initiating me into Berkeleyan idealism; he used the chessboard to explain the Eleatic paradoxes. Years later, he lent me Hinton's treatises, which attempt to prove the reality of a fourth dimension in space, a dimension the reader is encouraged to intuit by means of complicated exercises with colored cubes. I shall never forget the prisms and pyramids we erected on the floor of his study.

My uncle was an engineer. Before retiring from his job at the railway, he made the decision to move to Turdera,* which offered him the combined advantages of a virtual wilderness of solitude and the proximity of Buenos Aires. There was nothing more natural than that the architect of his home there should be his close friend Alexander Muir. This strict man professed the strict doctrine of Knox; my uncle, in the manner of almost all the gentlemen of his time, was a freethinker—or an agnostic, rather—yet at the same time he was interested in theology, the way he was interested in Hinton's fallacious cubes and the well-thought-out nightmares of the young Wells. He liked dogs; he had a big sheepdog he called Samuel Johnson, in memory of Lichfield, the distant town he had been born in.

The Red House stood on a hill, hemmed in to the west by swampy land.

The Norfolk pines along the outside of the fence could not temper its air of oppressiveness. Instead of flat roofs where one might take the air on a sultry night, the house had a peaked roof of slate tiles and a square tower with a clock; these structures seemed to weigh down the walls and stingy windows of the house. As a boy, I accepted those facts of ugliness as one accepts all those incompatible things that only by reason of their coexistence are called "the universe."

I returned to my native country in 1921. To stave off lawsuits, the house had been auctioned off; it had been bought by a foreigner, a man named Max Preetorius, who paid double the amount bid by the next highest bidder. After the bill of sale was signed, he arrived one evening with two assistants and they threw all the furniture, all the books, and all the household goods in the house into a dump not far from the Military Highway. (I recall with sadness the diagrams in the volumes of Hinton and the great terraqueous globe.) The next day, he went to Muir and suggested certain changes to the house, which Muir indignantly refused to carry out. Subsequently, a firm from Buenos Aires undertook the work. The carpenters from the village refused to refurnish the house; a certain Mariani, from Glew,* at last accepted the conditions that Preetorius laid down. For a fortnight, he was to work at night, behind closed doors. And it was by night that the new resident of Red House took up his habitation. The windows were never opened anymore, but through the darkness one could make out cracks of light. One morning the milkman came upon the body of the sheepdog, decapitated and mutilated, on the walk. That winter the Norfolk pines were cut down. No one ever saw Preetorius again; he apparently left the country soon after.

Such reports, as the reader may imagine, disturbed me. I know that I am notorious for my curiosity, which has, variously, led me into marriage with a woman utterly unlike myself (solely so that I might discover who she was and what she was really like), into trying laudanum (with no appreciable result), into an exploration of transfinite numbers, and into the terrifying adventure whose story I am about to tell. Inevitably, I decided to look into this matter.

My first step was to go and see Alexander Muir. I remembered him as a ramrod-straight, dark man whose leanness did not rule out strength; now he was stooped with years and his jet black beard was gray. He greeted me at the door of his house in Temperley—which predictably enough resembled my uncle's, as both houses conformed to the solid rules of the good poet and bad builder William Morris.

Our conversation was flinty; not for nothing is the thistle the symbol of

Scotland. I sensed, however, that the strong Ceylon tea and the judicious plate of scones (which my host broke and buttered as though I were still a child) were, in fact, a frugal Calvinistic feast laid out to welcome his old friend's nephew. His theological debates with my uncle had been a long game of chess, which demanded of each player the collaborative spirit of an opponent.

Time passed and I could not bring myself to broach my subject. There was an uncomfortable silence, and then Muir himself spoke.

"Young man," he said, "you have not taken such trouble to come here to talk to me about Edwin or the United States, a country that holds little interest for me. What keeps you from sleeping at night is the sale of the Red House, and that curious individual that's bought it. Well, it keeps me from sleeping, too. Frankly, I find the whole affair most disagreeable, but I'll tell you what I can. It shan't be much."

In a moment, he went on, without haste.

"Before Edwin died, the mayor called me into his office. The parish priest was there. They wanted me to draw up the plans for a Catholic chapel. They would pay me well. I gave them my answer on the spot. No, I told them, I am a servant of the Lord, and I cannot commit the abomination of erecting altars for the worship of idols."

Here he stopped.

"That's all?" I hazarded.

"No. That Jewish whelp Preetorius wanted me to destroy my work, the house I'd built, and put up a monstrosity in its place. Abomination takes many forms."

He pronounced these words with great gravity, then he stood up.

As I turned the corner, Daniel Iberra approached me. We knew each other the way people in small towns do. He suggested we walk back together. I've never held any brief for hellions and that lot, and I could foresee a sordid string of more or less violent and more or less apocryphal bar stories, but I resigned myself and said I'd walk with him. It was almost dark. When he saw the Red House up on its hill a few blocks away, Iberra turned down another street. I asked him why. His answer was not what I'd expected.

"I'm don Felipe's right arm. Nobody's ever been able to say I backed down from anything. You probably remember that fellow Urgoiti that came all the way here from Merlo looking for me, and what happened to him when he found me. Well, listen—a few nights ago I was coming back from a big whoop-de-doo. About a hundred yards from the house, I saw something. My pinto spooked, and if I hadn't talked her down and

turned down along that alleyway there, I might not be telling the story. What I saw was . . ." He shook his head. Then, angrily, he cursed.

That night I couldn't sleep. Toward sunrise I dreamed of an engraving in the style of Piranesi, one I'd never seen before or perhaps had seen and forgotten—an engraving of a kind of labyrinth. It was a stone amphitheater with a border of cypresses, but its walls stood taller than the tops of the trees. There were no doors or windows, but it was pierced by an infinite series of narrow vertical slits. I was using a magnifying glass to try to find the Minotaur. At last I saw it. It was the monster of a monster; it looked less like a bull than like a buffalo, and its human body was lying on the ground. It seemed to be asleep, and dreaming—but dreaming of what, or of whom?

That evening I passed by the Red House. The gate in the fence was locked, and some iron bars had been twisted around it. What had been the garden was now weeds. Off to the right there was a shallow ditch, and its banks were trampled.

I had one card still up my sleeve, but I put off playing it for several days, not only because I sensed how utterly useless it would be but also because it would drag me to the inevitable, the ultimate.

Finally, with no great hopes, I went to Glew. Mariani, the carpenter, now getting on in years, was a fat, rosy Italian—a very friendly, unpretentious fellow. The minute I saw him I discarded the stratagems that had seemed so promising the day before. I gave him my card, which he spelled out to himself aloud with some ceremony, and with a slight reverential hitch when he came to the *Ph.D.* I told him I was interested in the furnishings he had made for the house that had belonged to my uncle, in Turdera. The man talked on and on. I will not attempt to transcribe his many (and expressively gesticulated) words, but he assured me that his motto was "meet the client's demands, no matter how outrageous," and told me he'd lived up to it. After rummaging around in several boxes, he showed me some papers I couldn't read, signed by the elusive Preetorius. (No doubt he took me for a lawyer.) When we were saying our good-byes, he confided that all the money in the world couldn't persuade him to set foot again in Turdera, much less in that house. He added that the customer is always right, but that in his humble opinion, Sr. Preetorius was "not quite right," if I knew what he meant—he tapped his forehead with his finger. Then, regretting he'd gone so far, he would say no more. I could get not another word out of him.

I had foreseen this failure, but it is one thing to foresee something, and another thing when it comes to pass.

Over and over I told myself that time—that infinite web of yesterday, today, the future, forever, never—is the only true enigma. Such profound thoughts availed me nothing; after dedicating my evening to the study of Schopenhauer or Royce I would still wander, night after night, along the dirt roads bordering the Red House. At times I would make out a very white light up on the hill; at others I would think I could hear moaning. This went on until the nineteenth of January.

It was one of those days in Buenos Aires when one feels not only insulted and abused by the summer, but actually degraded. It was about eleven that night when the storm clouds burst. First came the south wind, and then sheets, waves, torrents of water. I scurried about in the darkness, trying to find a tree to take shelter under. In the sudden sharp light from a bolt of lightning, I found that I was but steps from the fence. I am not certain whether it was with fear or hopefulness that I tried the gate. Unexpectedly, it opened. Buffeted by the storm, I made my way in; sky and earth alike impelled me. The front door of the house was also ajar. A gust of rain lashed my face, and I went in.

Inside, the floor tiles had been taken up; my feet trod grass in clumps and patches. A sweetish, nauseating odor filled the house. To the left or right, I am not sure which, I stumbled onto a stone ramp. I scrambled up it. Almost unthinkingly my hand sought the light switch.

The dining room and library of my recollections were now (the dividing wall having been torn out) one large ruinous room, with pieces of furniture scattered here and there. I will not attempt to describe them, because in spite of the pitiless white light I am not certain I actually saw them. Let me explain: In order truly to see a thing, one must first understand it. An armchair implies the human body, its joints and members; scissors, the act of cutting. What can be told from a lamp, or an automobile? The savage cannot really perceive the missionary's Bible; the passenger does not see the same ship's rigging as the crew. If we truly saw the universe, perhaps we would understand it.

None of the insensate forms I saw that night corresponded to the human figure or any conceivable use. They inspired horror and revulsion. In one corner I discovered a vertical ladder that rose to the floor above. The wide iron rungs, no more than ten in all, were spaced irregularly; that ladder, which implied hands and feet, was comprehensible, and somehow it relieved me. I turned off the light and waited for a while in the darkness. I could hear not the slightest sound, but the presence of so many incomprehensible things unnerved me. At last, I made my decision.

Upstairs, my trembling hand once again reached out for the light switch. The nightmare prefigured by the downstairs rooms stirred and flowered in the upper story. There were many objects, or several interwoven ones. I now recall a long, U-shaped piece of furniture like an operating table, very high, with circular openings at the extremes. It occurred to me that this might be the bed used by the resident of the house, whose monstrous anatomy was revealed obliquely by this object in much the way the anatomy of an animal, or a god, may be known by the shadow it casts. From some page of Lucan, read years ago and then forgotten, there came to my lips the word *amphisbæna*, which suggested (though by no means fully captured) what my eyes would later see. I also recall a V of mirrors that faded into shadows above.

What must the inhabitant of this house be like? What must it be seeking here, on this planet, which must have been no less horrible to it than it to us? From what secret regions of astronomy or time, from what ancient and now incalculable twilight, had it reached this South American suburb and this precise night?

I felt that I had intruded, uninvited, into chaos. Outside, the rain had stopped. I looked at my watch and saw with astonishment that it was almost two A.M. I left the light on and began cautiously to climb back down the ladder. Climbing down what I had once climbed up was not impossible—climbing down before the inhabitant came back. I conjectured that it hadn't locked the front door and the gate because it hadn't known how.

My feet were just touching the next to last rung when I heard something coming up the ramp—something heavy and slow and plural. Curiosity got the better of fear, and I did not close my eyes.