

454 ANGELL

by Anthony Pearce

It is as the ebullient glow of August subsides, hiding once again behind the encroaching reign of autumn, that I lay down this annual tome, expecting not that it will be believed, but that it shall fulfill the geas enforced upon me by a looming headmaster.

With each new submersion into submission, it has been forced upon me, this recollection of events, which - though not truly within the auspice of your authority - it is impingent upon me to make a full recounting. What joys or sorrows occupy the vacuum which nestles betwixt our slavish months to these brownstone halls, should be the province of my heart and mind alone. But never can it be said that a figure of authority, particularly a yardstick wielding, martinet such as these instructors, should know the parameters of their intrusion, or the borders of their student's privacy.

And so here do I lay down a retelling of such events as occupied my winsome window of freedom book-ended by the joyful jettison of birthing June bugs and the simmer of a sweltering September.

It was at my mother's side that the first few sunsets of the long holiday found me, lounging languidly on one end of the chaise on which she stretched her adult frame to its length. Each of us gave the fullness of our focus to an engrossing tome. Mother, curving the upper corner of each page with a slowness that invoked the slippery, sliding of slugs in the garden. Myself, I hungrily devoured a fanciful tale, which ushered my cerebral escape from the vast, incapacitating exclusion, which filled my waking days.

At length a sibilant shushing crept to my awareness and, realizing my mother was dozing - book hooked crookedly in the delta of her arm - I dismissed it as the passive breathing of her pre-twilight slumber. However, noting the oscillating tide of her chest

and the true murmur ushering from her barely parted lips, I experienced a gradual dawning that the sound I heard - or believed I heard - did not emanate from her.

My head turned, like a vane perched about a rooftop apex on a still and windless day. Curious as my young heart was, it remained yet balanced against a tinge of terror. This reflected perhaps my mind's desperate measure at wisdom beyond its ken and a determination - for its own sake - not to know. Likewise, my eyes, cresting the arm of the chaise as they searched for the sound's origin, refused to find focus. Despite these unconscious defenses, still I made pictures of my world.

The gas lamp was not hissing.

Neither was there any audible emission from the steam vent in the wainscoting. These were not the source. What was, I wondered.

Adjacent to our sitting room ran the anterior hall, connecting the downstairs provinces. Low pillars flanked each terminus, four in all. They rose roughly to my shoulder and were topped with carved busts, poor recreations of family members long since returned to earth and ash. It was on the nearest of these that my gaze landed. The base of the pillar, abutting the contours of the wainscoting, made for a sliver of relief betwixt the sculpture and the wall against which it stood. Just beyond this, a narrow door, all red oak mounted within a regressed cherrywood frame, hung ever so slightly ajar, so that a black slice of shadowy interior hovered, revealed.

My eye would not have discovered it were not the blackness in such stark contrast to the pale pillar and the muted tones of the aged wallpaper in the hall. This, coupled with the barest of movement, as if some unseen hand was rocking the door to and fro in absent nonchalance. Squeezed as my perspective was, the Scythian darkness and bobbing portal

gave, to my innocent eye, a sense that the onyx sliver was changing shape, beckoning me…into the cellar.

There was no further revelation this day as my first daring attempt to rise stirred my mother, who awoke all peckish. But that evening, as I settled into the enveloping veil of sleep, I heard from somewhere in the house, a scratching. It seemed at first to be perhaps the branches of the old willow in the court, swaying aimlessly, ushered by the winds of night. However, a glance to my window affirmed that the dusky garden was still, and the scraping sound both persistent…and indoors. I will not profess falsely that I dared follow the audible intrusion to its source that night. Rather, I gripped tightly to downy bedcovers, turned my back to the noise and, after a fitful time without measuring, succumbed to sleep.

The sounds met me there.

I do not recall pictures of those dreams, a comfort which was to change decidedly throughout those sadly brief months of summer. I only remembered on waking, the lap of waves, and knocking of wood to wood, as if the periodic kiss of dock from dinghy. There were murmurs, nearly lost to winds, which, while having the hint of speech about them, were not of a language or cadence either clear or familiar. These, I was left with when I awakened. Nothing more.

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The next few days were pleasant enough, beset with no intrusions or terrors, but my gaze fell ever to the cellar door, closed presently, but now filled with knowing. It was on the following Friday that my mother received a telegram from my Aunts who were away. All aflutter, she made her apologies, packed hurriedly with some assistance from

servants, and departed in a hansom. I was left alone, but for a minimal staff who prepared meals, dressed linens and the like, and departed, always before nightfall.

The first such night was perhaps the worst, knowing not what remained in the house with me as the latch turned with the servants' exeunt. They wasted no time and indeed, the click of the door was met with, what to my ear, sounded like a wafting chuckle from the cellar.

My imagination, it was not. Accompanied as it was by a sting to tongue and sinus akin to salty sea air.

I have never liked the beach. I do not feel at all at home beside the sea and its denizens do not appeal, even when prepared and served at my table. There was no escape within the house from the assault of sound and smell. No surcease, as I hurried from room to room seeking some barrier which would separate me from those foul intrusions upon my senses. The longest night I can recall, I was rewarded with no sleep until morning and my eyes must have lit like the dawn when first I heard a key in the latch. Excitedly I raced to meet my Mother's return, but found myself instead wrapping my arms embarrassingly about the waist of our cook.

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In a week's time I received a letter from Mother explaining that some legal matters had arisen and she would be some time with Aunt's Anne and Lillian sorting it out. That week had not been without incidents of my own, and in fact, the nearly nightly visitations had continued rather than abated. They had not however, accelerated, and I was beginning to acclimate to the sensations almost with a singular sense of familiarity. I

missed my Mother terribly, there is no doubt, but with my Father on indefinite sabbatical, I think I can be forgiven my longing for the comforts of family.

This week had also not been without dreams. Though still mirroring the physical sensations of my waking hours, there was a gradual emerging of imagery in my visions asleep. A fog had joined me. Not the veil of obscurement of which all dreams make use, but a wafting blanket, rolling quickly, purposefully, away from me across the surface of what, night after progressive night, I gradually took to be a wide, expansive lake.

Following the most illuminating of these dreams, I penned a letter to my mother assuring her that I was well in her absence, and she should not burden her dealings with concern for me, or the need for a hasty return.

Having posted my missive, I returned home, immediately noting a peculiar phenomenon about the hall floor. Creeping along the seam of one floorboard, extended a viscous trail of liquid. On closer examination, I discovered a brackish pool gathered about the base of the cellar's entrance. This, at first perplexed me, as the stairs of the cellar descend rather sharply into its recesses, offering no surface level with the doorway for any such fluid to gather. Kneeling to it and dipping one tentative finger, I could tell ere I raised it to my tongue that it bore the salty tang of seawater.

Caution be damned to any child with a mystery at hand, and with the light of day as my ward, I took hold of the polished brass knob and opened wide the cellar door. The light from the hall found its way past me, illuminating the rippling surface, which I took immediately for what it was. The cellar was flooded. A deep, contained quarry of pipes and foundation descended before me, which no light, save what played across its surface, could penetrate.

My gaze was captured by so singular an occurrence, here in my own home, and I must have stared for time immeasurable at the gentle ripples and swirls about its glassy facade. I am not certain if I saw, or rather sensed, movement within. Writhing, clutching, crawling things, aged by millennia and awaiting their chance to arise. It was perhaps, my fancy, but, when at last I broke the hypnotic grip I found myself chilled to my skeleton and nursing a sturdy Earl Grey and a soothing, vegetable bisque in our well-lighted kitchen.

Whatever should I do? The flood had not been of my making, but surely no child left alone was ever judged innocent of a mishap therein. And this was no small matter, no spill of milk on white tiled floor. I elected to investigate further, if only to claim due diligence in the face of my accusers. Donning my gaiters and readying an umbrella--do not ask what perverse and reverse logic suggested this need to me--I opened, once again, the portal to the cellar.

There was no sign of water. If it had drained away in the last hour it must have been by some cyclopean sump device, a vacuum of tremendous proportions and power. For not only was the cellar no longer a housebound shipwreck, but nary a puddle remained upon the stairs. I took my first step downward. Checking my sturdiness with the rail agrip in one hand and my umbrella - still tightly closed, I was after all indoors - wielded aggressively in the other, I descended further.

Midway down, the stairs transition from a skeletal wooden structure to masonry ascending directly from the cellar floor. This was no new particular, I assure you. I mention it only to remark upon the arrangement of the lighting, for it is at this point that a lamp hangs directly downward affixed to the crossbeams overhead. I am, admittedly, too

small to reach it, but it was here that the umbrella came into good use and I was able, after several tries, to harness it with the handle. However, before I could pull the lamp close enough to light, I was met with a startling, stabbing pain in my hand upon the rail. I jerked back, feeling lacerations across my fingertips. The lamp, though unlit, did still serve to reveal to me my pain's origin. For, now swinging, its base reflected the fractured light from the hall above, becoming something of an impromptu lighthouse on the shores of my mysterious sea. And sea it was, for I was able to make out jagged edges decorating the railing from this point downward…barnacles.

It was as if the single window of existence had allowed the vanishing flood to implant a residue of centuries. Staring, confounded by this enterprise, I became aware of a shadow above me, something mirroring the lamp in its decreasing arc. Following this to its source, I captured a brief, but sufficient impression. Swinging above me, draped entwined with the lamp's handle, was a narrow, glistening strand of seaweed.

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Following this, they came to me nightly; whispering, murmuring, teaching me a language humankind was never meant to pronounce. I dreamed lucidly, every night without exception, as if making up for centuries of silence. Some nights I was blessed with complete stories, expansive visions of cyclopean cities, and of beings too large to take all in one view. Other nights there were fragments, fractured glimpses of tombs and the dead, of mist covered, seaside villages, and townsfolk with awkward gaits and bulbous eyes.

Some nights, they urged me so harshly from dreams to waking that I felt compelled to chronicle such as I could recall, before finding any hope of rest. In time, my

recollections became clearer and I was able to appease their insistent urgings, earning the occasional window of surcease.

At length, I received a letter from my Mother, tinged both with sadness and love. She would be returning, along with my Grandfather and Aunts, all of whom were now meant to reside with us here at 454 Angell St. She professed her love and excitement to hold me once again, and assured me that she would make up for our lost summer together.

With only a few days of privacy left me, I made ready for their return. I had highlighted many portions of my dream diary, circling and underlining some passages almost to obliteration. From these, I made my preparations, gathering candles and other supplies from the linen cupboard and throughout the house. Recent rains had left their residue and I recovered water and mud from a formidable puddle off our back stoop and a scrambled search through the disposed remains of several dinners provided the carcass fragments I required. As night fell and the servants once again left me to my devices, I descended to the cellar and made ready for the return of the Deep Ones.

I laid clean linens beneath me, describing a shape explained to me in a dream involving a mad Arab. This design, I outlined with a trail of wax, marking each necessary pinnacle with a solitary candle. I worked diligently in the now familiar and singularly comforting auspice of the cellar, reveling in its coolness and similarity to the earthen burrows of the dead revealed to me in my dreams. When mixtures of water and earth were married with other, less elemental, components, I at last knelt within my flickering temple and spoke words unspoken since before man emerged from the ocean’s dark and chilling bosom.

“Ph’nglui mglw’nafh C’thulu R’lyah wgah’nagl fhtagn,” I recited, as phonetically as I had heard in my dreams and as faithfully as my human tongue would allow. I continued and, at length, was rewarded.

A sloshing, splashing sound issued from a deep, lightless corner of the cellar. Thick, brackish water slid from the shadows in every direction, encompassing my candlelit fortress. My heart caught sharply in my throat, as I feared the flood would overtake me, dousing my flames and, once again, filling the cellar, taking me with it to an abrupt and atramentous grave.

But the viscous perimeter held its position, pausing almost respectfully at a distance. Moments passed, my wide eyes peering into the shadows deepening beyond my candlelight. And so it was that a faint and hollow popping sound came to my ears. It was as though bulbs of seaweed were crushed underfoot, or the cups of a gigantic tentacle were finding their way across the concrete cellar floor.

As indeed they were.

A thick, fleshly, tendril twisted into and out of the light. Visited by others, one central appendage made its way across the floor, conveyed along an extending pool of Stygian seawater. The cellar stank, a piscean miasma which choked bile up into my throat. This scathing burn invoked a pause in my incantation, which continued on without me, hummed and murmured by masses yet hidden in the shadowy veil. It was carried across eternity on a thousand inhuman tongues, from the mouths of beasts neither fish nor human, which lurked and swayed just beyond my aura of firelight.

The tentacle approached, a writhing, questing thing, which made its way unerringly to my side. Stricken steadfast, I felt it sweep up the length of my body, finally

touching down on the flushed flesh atop my throat. It caressed the course of my cheek and, on it, discovered the signature of my terror; the salt heavy stream of a tear. I became aware of other tentacles, smaller, yet still enormous for all that. These probed blindly about the cellar, which now seemed to echo great, crumbling cities constructed at nonsensical angles. Some found me there, and joined in the gentle cradling of the great and slimy appendage.

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By the time my Mother returned home, I was fully immersed in chronicling every vision my new friends would share with me by day or night. I remained completely preoccupied with this endeavor, giving only cursory notice of the family members who had joined us. The cellar seemed to contain no shred of indication that any water or presence had ever existed within. I was elated with my discoveries, but learned quickly that my Mother was at ill ease with discussions of the Deep Ones, particularly over supper. My Grandfather alone seemed open to my narratives and reciprocated frequently with weird and extraordinary tales of his own.

It was a long and restless summer, but I emerged from it with new friendships and purpose. The Deep Ones are ever with me, their murmurs filling my ears with the promise of kindnesses for my diligence and dedication. Only I, amongst all boys, will remain by their side when insanity has claimed all humankind in its grip. The geometry you hold so dearly as truth will fade to memory, replaced with a science and structure known only to vastly older, wiser beings. I can feel them now, rocking my desk. Do you see how it moves, as if great, writhing forces exist within? Do you hear the splash of water? Smell the biting sting of the salt sea air?

That yardstick will do you no avail.

They are here.

Howard L.

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