

THE SHADOW AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD

Before there occurred anything of a truly prodigious nature, the season had manifestly erupted with some feverish intent. This, at least, was how it appeared to us, whether we happened to live in town or somewhere outside its limits. (And traveling between town and countryside was Mr. Marble, who had been studying the seasonal signs far longer and in greater depth than we, disclosing prophecies that no one would credit at the time.) On the calendars which hung in so many of our homes, the monthly photograph illustrated the spirit of the numbered days below it: sheaves of cornstalks standing brownish and brittle in a newly harvested field, a narrow house and wide barn in the background, a sky of empty light above, and fiery leafage frolicking about the edges of the scene. But something dark, something abysmal always finds its way into the bland beauty of such pictures, something that usually holds itself in abeyance, some entwining presence that we always know is there. And it was exactly this presence that had gone into crisis, or perhaps had been secretly invoked by small shadowy voices calling out in the midst of our dreams. There came a bitter scent into the air, as of sweet wine turning to vinegar, and there was a hysteric brilliance flourished by the trees in town as well as those in the woods beyond, while along the roads between were the intemperate displays of thorn apple, sumac, and towering sunflowers that nodded behind crooked roadside fences. Even the stars of chill nights seemed to grow delirious and take on the tints of an earthly inflammation. Finally, there was a moonlit field where a scarecrow had been left to watch over ground that had long been cleared yet would not turn cold.

Adjacent to the edge of town, the field allowed full view of itself from so many of our windows. It lay spacious beyond tilting fence-posts and under a bright round moon, uncluttered save for the peaked silhouettes of corn shocks and a manlike shape that stood fixed in the nocturnal solitude. The head of the figure was slumped forward, as if a grotesque slumber had overtaken its straw-stuffed body, and the arms were slackly extended in a way that suggested some

incredible gesture toward flight. For a moment it seemed to be an insistent wind which was flapping those patched-up overalls and fluttering the worn flannel of those shirt sleeves. And it would seem a forceful wind indeed which caused that stitched-up head to nod in its dreams. But nothing else joined in such movements: the withered leaves of the cornstalks were stiff and unstirring, the trees of the distant woods were in a lull against the clear night. Only one thing appeared to be living where the moonlight spread across that dead field. And there were some who claimed that the scarecrow actually raised its arms and its empty face to the sky, as though declaring itself to the heavens, while others thought that its legs kicked wildly, like those of a man who is hanged, and that they kept on kicking for the longest time before the thing collapsed and lay quiet. Many of us, we discovered, had been nudged from our beds that night, called as witnesses to this obscure spectacle. Afterward, the sight we had seen, whatever we believed its reason, would not rest within us but snatched at the edges of our sleep until morning.

And during the overcast hours of the following day we could not keep ourselves from visiting the place around which various rumors had hastily arisen. As pilgrims we wandered into that field, scrutinizing the debris of its harvest for augural signs, circling that scarecrow as if it were a great idol in shabby disguise, a sacred avatar out of season. But everything upon that land seemed unwilling to support our hunger for revelation, and our congregation was lost in fidgeting bemusement. (With the exception, of course, of Mr. Marble, whose eyes, we recall, were gleaming with perceptions he could not offer us in any words we would understand.) The sky had hidden itself behind a leaden vault of clouds, depriving us of the crucial element of pure sunlight which we needed to fully burn off the misty dreams of the past night. A vine-twisted stone wall along the property line of the farm was the same shade as the sky, while the dormant vines themselves were as colorless as the stone they enmeshed like a strange network of dead veins. But this calculated grayness was merely an aspect of the scene, for the colors of the abundant woods along the margins of the landscape were undulled, as if those radiant leaves possessed some inner source of illumination or stood in contrast to some deeper shadow which they served to mask.

Such conditions no doubt impeded our efforts to come to terms with our fears about that particular field. Above all these manifestations, however, was the fact that the earth of those harvested acres, especially in the area surrounding the scarecrow, was unnaturally warm for the season. It seemed, in fact, that a late

harvest was due. And some insisted that the odd droning noises that filled the air could not be blamed on the legions of local cicadas but indeed rose up from under the ground.

By the time of twilight, only a few stragglers remained in the field, among them the old farmer who owned this suddenly notorious acreage. We knew that he shared the same impulse as the rest of us when he stepped up to his scarecrow and began to tear the impostor to pieces. Others joined in the vandalism, pulling out handfuls of straw and stripping away the clothes until they had exposed what lay beneath them—the strange and unexpected sight.

For the skeleton of the thing should have been merely two crosswise planks. We verified this common fact with its maker, and he swore that no other materials had been used. Yet the shape that stood before us was of a wholly different nature. It was something black and twisted into the form of a man, something that seemed to have come up from the earth and grown over the wooden planks like a dark fungus, consuming the structure. There were now black legs that hung as if charred and withered; there was a head that sagged like a sack of ashes upon a meager body of blackness; and there were thin arms stretched like knobby branches from a lightning-scorched tree. All of this was supported by a thick, dark stalk which rose from the earth and reached into the effigy like a hand into a puppet.

And as that sunless day began to dim, our vision was still held by that thing which dangled ominously in the dusk. Its composition appeared to be of the blackest earth, of earth that had gone stagnant somewhere in its depths, where a rich loam had festered into a bog of shadows. Soon we realized that each of us had fallen silent, entranced by a deep blackness which seemed to absorb our sight but which exposed nothing to scrutiny except an abyss in the outline of a man. Even when we ventured to lay our hands on that mass of darkness, we found only greater mysteries. For there was almost no tangible aspect to it, merely a hint of material sensation, barely the feel of wind or water. It seemed to possess no more substance than a few shifting flames, but flames of only the slightest warmth, black flames that have curled together to take on the molten texture of spoiled fruit. And there was a vague sense of circulation, as though a kind of serpentine life swirled gently within. But no one could stand to keep his hold upon it for long before stepping away.

“Damn the thing, it’s not going to be rooted to my land,” said the old farmer. Then he walked off toward the barn. And like the rest of us he was trying to rub something from the hand that had touched the shriveled scarecrow, something

that could not be seen.

He returned to us with an armory of axes, shovels, and other implements for uprooting what had grown upon his land, this eccentricity of the harvest. It would seem to have been a simple task: the ground was curiously soft all around the base of that black growth and its tenuous substance could hardly resist the wide blade of the farmer's axe. But when the old man swung and tried to split the thing like a piece of firewood, the blade would not cleave. The axe entered and was closed upon, as if sunk within a viscous mire. The farmer pulled at the handle and managed to dislodge the axe, but he immediately let it fall from his hands. "It was pulling back on me," he said in a low voice. "And you heard that sound." Indeed, the sound which had haunted the area all that day—like innumerable insects laughing—did seem to rise in pitch and intensity when the thing was struck.

Without a word, we began digging up the earth where that thick black stalk was buried. We dug fairly deep before the approaching night forced us to abandon our efforts. Yet no matter how far down we burrowed, it was not far enough to reach the bottom of that sprouting blackness. Furthermore, our attempts became hindered by a perverse reluctance, as in the instance of someone who is hesitant to have a diseased part of his own body cut away in order to keep the disease from spreading.

The clouds of that day had lingered to hide the moon, and in the darkness our voices whispered various strategies, so that we might yet accomplish what we had thereto failed in doing. Nor did any of our words now rise above a whisper, although none of us would have said why this was so.

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The great shadow of a moonless night encompassed the landscape, preserving us from seeing the old farmer's field and what was tenanted there. And yet so many of the houses in town were in vigil throughout those dark hours. Soft lights shone through curtained windows along the length of each street, where our trim wooden homes seemed as small as dollhouses beneath the dark rustling depths of the season. Above the gathered roofs hovered the glass globes of streetlamps, like little moons set inside the dense leaves of elms and oaks and maples. Even in the night, the light shining through those leaves betrayed the festival of colors seething within them, blazing auras which had not faded with the passing days, a plague of colors that had already begun to infect our dreams. This prodigy had

by then become connected in our minds with that field just outside of town and the strange growth which there had taken root.

Thus, a sense of urgency led us back to that place, where we found the old farmer waiting for us as the frigid aurora of dawn appeared above the distant woods. Our eyes scanned the frost-powdered earth and studied every space among shadows and corn shocks spread out over the land, searching for what was no longer present in the scene. “It’s gone back,” the farmer revealed to us. “Gone into the earth like something hiding in its shell. Don’t walk there,” he warned, pointing to the mouth of a wide pit.

We gathered about the edge of this opening in the ground, gazing into its depths. Even full daybreak did not show us the bottom of that dark well. Our speculations were brief and futile. Some of us picked up the shovels lying nearby, as if to begin the long duty of filling in the great aperture. “No use in that,” said the farmer. He then found a large stone and dropped it straight down the shaft. We waited and waited; we put our heads close to the hole and listened. But all we seemed to hear were remote, humming echoes, as of countless voices of insects chattering unseen. Finally, we covered the hazardous pit with some boards and buried the makeshift enclosure under a mound of soft dirt. “Maybe there’ll be some change in the spring,” someone said. But the old farmer only chuckled. “You mean when the ground warms up? Why do you think those leaves aren’t falling the way they should?”

It was not long after this troubling episode that our dreams, which formerly had been the merest shadows and glimpses, swelled into full phase. Yet they must not have been dreams entirely, but also excavations into the season which had inspired them. In sleep we were consumed by the feverish life of the earth, cast among a ripe, fairly rotting world of strange growth and transformation. We took a place within a darkly flourishing landscape where even the air was ripened into ruddy hues and everything wore the wrinkled grimace of decay, the mottled complexion of old flesh. The face of the land itself was knotted with so many other faces, ones that were corrupted by vile impulses. Grotesque expressions were molding themselves into the darkish grooves of ancient bark and the whorls of withered leaf; pulpy, misshapen features peered out of damp furrows; and the crisp skin of stalks and dead seeds split into a multitude of crooked smiles. All was a freakish mask painted with russet, rashy colors—colors that bled with a virulent intensity, so rich and vibrant that things trembled with their own ripeness.

But despite their gross palpability, there remained something spectral at the

heart of our new dreams. It moved in shadow, a presence that was *in* the world of solid forms but not *of* it. Nor did it belong to any other world that could be named, unless it was to that realm which is suggested to us by an autumn night when fields lay ragged in moonlight and some wild spirit has entered into things, a great aberration sprouting forth from a chasm of moist and fertile shadows, a hollow-eyed howling malignity rising to present itself to the cold emptiness of space and the pale gaze of the moon.

And it was to that moon we were forced to look for comfort when we awoke trembling in the night, overcome by the sense that another life was taking root within us, seeking its ultimate incarnation in the bodies we always dreamed were our own and inviting us into the depths of an extraordinary harvest.

Certainly there was some relief when we began to discover, after many insecure hints and delvings, that the dreams were not a sickness restricted to solitary individuals or families but in fact were epidemic throughout the community. No longer were we required to disguise our uneasiness as we met on the streets under the luxuriant shadows of trees that would not cast off their gaudy foliage, the mocking plumage of a strange season. We had become a race of eccentrics and openly declared an array of singular whims and suspicions, at least while daylight allowed this audacity.

Honored among us was that one old fellow, well known for his oddities, who had anticipated our troubles weeks beforehand. As he wandered about town, wheeling the blade-sharpening grindstone by which he earned his living, Mr. Marble had spoken of what he could “read in the leaves,” as if those fluttering scraps of lush color were the pages of a secret book in which he perused gold and crimson hieroglyphs. “Just look at them,” he urged passersby, “bleeding their colors like that. They should be bled dry, but now they’re making pictures. Something inside trying to show itself. They’re as dead as rags now, all limp and flapping. But something’s still in there. Those pictures, do you see them?”

Yes, we saw them, though somewhat belatedly. And they were not seen only in the chromatic designs of those deathless leaves. They could show themselves anywhere, if always briefly. Upon a cellar wall there might appear an ill-formed visage among the damp and fractured stones, a hideous impersonation of a face infiltrating the dark corners of our homes. Other faces, leprous masks, would arise within the grain of paneled walls or wooden floors, spying for a moment before sinking back into the knotty shadows, withdrawing below the surface. And there were so many nameless patterns that might spread themselves across the boards of an old fence or the side of a shed, engravings all tangled and

wizedened like a subterranean craze of roots and tendrils, an underworld riot of branching convolutions, gnarled ornamentations. Yet these designs were not unfamiliar to us . . . for in them we recognized the same outlines of autumnal decay we saw our dreams.

Like the old visionary who sharpened knives and axes and curving scythes, we too could now read the great book of countless colored leaves. But still he remained far in advance of what was happening deep within us all. For it was he who manifested certain idiosyncrasies of manner that would later appear in so many others, whether they lived in town or somewhere outside its limits. Of course, he had always set himself apart from us by his waywardness of speech, his willingness to utter pronouncements of dire or delightful curiosity. To a child he might say: "The sight of the night can fly like a kite," while someone older would be told: "Doesn't have arms, but it knows how to use them. Doesn't have a face, but it knows where to find one."

Nevertheless, he plied his trade with every efficiency, pedaling the mechanism that turned the grindstone, expertly honing each blade and taking his pay like any man of business. Then, we noticed, he seemed to become distracted in his work. In a dull trance he touched metal implements to his spinning wheel of stone, careless of the sparks that flew into his face. Yet there was also a wild luminousness in his eyes, as of a diamond-bright fever burning within him. Eventually we found ourselves unable to abide his company, though we now attributed this merely to some upsurge in his perennial strangeness rather than to a wholly unprecedented change in his behavior. It was not until he no longer appeared on the streets of town, or anywhere else, that we admitted our fears about him.

And these fears necessarily became linked to the other disruptions of that season, those extravagant omens which were gaining force all around us. The disappearance of Mr. Marble coincided with a new phenomenon, one that finally became apparent in the twilight of a certain day when all of the clustering and tenacious foliage seemed to exude a vague phosphorescence. By nightfall this prodigy was beyond skepticism. The multicolored leaves were softly glowing against the black sky, creating an untimely nocturnal rainbow which scattered its spectral tints everywhere and dyed the night with a harvest of hues: peach gold and pumpkin orange, honey yellow and winy amber, apple red and plum violet. Lustrous within their leafy shapes, the colors cast themselves across the darkness and were splattered upon our streets and our fields and our faces. Everything was resplendent with the pyrotechnics of a new autumn.

That night we kept to our houses and watched at our windows. It was no marvel, then, that so many of us saw the one who wandered about the town on that iridescent eve, and who joined in its outbursts and celebrations. Possessed by the ecstasies of a dark festival, he moved in a trance, bearing in his hand that great ceremonial knife whose keen edge flashed a thousand glittering dreams. He was seen standing alone beneath trees whose colors shined upon him, staining his face and his tattered clothes. He was seen standing alone in the yards of our houses, a rigid scarecrow concocted from a patchwork of shadows. He was seen stalking beside high wooden fences that were now painted with a quivering glow. Finally, he was seen at a certain intersection of streets at the center of town.

By then, we knew what needed to happen. The slaughtering beast had come for its own. A season was upon us out of all seasons, and an aberration had risen that did not belong to the course of life we had always known. It grew out of the earth in a farmer's field, and beneath it was a bottomless hole that we covered with a mound of dirt, thereby denying a hungry presence what it asked of us. Unsated, it would now take what it desired. As frightened as we were, we also felt resentment and outrage. From the beginning, there was an exchange to which we had resigned ourselves: that which is given must one day be given back. In time the eternal darkness would arrive, as each of our lives was reclaimed at its end and went back to the earth that had borne our bodies and sustained them with its plenty. But the phenomenon we confronted seemed nothing less than a premature craving, a greed surpassing our covenant with earth's estate. What we were forced to stipulate, then, was another, perhaps more fundamental, order of being than our species had suspected, even a betrayal or deception on the part of creation itself. All that was left to us was to wonder: who knows all that is innate to this world, or to any other? Why should there not be something buried deep within appearances, something that wears a mask to hide itself behind the visibility of nature?

But whatever it was that secreted itself in outward shapes mattered less to us that night than the plan it had conceived for an expertly whetted blade and the possessed hand that held it. We had no illusions that our fate could be evaded or opposed. For if the power or entity that had seized our land could exercise its will as we had seen, what was there that it could not do? And now it was rousing itself to a furor. More than ever, the trees burned with an eerie incandescence, and the chattering noises that commanded the sultry air began rising to a pitch of vicious laughter. As Mr. Marble stood in the center of town, he eyed our houses

in turn, the matter of his mind seemingly focused on where the blood would begin and how voracious would be the ravening demanded by whatever mystery empowered him as its brutal servant.

Like any group of persons who feel a sure sense of imminent mayhem, each of us hoped that it might pass us by and the worst would be visited on others. Cowards all, we prayed to be overlooked in the coming massacre. But our shame was not long-lived. Voices began to call from the street to those of us who were still in hiding. "He's gone," someone said. "We saw him go off into the woods." He had raised his knife, it was reported, but his hand trembled, as if he was fighting against it. Then he walked off past the town limits. "More like staggered," said a woman who was holding a spatula like a weapon. "You'd think he was walking in a windstorm that way he leaned forward, pushing and pushing. I was afraid that he'd tumble back into Main Street." A man who came late to the scene avowed to all of us that if Mr. Marble had stayed any longer, he was going to approach him and say, "Take me and spare the others. Blood is blood." It was not difficult to see through his fabrication.

For some hours, we huddled in the center of town, waiting to see if Mr. Marble would return. The trees around us seemed to be fading in their radiance, and the night was quiet, the din of shrill vibrations in the air having abated entirely. A few at a time, we turned back to our houses, which had now lost their reek of moldering shadows, and gradually the town succumbed to a dreamless sleep. Somehow we all felt assured that what we feared would happen that night would not come to pass.

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Yet at daybreak it became evident that something had indeed happened during the night. Everywhere the earth had at last turned cold. And the trees now stood bare of leaves, all of which lay dark and withered upon the ground, as if their strangely deferred dying had finally overtaken them in a sudden rage of mortification. We searched both the town and countryside for any remaining sign of the appalling season we had endured. And it was not long before Mr. Marble was discovered.

The corpse reposed in a field, stretched face-down across a mound of dirt and alongside the remains of a dismantled scarecrow. When we turned over the body we looked upon open eyes as colorless as that ashen autumn morning. Then we marked that the figure's left arm had been slashed to the bone by the

knife still gripped in its right hand.

Blood had flowed over the earth and blackened the flesh of the self-murdered man. But those of us who handled that limp, nearly weightless body, dipping our fingers into the dark wound, found nothing at all that had the feeling of blood. We knew very well, of course, what that shadowy blackness did feel like. We knew what had found its way into the man before us and dragged him into its savage world. His affinity with the immanent schemes of existence had always been much deeper than ours. So we buried him deep in a bottomless grave.