Chronicles of Brunonia

Reanimating Providence: The Haunts and Hauntings of H. P. Lovecraft

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I never can be tied to raw, new things,
For I first saw the light in an old town,
Where from my window huddled roofs sloped down
To a quaint harbor rich with visionings.

Streets with carved doorways where the sunset beams
Flooded old fanlights and small window-panes,
And Georgian steeples topped with gilded vanes—
These were the sights that shaped my childhood dreams.
-H.P. Lovecraft, Sonnet 30

H.P. Lovecraft, one of the founding masters of American horror, plunged his readers as never before into a world of abject terror and utter despondency, a world of erudition twisted by the lure of forbidden knowledge, a world of purity tarnished, nobility cast down, and paradise lost. This world, Lovecraft's world, is also Providence, Rhode Island—except, that in his work, the Baptist paradise is beset by all the staples of horror, sprinkled with an undertone of existential terror and a liberal dose of the Lovecraftian: the terrifying, insurmountable cosmic sweep of time, space, and history.

It is a fictive world populated by the likes of Henry Anthony Wilcox, a prodigy of classical sculpture, regarded as the Bernini of Rhode Island—that is, until his thoughts begin to become twisted and warped by voices, whispering to him in the dark. He becomes their thrall: his brilliant work at the Rhode Island School of Design turning contorted, dark, and perverse. The dons of the conservative Providence Art Society, incensed at work so radical, so inexplicably non-Euclidean, cast him out of their number. Wilcox vanishes, leaving nothing behind but a finished sculpture of an alien god and a single book bound in human skin, words scratched into its pages with blood.

In a story set years later, George Angell, an authority on ancient inscriptions and Professor Emeritus of Semitic Languages at Brown University, is brutally murdered on the Providence waterfront—naming as sole executor his grand-nephew, Francis Wayland Thurston, a bright-eyed, naïve freshman. Sifting through a worn crate of the scholar's belongings, Thurston finds a dusty tome: inside are terrible diagrams annotated in an unknown script, and reoccurring images of humans being sacrificed to a terrible, tentacled god. The boy's studies wane and he begins to shun food, light, and the company of friends. He plunges into the depths of horror and insanity, and with him, the book is lost to time.

Within Lovecraft's pages, a Brown University medical student, devastated years ago by his inability to save the lives of those he loves most, steals the corpses of the indigent, hauling them down Benefit Street to a secret laboratory. Herbert West's pale blue eyes manically flit about a rigid body; the pall of death mingles with the sterility of the operating room. A syringe of viscous green liquid is injected, a toggle switch thrown open: sparks fly, screams echo through the crisp night air, death is cheated.

Howard Philips Lovecraft himself lived on College Hill in Providence for all but a few years of his life, only once traveling south of Brooklyn, north of Maine, or west of Scranton. Lovecraft's fiction mirrored his personal life, being set almost exclusively in the "Rhodeinsular" city, neighborhoods, and streets that he loved most: heroes trudge up the same cobblestone paths trodden by students today, beset by creeping terrors lurking the same alleyways and dark fens.

On his daily strolls up and down the wooded lanes of College Hill, Lovecraft took explicit pride in his ability to recite offhand the minutiae of local history, breaking down every aspect of the area's stately homes for his delighted guests: the owners, date of construction, architectural style, and folklore—meticulously noting every change in his journal. In 47 years of life, Lovecraft's topophilia, his bond with Providence the place, grew so strong that, if his bold tombstone epithet, "I Am Providence," is to be believed, he even embodied the city itself. Now, years after his death, Providence is a markedly different place. Wood and steam heating have given way to that of electricity, the muck of stables to the asphalt of parking lots, and the raging furnaces of industry to the ridiculous spectacle of Waterfire. Like the sort of hidden, cosmic force that's a staple of his oeuvre, Lovecraft's Providence is still there: pulsing with life, just below the surface.

"More than any other man," writes modern horror master Stephen King, "Lovecraft opened the way for me as he had done for others before me… it is his shadow, so long and gaunt, and his eyes, so dark and puritanical, which overlie almost all of the important horror fiction that has come since." Skillfully and methodically, Lovecraft drew even the youngest of readers, among them the fourteen year old King, into worlds of absolute terror; his writing, to Michel Houellebecq, was "an open slice of howling fear." "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear," Lovecraft wrote, "and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."

In the author's lifetime, he was derided by the mainstream as a hack, a subliterary upstart who could only publish in the basest of mediums—pulp and amateur magazines printed on paper of such low quality that few originals survive intact. Through the 1960s, popular derision turned into acclaim, and today, the dominant debate on Lovecraft is between James Cameron and Benicio Del Toro, co-directors of an upcoming treatment of the author's *At the Mountain of Madness*—and it isn't a debate on literary merit, but who should star in the lead role: James McAvoy or Tom Cruise.

The house of Lovecraft's troubled childhood, since demolished, sat at 454 Angell Street, on the far east side of College Hill. What began as a beautiful home with an impressive Georgian façade, quickly fell to clutter and disrepair as both of his parents began to plunge

slowly into the throes of insanity, their dementia caused by syphilis that would ultimately prove fatal. His mother, before her committal to the Butler Hospital for the Insane, described young Howard's appearance as "hideous," locking him away from the "poisonous" gaze of outsiders. Learning to read by the age of three, tackling Jules Verne by four, and the *1,001 Arabian Nights* by five, Lovecraft was a boy tormented by nightmares, dreams of "black, lean, rubbery things with horns, barbed tails, bat-wings, and no faces at all." Lovecraft's childhood diary recorded how these "Night-Gaunts would seize me by the stomach and carry me off through infinite leagues of black air over the towers of dead and horrible cities. They would finally get me into a grey void where I could see the needle-like pinnacles of enormous mountains, miles below—then they would let me drop…"

After the death of his grandfather, the family moved into smaller accommodations at 598 Angell Street, now a middle-income duplex. Lovecraft's childhood at the new home was lonely and isolated, even by the standards of cold New England. "I have made no reference to childish friends and playmates," he wrote at the age of 26, "for I had none! The children I knew disliked me, and I them. I was used to adult company and conversation, and despite the fact that I felt shamelessly dull beside my elders, I had nothing in common with the infant train… Their romping and shouting puzzled me—in my relaxations, I always desired *plot* and despised the company of others." Lovecraft would remain a lifelong misanthrope; his most haunting and hellish nightmares are not the lonely squalor of Beckett, but the teeming, ravenous masses of Dante. In his "mythos," or fantasy realm, the domain of the outer gods is ruled from a gigantic aquatic throne, the water saturated with supplicants just as strange as the deities to whom they pay heed.

Lovecraft's fictional world was one of quiet desperation as a once-great civilization falls victim to its own racial, social, and political contradictions—even as outside its borders, outside the space of time and reason, foreign, alien powers actively seek its undoing. The only consolation to be found in this hell is in isolation and misanthropy, yet even this is self-defeating. The solitary scholar in his ivory tower will stumble blindly into the risks of science unknown in the quest for knowledge forbidden, and from that, Lovecraft's view of the romance of academia: brief, self-serving, and ultimately, worthless.

Lovecraft's isolation and depression lead to a state of chronic poor health that made a normal education impossible. "In 1908," he wrote, "I should have entered Brown University, but the broken state of my health rendered the idea absurd; I was and am prey to intense headaches, insomnia, and general nervous weakness which prevents my continuous application to any one thing." For lack of the amenities of modern psychiatry, H.P. tried his hand at correspondence courses in chemistry, history, and classics, "but soon realized that regular duties were not for me." Lovecraft suffered lifelong humiliation at his failure to complete college at Brown, his lamentations growing even more despondent when he realizes, while compiling a list of his greatest idols and mentors of character and intellect, that they are all "Brown University Men."

Lovecraft even found time to take sides in university politics, writing off retiring President William Faunce as a "smug, bland, pious, fact-shy soul-believer," over whom he would much prefer the "frank animism of any savage fetish-worshipper." Likewise, Lovecraft succumbs to the pettiness of inter-Ivy rivalry: "my other uncle-in-law," he wrote in a jocund

letter, "was a Cambridge [Massachusetts] man, as such, my converse with him was of lesser quality and frequency." Later in life, he took vicarious pride in the Memorial Day Riots of 1929 on campus, in which the freshman class immolated their newly-issued formal gowns and clashed with Providence police at the mouth of the East Side Tunnel on Thayer Street, today, the site of a bustling Starbucks café. "About Brown rioting—yes, the virile energy and healthy antinomianism displayed!," Lovecraft related, "though it truly makes me sad to reflect that I've gotten too old and grey to mix into inspiring rough-and-tumbles like this." While he never graduated, Lovecraft's close proximity to the university vastly enabled his lifelong love affair with learning, and strengthened his close, physical bond with the area itself.

To pass time, and perhaps escape the horrors of Philips-Lovecraft domestic strife, H.P took to wandering about College Hill: spending nights stargazing at the Ladd Observatory and days winding through the wooded quadrangles of Brown, eventually collapsing, tired of body but clear of mind, in the wooded glen of Prospect Terrace, a natural outcropping of College Hill along Congdon Street, which commands an unparalleled view of the Providence skyline and the domed cupola of the Rhode Island State House. The terrace, with its perfect mix of seclusion and freedom, quickly became one of Lovecraft's favorite haunts, where he spent warm afternoons reading, writing, and simply gazing off at the skyline of Providence, dreaming.

Like Lovecraft himself, the protagonist in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* spent much of his youth on the terrace: "one of the child's first memories was of the great westward sea of hazy roofs and domes and steeples and far hills which he saw one winter afternoon from that great railed embankment, violet and mystic against a fevered, apocalyptic sunset of reds and golds and purples and curious greens. The vast marble dome of the State House stood out in massive silhouette, its crowning statue haloed fantastically by a break in one of the tinted stratus clouds that barred the flaming sky."

From the vantage point of the park, Lovecraft also caught his first glimpse of one of the most captivating, haunting, and mysterious landmarks of Providence: the St. John Catholic Church, three miles away on Federal Hill, and demolished in 1996. "A certain huge, dark church most fascinated Blake," Lovecraft writes of his protagonist in *The Haunter of the Dark*, "standing out with especial distinctness at certain hours of the day; at sunset, the great tower and tapering steeple loomed blackly against the flaming sky." St. John so haunted Lovecraft that he made it the model for the "Church of Free Will," home to a demonic cult known as the "Sect of Starry Wisdom" that made several appearances in his works. The former site of St. John's, at 352 Atwells Avenue in West Providence, would today go wholly unrecognized by Lovecraft. Where the church's towering steeple once rose lies a vacant lot, flanked across the street by a discount liquor store and a hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant.

Other sites of Providence too would play host to Lovecraft's flights of fiction. In *The Call of Cthulu*, the distinctive Fleur-de-Lys building on Thomas Street is described much as it is today, as "a hideous Victorian imitation of seventeenth-century Breton architecture which flaunts its stuccoed front amidst the lovely colonial houses on the ancient hill." The protagonist of *Herbert West: Reanimator* is nearing the completion of his residency at Brown's Medical School when he decides to cheat death, using far less than ethical means. Scholars and specters haunt the stacks of Brown's John Hay Library, along with the chunky, Greco-Roman style Athenaeum

Library as they manically research the origin, purpose, and powers of the forbidden Necronomicon, the book of death.

The grand Halsey House, dating from 1801 and rumored to be haunted during Lovecraft's lifetime, stood in as the family manse of Charles Dexter Ward, where he struggles to uncover the origin of its haunting and the sins of his ancestors. Today, the magnificent house is home to a jovial, middle-aged Brown graduate. "I think it's fascinating, really," he says amid pruning shrubs, "I didn't even realize until a few folks came by on a tour!" Reality's counterpart to Lovecraft's hero couldn't have done a better job preserving the beautiful home: the only changes evident since Lovecraft's time are a fresh coat of paint, brilliant flowers planted on the walk, and a mezuzah on the doorpost.

At 135 Benefit Street lies the Stephen Harris House, built in 1763, and known to readers of the mythos as "The Shunned House." Dingy and abandoned in Lovecraft's day, the house is home to a sect of murderous cultists in his fiction: "the really inexplicable thing was the way in which they, ignorant people (for the ill-smelling and widely shunned house could now be rented to no others), would babble maledictions in French, a language they could not possibly have studied to any extent." Today, the house is a cheery pale yellow, and its current inhabitants, students at the Rhode Island School of Design, appear to have gotten the joke. Nailed to the gate of a white-picket fence are a series of comically nonsensical phrases in French: "Attention Chien Bizzare," "Chien Fort Méchant Et Peu Nourri," "Chien Lunatique," and "Oubliez Le Chien Attention Au Maitre." As the Providence Historical Society quips, "while the house is clearly no longer shunned, some lingering miasmal influence appears to have affected the owner's sanity- or at least that of their dog."

Lovecraft would seldom venture off the hill of his birth, and when he did, threading his way through the "cosmopolitan" masses, his reaction was one of revulsion. Leading a friend on a tour of the city, one of his favorite weekend pastimes, Lovecraft notes that they were "impressed by the solemn hush of the venerable streets and the Georgian dignity of the old mansions" of College Hill, especially "the cloisteral hush of the Brown University campus, particularly the inner quadrangle where in the deserted twilight, there seemed to brood the spirit of the dead generations." Both men were decidedly less pleased as they began "a descent of College Hill, and the visitor did not fail to grasp the sensation of anticlimax involved in this abrupt transition from the ancient to the garishly modern: the soul of Providence broods up on the antique hill—below, there is only a third-rate copy of New York."

This particular disdain for the modern, cosmopolitan aesthetic met with disastrous results when Lovecraft married at the age of 34 and moved to the Red Hook neighborhood in Brooklyn to be closer to his in-laws, a family of Jewish shopkeepers. Lovecraft was shocked, embarrassed, and isolated to be one face among millions—and not only that, but to be outworked and outhustled by minorities and immigrants who he felt were decidedly inferior to the superior Anglo-Saxon breed. "My coming to New York had been a mistake," Lovecraft admitted through his protagonist in *The Horror at Red Hook*, "for whereas I had looked for poignant wonder and inspiration in the teeming labyrinths of ancient streets that twist endlessly from forgotten courts… I had found instead only a sense of horror and oppression which threatened to master, paralyze, and annihilate me."

On an even more basic level, Lovecraft's simple and spartan lifestyle clashed against the energy and excitement of New York. A lifelong temperance enthusiast, "never at a loss for something to say against liquor," Lovecraft detested lavish food and "frivolous" dinner-parties, preferring instead the simple food of a New England gentleman. In Lovecraft's *Shadow over Innsmouth*, the protagonist "always sought the cheapest route" to his destination, and once there, ate "a dinner of vegetable soup with crackers." Photographs of Lovecraft in Red Hook show him trapped and isolated, with his back to a cold, red-brick wall. Even in one with his closest friend and collaborator August Derleth, Lovecraft looks askance while Derleth puffs merrily at an ivory-handled pipe.

Beyond the lonely desolation of the modern world and all its trivial vanities, Lovecraft was disgusted with the "impurity" of the city's diverse inhabitants. The "throngs of people that seethed through the flume-like streets were squat, swarthy strangers with hardened faces and narrow eyes, shrewd strangers without dreams and without kinship to the scenes about them, and who could never mean aught to a blue-eyed man of the old folk, with the love of fair green lanes and white New England village steeples in his heart." After two miserable years, Lovecraft gave up on his marriage, and along with his narrator, manages to escape, coming "home to the pure New England lanes up which fragrant sea-winds sweep at evening."

Lovecraft moved back to Providence, renting a room in a "spacious brown Victorian wooden house" at 10 Barnes Street, now University auxiliary housing and painted an unappealing shade of orange with an equally nauseating green trim. "Yeah, that's the place, alright," a woman calls out from across the street, "funny thing is, you're probably the only one of em' who knows it." An Angel Taveras campaign sign protrudes from the front lawn, a fixed-gear bicycle leans against the elegant, colonial stoop, and cigarette butts jut out from in between worn cracks in the carpentry. It was here, from 1926 to 1933, that Lovecraft's literary output began to increase, penning some of the formative works of the "Lovecraft Mythos," a connected world where Lovecraft most effectively blurs the distinctions between horror, science fiction, and fantasy.

Seven years after moving back to Providence, in a stroke of good luck, Lovecraft was able to move into his fourth and final home, originally at 66 College Street, adjacent to the John Hay Library and steps from the wooded quadrangles of Brown that he loved. The home is perfectly preserved and remarkably undamaged by its transport, in 1959, to a dignified lot at 65 Prospect Street, in order to clear the way for the List Arts Center. Moving into spacious rooms on the second floor, Lovecraft rejoiced in one of his most effusive letters: "Boy what a place! God save the king! At last, after forty-odd years of wistful worship, I will live in a real colonial house!… The new Villa Lovecraftus, yellow and modern, is situate on the crest of the ancient hill in a quaint grassy court just off College Street, behind and next to the John Hay Library… After admiring such all my life, I find something magical and dreamlike in the notion of actually living in it for the first time."

The "picturesque, village-like, and semi-rustic" garden in the rear brought Lovecraft endless joy in the final years of his life, a "cozy and fascinating place, in a little garden oasis of antiquity where huge, friendly cats sunned themselves atop a convenient shed." Today,

Lovecraft's wooden shed has been replaced by a jumbo-sized loading dock for installations in Brown's List Arts Building. From his study window, Lovecraft could see "the green front-campus, ancient halls, and great clock tower of the Brown campus," and his "working table sat under a west-window affording a splendid view of some of the lower town's outspread roofs and the mystical sunsets that flame beyond them." Even today, a chilling yet comforting sense of calm abounds on the "Quiet Green" in the breezy afternoons and crisp days of early fall. A young scholar puffs contemplatively at a cigar, a tome on "Modern Physics" in hand, and couples wind their way hand-in-hand across Brown's innumerable quadrangles, tracing, consciously or not, the path of Brown's most famous hopeful student.

By this time, while still tangentially connected with the university, Lovecraft "would no more visit the observatory or its various other attractions," feeling an ever-increasing sense of shame at his "non-university education," especially as his renown as a writer grew. Once, he had expected to make use of Brown's amenities "as a regularly entered student, and some day, perhaps control some of them as faculty member—but having not the ability to know them with this 'inside' attitude, I am today unwilling to visit them as a casual outsider and non-university barbarian and alien." Lovecraft made exceptions to this rule only for lectures open to the public, such as one in 1935 on "Art, Economics, and the American Future" in Sayles Hall, at which he sat behind Rhode Island Governor T.F. Green, later namesake of the Providence airport.

The following day, Lovecraft began work on his final story, *The Haunter of the Dark*, but as the years wore on, his creative energy was constrained by increasingly frequent attacks of the measles and a deteriorating heart, both of which brought about renewed bouts of depression and a subtle, creeping fear of his own mortality. Spending almost two years on this single work, time itself flowed for Lovecraft at a different rate than it does today: the bells of University Hall that punctuated his daily circumnavigation of the university's inner quadrangle were still tolled by hand, and not with the sterile regularity of electronic precision.

While fostering a healthy disdain of science fiction, advances in technology and the allure of science provided ample fodder for Lovecraft's fertile imagination. "The sciences, each straining in its own direction," he wrote, "have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age."

For Lovecraft, science had turned into a "deadly light" sometime in the nineteenth century—possibly even within his lifetime. Lovecraft was a man of anachronisms, insisting on vastly outdated conventions of spelling and grammar and remaining a virulent political conservative. He was a man who belonged, and wished he lived, two centuries before his time—a time when science still represented man's triumph over superstition and natural laws and principles replaced spirits and magic. By the turn of the century, however, embracing science meant surrendering man's exalted place in the universe. Lovecraft's boiling indignation at each stage of this disillusionment is clear; from Copernicus to Darwin, Einstein to Freud, Lovecraft saw the very mystery of the natural world disintegrating before his very eyes.

Days before his death, and in the depths of a New England snowstorm, Lovecraft put on his coat and set off on a last, grand walk around the city of his birth, life, and dreams, ultimately wandering far to the southwest. He "succeed in discovering several splendid rural regions which he had never seen before, about a wooded hill called Neutaconkanut," today a short walk off of Route 14, just short of Clayville Township. It lay "on the western rim of town, commanding an utterly idyllic vista of rolling meadows, ancient stone walls, hoary groves, and distant cottage roofs to the west and south—only two or three miles from the city's heart, and yet in the primal rural New England of the first colonists!"

From this "dizzy crest," he obtained "an almost stupefying prospect of unfolded leagues of farmsteads and champaigns, gleaming rivulets and far-off forests, and mystical orange sky with a great solar disc sinking redly amidst bars of stratus clouds." From a meadow hidden within the woods, he "secured truly marvelous glimpses of the remote urban skyline—a dream of enchanted pinnacles and domes half-floating in the air, and with an obscure aura of mystery around them." Dark valleys sloped down to the plain below, and "huge boulders balanced on rocky heights imparted a spectral, druidic effect" as they stood out against the twilight. At the end of a page, Lovecraft excitedly scribbled that he "did not even begin to cover the full extent of the plateau, and can see that I have a field for several voyages of discovery when warm days return!"

Once he finally reached more familiar ground, and stood atop Federal Hill, the "eastward crest which I had gazed at since infancy," "the outspread city was rapidly lighting up, and lay like a constellation in the deepening dusk; the moon poured down increasing floods of pale gold, and the glow of Venus and Jupiter in the fading west grew intense." Shivering and satisfied, he kicked the snow off his boots and made his way down the steep hillside to a line of taxis, since it was "too cold for enjoyable walking without scenery to compensate for shivers," and slowly "made his way back to the prosaic haunts of man."

Lovecraft had walked every corner of Providence, and even as cancer, pneumonia, and malnutrition slowly wore away at his health, he never finished exploring his hometown. Lovecraft's final letter, detailing his striking travel narrative to Neutaconkanut, lay unfinished atop his desk even at the time of his death, on the Ides of March of 1937. Surely, Lovecraft would rather remember the "dizzy crest" as it was in his day, than the bleak place it has become in mine: a few acres of woodland bordering a strip mall off a dejected turnpike, littered with aluminum cans and populated only by a gas station, hardware store, and take-out Chinese restaurant. Providence was, for Lovecraft, a vista still untouched by the steely hand of modernity at the border of light and dark, magic and science, hope and fear.

Lovecraft's grave is as simple as the man himself: a plain, unadorned stone in the Philips family plot in Swan Point Cemetery, bearing the epitaph "I Am Providence." Sometimes there are notes left by admirers, sometimes rocks or flowers, but today, a black feather is placed gingerly atop the stone. It is a fitting tribute, perhaps, since an inscription on a nearby bench reads: "Mock not the crows of Swan Point, for they are the guardians of the souls which linger here." I look up, past the plain, granite stone, just in time to see one alight. It flies over my head, banks south to Blackstone, and from there, coasts the thermals up the wooded slopes of College Hill.