

BEN SAMUEL

Monolith

When he came to town he rode a horse upon which he'd piled his belongings. He was tall and gaunt. He carried before him an air of mystery. His expressionless features were caulked with sweat and road dust and he blinked from the pale disks of his eyes like a cave dweller newly emerging in to the sun.

Those that saw him watched with a slow emerging fear but he did not heed their stares nor move his eyes to meet them. The people watched him with rapt fascination as he brought his horse to the hardware store and dismounted swiftly and in near silence. He raised an orange dust that diminished at his feet as soon as it appeared.

He wandered with mute apathy into that dim and musty store, a reek of turpentine, of coffee grinds, and of tobacco. He bought there a sack of obscure supplies though no one knew the meaning of the objects he procured.

His spavined horse snoozed by the shop pillar. It had once been a horse of some value and stood now with that air of diminished regality. It slept on the hoof, weary, as though aware of some darker purpose, shining with sweat and brindled with dust it cast a thin and wavering shadow upon the road.

He left the store with a sack full of wares pans and other disparate wares clattering a rhythm-less tune as he moved.

The people thereabouts went about their routines watching the man through the corners of their eyes, fascinated and oddly afraid. He mounted and quit himself of the town with a strange sort of solemnity that breeds mistrust in others. His features concealed and his expression esoteric and foreboding, he remained a mystery as he returned to the road and the road took him away along it as though it were the road that moved and he that remained stationary. A cloud of dust followed him about the legs of the horse and he appeared motionless, traveling forever forward upon it with the charivari of pans and spades following him into whatever solitude he planned to keep beyond the sight of the townsfolk.

The man did not know where he was bound but he kept a deliberate pace in no particular hurry to arrive. He ate only what he needed to sustain him and drank only what he needed to survive. Some days he ate and drank nothing.

The road he travelled carried no other people for nothing existed in that place worth traveling to. He barely slept and did not rest his horse until it took to stumbling with exhaustion and then he rested it by the roadside releasing the harness and saddle and slapping it's behind to send it away. Then he continued without it, the horse watching him as it cropped the roadside grass with nostrils flared and its body caked in salt. He did not look back and the horse did not follow him perhaps it sensed and feared his intent.

The man found a spot of earth within the forest, a spot like any other. The density of foliage within that uncultivated place grew in wild abandonment; tree over tree, vine over vine, moss over moss, climbers hung with named and unnamed fruits of various shape and size, foxholes, wolf scent, bear marks. He chose this place for no reason other than the life there was in such abandon. The fecund succulent life there lavish and unrestrained in its' abundance. He regarded the trees and creeping things passively and such was the extent of the task he had given himself that he started immediately.

The forest began to reverberate with the wet thuds of his axe against the burred and lenticled tree trunks. The foxes and birds fled in an exodus of fear as leaves and twigs rained upon him at toil beneath the branches.

He worked naked and clay smeared within the forests dark and covetous shadows hacking and scraping at the dank earth, the trunks giving way beneath the thuds of his axe. A bleeding simian thing toiling against the Earth, peeling away at the foliage and raising fires within the ranked and harried trees that belched a grey and acrid fume as the leaves curled within the pyres. The branches shattered and crumbled in tuneless pings and whistles, a threnody of burning carrion and warping blackening timber and he in-amongst it, bearded, black and bloody with labour and injury.

His hands scraped at the clay and he turned over pottery and spearheads made from flint as the pyres burned with the reticulate carcasses of the forest in the sere diminishment of the living things burned and crisped, a palpable and horrid

stench rising. He in motion about the edges of the fire, working the clay, moulding the slimy and lifeless gault bringing it forth, accumulating it from the decadent decaying earth made captive by his hand, now forming it, moulding it into the form of his design the object of his determination, symmetrical and structured. This wet clay of the Earths abundant and unfettered womb, now yoked with form and structure, made substantial and sublunary, formed from the formless, squaring baking.

He was driven to scorch the verdurous bouquets of the forest and to parch the soil there to bring forth a wandering notion of a somatic wild and energised thing a fertile incubus giving material form to indistinct thought. The timbre made flat and useful, the clay shaped to bricks and baked, aspirant notions manifest in the rising of the abode appearing within the clearing amassing piece by piece, the ruination rising and joined by symmetrically lined elements baked in the foundry fires and hammered in place to frame the articulated structure. A home risen from the soil by that caked and toil worn atavistic being who ate the burnt remains of the animals he found and dreamt febrile and horrifically sanguinary dreams, a tormenting eldritch blackness visiting him nightly a stertorous and phlegmy breath upon him from the shadows, a concealed and mindless incubus lurking. Then waking into recrudescence activity, planing the wood into lath, pale curls, scantling and billet, plank and beam hammered into place beneath the thinning rheumy canopy.

When the rains came the man toiled, as the clay trickled in a ferruginous slick of red rusted crud. The foundation seemed unsound and the building teetered but the ground was safe and the building held beneath the downpour and as he

teetered there as solitary as a woodpecker against a tree yet still he hammered the wood into place and he continued to do so until the rain stopped and he ran out of nails to hammer. Then he set to melting his pans into an incandescent liquid and he poured that into moulds to create more nails. He hammered them still hot and hissing into the heart of the timbre. When he finished it the house stood tall and defiant against the forest from which it has been raised like a pariah or orphan child, stubborn and recalcitrant, a beacon. His implacable will, standing incongruent within the forest, unique in form and architecture a monument to a stubborn and obscure soul.

The house was a masterly concoction of symmetry and refinement, though to those who saw it it seemed perhaps to lack beauty. Though stately it was not enormous. The man echoed within its walls. The fire was the only living thing he could bear to keep him company.

He lived then in that place of self-imposed seclusion, alone in his house of ostentatious size and architecture, like an exiled, lonely king. The house contained no comfort, no furniture or linen. The walls were bare and the kitchen was empty. He slept roughly on the wooden floorboards and kept a fire of enormous size burning within the hearth. He kept it burning through the cold and clement weather alike.

The trees about the house grew sparsely and without vigour, those trees that had grown there lay side by side in stately death within the buildings frame and

floorboards. The other trees surrounding the house diminished daily as a store of firewood grew.

The man toiled throughout the day hacking away the giant trees and snapping the pliant limbs for kindling. The scorched earth about the house steamed and hissed beneath the rains and any green shoots that emerged there he removed with studious industry.

Whatever supplies or materials he needed he bought from the nearest town and paid for using paper money. No one knew where it came from but they took it all the same. A speculation grew that he had stashed an enormous sum somewhere in that empty house.

The man kept cultivated shrubs and ornamental trees within the garden which he crossed and re-crossed into bizarre and chimerical plants alien to that place and unnatural in shape and evenness of form, these he planted about the grounds in neat lines and even spaces, right angles and orderly groupings. The garden grew in scale and amongst the shrubs and cultivars strange statuary appeared, these in turn were twinned with stunning and meticulous topiary. The gardens though orderly held a strange and fascinating ugliness, a scarcity of life that the surrounding forest seemed almost to slant away from. No weeds or rambling wild flowers were allowed to seed there. No wild animals were tolerated in that garden and in turn they shunned the house and gardens.

A great menagerie of exotic and unusual creatures was built. All manner of strange and disparate creatures were housed there in ornate ironwork cages. A clamorous din of unholy and discordant cries rose from the property and the children from the nearby towns took to daring one another to go listen at the gates.

The din was as inharmonious and terrifying as the whooping of some confused and tortured demons. No creature belonged there, no recognisable thing from these parts lived within the grounds, and each creature was tormented by the climate, either too cold or too hot for their needs. Each creature was alien to this place, their antecedence unknown their kind the first to live in this forest. Many died the first year through apathy and exposure. The corpses were burnt and the ashes spread onto the plants and the plants there grew with an ashen and etiolated appearance like stone flowers or flowers grown by an indifferent and colour-blind creator. The flowers and grasses grew limp and shrivelled, small and stunted.

The man was seldom seen and the children that dared to peer through the ironwork fence did so in furtive and terrified glances. They spied him toiling to remove the weeds and climbers that attempted to establish themselves there. They scarcely saw his face. The shuffling thing they saw amongst the plants and animal cages they took to be the owner though he did nothing to establish this as fact, cowed as he was in muslin like some leper, his face shrouded and only his hands emerging to snip at the flower heads or to rattle a stick between the bars of the cages to torment

the animals he kept. The stick he shook bore the marks of tooth and claw and he seemed to carry it with some degree of pride.

Over time the man grew old and the house began to mould, as houses will. The porch began to hang in the middle like a smile and the slats on the roof began to tumble and creep with moss and algae. The man would toil in rain and high wind to rectify and repair the damage and to scrape back the moss and straighten the porch. The slats on the roof allowed the rain to seep through and the man worked with boundless commitment to stave the oncoming rains and he hammered the slats in place as his animals howled and the wind whistled between the slanted trees. He worked quickly and with a strange ferocity, fixing one hole as another opened.

At all times a black and permanent smoke belched from the chimneystack of the house. The still green branches of nearby trees fed the fire and at night the windows of the house glowed by the light of this furnace a strange orange light that lit each pane and projected its shadows like an immense jack-o-lantern standing within the black forest.

The smoke from the chimney blocked out the stars and the sound of the fire rumbled from within, an all-consuming thunderous and avaricious flame leaping ever higher with each new addition. Though the door rattled and the windowpanes shook with the suck of the flame, the man still fed it, until the fireplace resembled a flaming mouth and the walls and ceilings were befouled with soot, and he, nature's

destructive disciple at work before the hearth snapping and chopping the tree limbs to a resinous black smoke that tarred and choked the flue.

The menagerie he kept grew and he further crossed the caged beasts with one another and rumours circulated of creatures born dead and malformed. Some born and living for only a few minutes or a couple of hours, horrific in their agonising deformity, blasphemous aberrant beings, multi limbed or with organs outside of their bodies. Few survived but he continued all the same with his self appointed task. Out of the many creatures he bred some survived for many years in bizarre forms and pained existences, horse with two heads, a pack of legless dogs. The children watched them horrified but compelled, as children are by fear and agony.

As the man grew old his back bent and his fingers thinned. The children who watched him had children of their own who in turn watched him and talked of him and dared each other to peer through the iron railings.

The weeds and climbers he worked so hard to remove began to take hold and the house façade began to crumble and decay. Honeysuckle and clematis began to climb the fluted pillars and they in turn began to warp and crumble beneath the weight of the foliage. In time the porch cracked and fell covering the doorway and the crooked old man did nothing to repair it such was his old age and rheumatism. The chimerical animals he had created began to die and decayed within their cages. A fly swirled and stinking miasma formed about the property.

The dilapidated house began to sag in the middle like over leavened bread. The roof of the house opened up and when the rains came they fell upon the boards and the woodwork grew soft and green.

The sore-boned, kyphotic old man robed in muslin cloth shuffled amongst his ruinous mansion with a distracted air of fear and perturbation. He sang rote and tuneless hymns of his own devise as he hobbled amongst the weeds, the crumbling statuary and the rusted cages.

At night the internal fire burned weakly and the house glowed dimly within the forest. Through the winter the man sat hunched by his fireplace burning the floorboards and doorframes of his home. The cold gnawed and the snow fell within the house piling upon the stairs and bannisters that were slick now with frozen moss and tendrils of algae.

Honeysuckle and dog rose began to climb about the foundations of the house. In the spring and children used them as cover to watch the man tend his fire. This moribund and etiolated figure snapped the wood and threw each stick onto the ever-burning fire staring forever forward into the flame like some faded and arthritic pyromancer, aglow in the children's dreams for eternity.

In time the old man grew increasingly senile and in his dotage he gave up tending the house and allowed his unnatural creation to fall into terminal disrepair.

Eventually the old man expired before his fire quietly and without fuss. He fell and

the flames licked upon his sleeves and ignited him in a horrid and fervent fire. Those that saw the flaming body said that the house took to creaking and contracting in systolic communion with its master. The house roared with flames and ascended in a horrific cloud, dark and acrid casting a shadow across the forest. The house emanated a creaking and the wood pinged and splintered as the flames grew.

The morning mists were sucked toward the house like manifestations of spirits called forth to a meeting of wraiths and ghouls sucked towards the monolithic burning spire in thin swirling eddies. The house collapsed in the middle and the fire grew enormous throwing multitudinous sparks into the sky.

In the following weeks a mound of ash smoked endlessly through the canopy and into the sky in a single and unending line. The animals were gone and the gardens now were weeded and overgrown. The ironwork cages that housed the animals slowly oxidised and fell into the earth from which the man had raised them.

In time animals scraped away the ash and revealed the soil beneath. Birds fed on brambles and raspberries and then shat the seeds they ate upon the newly fertile ground. The baked and ashen earth where the house once stood became moist with rain and then in time began to moss over and the iris of ash and charcoal closed covering the mans toil indifferently and without compassion. The man's misplaced and unnatural faith remained secluded beneath that verdant green carpet of transient life.

