

The Reflecting Pool

A Tale of Structural Dread

Michael S. Moniz, after H.P. Lovecraft

LV04

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I

I write this from Butler Hospital, where I have been a patient since the fourteenth of September. The irony of my situation is not lost upon me — I am a physician, trained at the Harvard Medical School, who has practiced surgery in Boston for eleven years, and I am now confined to the very sort of institution whose diagnostic instruments I once trusted without reservation. The attending staff are competent and not unkind. They believe I suffer from a disorder of perception aggravated by grief. I do not dispute the grief. But the perception is sound, and it is the soundness of my perception that has made it impossible for me to live among mirrors, windows, polished surfaces, standing water, or any medium that returns a man's face to him.

I write because my brother Silas is dead — or if not dead, then altered past any definition of life that a medical education can supply — and because the circumstances of his alteration must be set down by someone who shared his face, his blood, and his earliest memory of the world. I am that person. There is no other.

We were twins, Silas and I. Identical in every particular that a physician's examination could verify. Born on the ninth of March, 1893, in the city of Providence, Rhode Island, in a house on Benefit Street whose cellar extended, as I would later learn, somewhat further than its lot lines could account for.

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II

Our father, Josiah Fenner, was a surveyor for the city — a man of precise habits and modest ambition who measured property lines with the same calm attention he brought to carving the Sunday roast. Our mother, Eunice, died when we were seven. I remember the funeral less clearly than I remember the sound Silas made afterward, alone in our shared bedroom, a sound I recognized because it was the sound I was also making, an exact replica, as if grief too were subject to the laws of duplication.

We were not merely alike. We were, in the parlance of our schoolmates, uncanny. We finished each other's sentences before we understood that other siblings did not. We fell ill simultaneously with fevers whose temperatures, measured by our father with a pharmacist's thermometer, matched to the decimal. When I broke my left wrist at fourteen, falling from the elm behind the house, Silas reported pain in the same wrist for three days, though no injury could be found. Our father, who was not a superstitious man, recorded this in his surveyor's notebook alongside a property boundary and did not discuss it further.

There was a horse trough behind the house on Benefit Street, old granite filled by a pipe whose origin neither our father nor the city water office could definitively trace. On

summer afternoons, Silas and I would lean over it together and look at our reflections in the water. Two faces, identical, looking up from the same dark surface. Silas said once — we were perhaps ten — that we were not two boys looking down but one boy looking at himself from two sides of the water. I laughed. He did not. He watched the reflections with a patience that I, even then, recognized as different from my own. He was not admiring himself. He was studying the duplication, as if it contained a question he had not yet learned to ask.

The divergence came with education. I had an aptitude for the sciences that Silas lacked, or rather, Silas had an aptitude for a kind of knowledge that no institution could credential. He read widely and without system — natural history, antiquarian records, the geological surveys of New England that our father kept in his study. He took particular interest in burial customs, in the architecture of old cemeteries, in the maintenance of grounds that no living relative visited any longer. When I left for Cambridge, Silas remained in Providence and found employment as an assistant sexton at the North Burial Ground.

It was not the profession our father had hoped for. But Silas had a genuine feeling for the work — the old stones, the shifting earth, the record-keeping that a well-run cemetery demands. He knew which plots had settled and which had been disturbed by root systems. He could identify the century of a grave by the cut of the stone and the formula of the mortar. He was, in his way, as precise as our father, but his precision was devoted to the dead.

The arrangement between us began in my third year at the medical school, when the shortage of cadavers for dissection had become acute. The Commonwealth's

anatomical laws were strict, the supply of unclaimed bodies insufficient, and the professors made it known, without saying so directly, that resourceful students had always found supplementary sources. I wrote to Silas. His reply arrived within four days. The tone was practical, even cheerful. He knew which graves in the older sections were unlikely to attract visitors. He knew the grounds at night. He had keys.

I will not pretend that what we did was legal. It was not. But I will say that the bodies Silas provided were old — decades old in some cases — and that no grieving family was robbed of a recent burial. Silas was scrupulous about this. His letters described the selections with a care that I found, at the time, reassuring: the condition of the casket, the depth of the interment, the state of the remains. He was doing a kind of archaeology, he said, and I chose to believe him because the alternative was to examine the arrangement more closely than either of us could afford.

The shipments arrived in Boston by rail, packed in sawdust and lye, addressed to my rooming house under the name of a chemical supply company that existed only on the return labels Silas had printed. We maintained this system for the better part of four years — through my residency and into the first years of my practice. The correspondence that accompanied the shipments was regular, detailed, and warm. Silas wrote well, in a plain direct hand that mirrored my own so precisely that I once opened a letter of his and read three sentences before realizing it was not something I had written to myself.

That is important. The handwriting. Remember that I could not tell his hand from mine.

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III

The change in the correspondence began in the autumn of 1924, though I did not recognize it as a change until the winter of 1925, when the accumulation of small discrepancies had become impossible to rationalize individually.

The first sign was the hours. Silas had always written his letters in the evening, after his duties at the burial ground were complete, and his datelines reflected this — eight or nine o'clock, the ink of a man who had washed the day's work from his hands and sat down at his desk with purpose. Beginning in October, the datelines shifted. Eleven o'clock. Midnight. Two in the morning. I attributed this to the seasonal change — the shorter days requiring longer evenings to complete his private work among the grounds.

The second sign was the subject matter. Silas had always been interested in the history of the plots he tended, but his earlier letters treated this interest as background — a paragraph on the Tillinghast family monument, an aside about the curious depth of the Fenner lot (no relation, he assured me, though the name gave us both a superstitious pause). Beginning in November, the antiquarian interest displaced the practical. He wrote at length about tunnels. The North Burial Ground, he explained, sat above a network of passages that connected, in ways the city surveyor's maps did not acknowledge, to older excavations beneath College Hill. Some of these passages were colonial in origin — root cellars, drainage channels, the remnants of foundations that predated the current street grid. Others, Silas wrote, were older.

I did not ask how much older. I should have.

The third sign was dietary. Silas had always been a man of regular habits at table — our mother's cooking had imprinted itself on both of us, and we shared a preference for plain New England fare, boiled dinners and brown bread and the salt cod our father had eaten every Friday. In December, Silas mentioned that he had given up his rooms' small kitchen in favor of eating elsewhere. He did not specify where. In January, he wrote that he found cooked food disagreeable, and had adopted what he called a simpler regime. I told myself he meant cold suppers — bread, cheese, dried meat. I did not ask for detail, and he did not supply it.

The fourth sign was the smell. Beginning in late January, the letters carried an odor that I could not immediately place. It was not the smell of the burial ground, which I knew well enough from the shipments — that particular compound of old earth, calcium powder, and the faint sweetness of advanced decomposition. This was different. Damp, but not the damp of rain or cellar condensation. An older damp, if such a thing can be said to have an age — the smell of water that has stood in stone for so long that it has ceased to be mere water and has become instead a medium, a solution saturated with the mineral memory of whatever the stone has witnessed. I held the letters to my nose and tried to name the smell, and the closest I could come was this: it smelled like the inside of a well that has not been opened in a century.

The fifth sign — and the one that finally broke through my capacity for rationalization — was the handwriting.

I must be careful here, because this is the point at which my account will seem, to the attending physicians who may read it, to confirm their diagnosis. But I am a physician

myself, and I know the difference between a clinical observation and a delusion, and what I observed in Silas's handwriting between January and April of 1925 was not a product of my imagination.

The hand was still recognizably his — which is to say, recognizably mine. But the pressure had changed. The downstrokes had thickened, as if the pen were being held with greater force or with fingers whose proportions had subtly altered. The loops had tightened. The spacing between words had grown irregular, not in the manner of haste or fatigue, but in the manner of someone whose spatial sense had been recalibrated to a different standard. The letters still said what Silas meant to say. But the instrument producing them was, by imperceptible degrees, becoming a different instrument.

I have kept the correspondence. It is in a box at my former lodgings in Boston, filed in chronological order. Any competent graphologist will confirm what I am describing. The change is there. It is measurable. It is not grief and it is not delusion.

In February, Silas wrote that he had found something beneath the burial ground that he wished me to see. Not a body — he was careful about this distinction — but a space. A cistern or natural cavity, walled in fieldstone so old that the mortar had powdered to chalk, in which standing water had collected to a depth of perhaps two feet. The water was black and perfectly still, he wrote, and the chamber was large enough to accommodate several persons. He had been visiting it regularly. He described the reflective quality of the water with an enthusiasm that I found, even then, unsettling — not because the description was unreasonable, but because it was not the sort of thing Silas would normally

have noticed. My brother was a practical man. He did not comment on the beauty of standing water.

In March, he stopped mentioning daylight altogether.

I do not mean that he complained of the dark, or that he described a preference for evening work. I mean that the concept of daytime — of sun, of morning, of the ordinary cycle of waking and working — simply vanished from his letters as if it had ceased to be relevant to his experience. He wrote of the tunnels, of the cistern, of the passages that extended beneath College Hill in directions he had not yet fully mapped. He wrote of others he had encountered below — colleagues, he called them, though he had never before used that word for anyone but me. He wrote that he was comfortable, that his health was excellent, that the work suited him in ways the surface employment never had.

Surface employment. He used that phrase exactly.

In April, a letter arrived that I read three times before I understood what had changed. The content was ordinary — an account of a passage he had explored, a reference to our father's old survey maps, a request that I visit Providence at my earliest convenience. But the hand — the hand was no longer mine. I held the letter beside a page of my own writing and the correspondence that had once been perfect, that had once been so precise that I could not tell his script from my own, had broken. The letters were formed differently. The slant had shifted. The capitals had acquired an angularity that I had never produced and could not reproduce when I tried.

I read the letter again. The voice was still Silas. The words were his words, the phrasing his phrasing, the warmth still present beneath the strangeness of the subject matter. But

the hand that had written them was becoming, with a patience I can only describe as geological, a hand I did not recognize.

I booked passage to Providence on the seventh of May.

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IV

Silas had moved. His former rooms on Congdon Street — clean, well-lit, modestly furnished in the manner of a bachelor who respects his space without decorating it — had been vacated in March, and the landlady, a Mrs. Borden who had known our father, told me with visible discomfort that Mr. Fenner had left no forwarding address but had mentioned lodgings closer to his work. She paused. She wanted to say something else. I waited, and after a moment she said only that he had changed, and that she hoped I could help him, because the change was not the kind that improved with time.

I found him through the burial ground's superintendent, a Mr. Orne, who confirmed that Silas still reported for duty but had shifted exclusively to night work and could be found, most evenings, at a maintenance shed near the northern boundary of the grounds. The superintendent, too, paused. He said that Silas was a good worker and that no complaint had been filed. He said this in the tone of a man who is about to add a qualification and then decides against it.

I reached the grounds at dusk. The North Burial Ground is not, by any standard, a frightening place — it is old, established, well-maintained, its stones dating to the eighteenth century in the oldest sections and its paths kept

clear by the city's parks department. I had visited many times, as a boy with our father and later with Silas, and the dead there had never seemed anything other than decently interred and properly at rest. But the light was leaving the sky in a way that made the stones look provisional, as if they were not monuments but markers for something that had not yet been finally settled, and the paths between the plots seemed, in the thickening air, to lead not to other sections of the cemetery but to a territory adjacent to the cemetery that the paths merely crossed.

The maintenance shed was at the far edge of the grounds, where the burial plots gave way to a stand of old elm and oak whose roots had, over the decades, complicated the nearest graves. The shed was unlocked. Inside, I found a cot, a lamp whose oil was low, a stack of our father's survey maps annotated in a hand I could no longer call my own, and a trapdoor.

I will describe what follows as precisely as I can, because precision is the only instrument I have left, and because the attending staff at Butler Hospital have suggested, in their careful way, that the events of that evening were a product of grief and exhaustion and the particular susceptibility that twins possess to disorders of identity. They are wrong. But I understand why they believe what they believe, and I cannot fault their reasoning, because their reasoning is the same reasoning I would have applied to any patient who told me what I am about to set down.

The trapdoor opened onto a wooden ladder that descended approximately fifteen feet into a passage walled in fieldstone. The air was cool and carried a smell I recognized — the same smell that had clung to the letters since January, that ancient-well damp, but concentrated now to a density

that was almost tactile. The passage was narrow and unlit. I had brought an electric torch from the shed, and its beam showed me walls that were dry, well-constructed, and considerably older than the burial ground above.

I followed the passage for what I judged to be two hundred yards, though the absence of reference points made estimation difficult. The passage turned twice, both times at angles that seemed, in the torchlight, slightly wrong — not impossible, not dramatically askew, but inclined in a direction that my sense of level could not reconcile with the grade of the hill above. The floor was smooth underfoot, worn by traffic I preferred not to estimate. In places, the walls bore marks — not inscriptions, not symbols, but worn grooves at approximately hip height, as if generations of hands or other appendages had steadied themselves against the stone in passing. The grooves were polished to a dull sheen.

The passage opened, without transition, into the chamber Silas had described.

It was larger than his letters had suggested. The ceiling was perhaps ten feet high, vaulted in a manner that no colonial builder would have attempted underground, supported by pillars of the same fieldstone that walled the passage. The floor was stone — not laid stone, but a single continuous surface that had been, if the word applies, carved or worn or shaped by means I could not identify. And in the center of the chamber, occupying a roughly circular depression perhaps twelve feet across, was the pool.

The water was black. Not dark — black, in the way that a substance is black when it absorbs the entirety of the light directed at it and returns nothing. My torch beam entered the water and did not come back. The surface was perfectly

still. Not calm — still, in the way that a solid is still, as if the water had achieved a state of rest so complete that motion had become structurally unavailable to it.

I stood at the edge of the pool and looked down, and the water, despite its blackness, showed me my face.

I do not know how this was possible. A surface that absorbs all light should not reflect. But the face was there — my face, pale and strained in the torchlight, its features as familiar as the features I saw each morning in my shaving mirror. I looked at my own reflection, and my reflection looked at me, and for a moment the chamber was only a chamber, the pool was only a pool, and the strangeness of the evening was only the strangeness of an old cistern beneath an old burial ground in an old city.

Then Silas spoke.

He said my name. He said it from somewhere to my left, from the far side of the chamber where the pillars cast shadows that my torch did not fully penetrate. His voice was his voice — the same voice that had read to me from our father's survey notebooks, that had argued with me over the carving of the Christmas ham, that had broken on the same syllable mine had broken on at our mother's funeral. His voice was unchanged. I turned toward it with a relief so profound that it amounted to a kind of prayer.

He stepped into the light, and the prayer died.

I must be precise. I owe him that.

He was recognizably Silas. The height was right. The build was right. The face — my face, our face — was present, was identifiably the face of the man I had known for thirty-two years. But it was present in the way that a photograph is

present in the developing tray before the final wash, when the image is there but has not yet fixed, when the features float in the solution and the chemistry is still working and the face might resolve into sharpness or might dissolve into something the silver halide cannot hold.

His skin had changed. Not its color — I am not describing a pallor or a flush — but its texture, its quality, its relationship to the musculature beneath. It had thickened in some areas and thinned in others, and the thinning revealed, at the temples and along the jaw, a faint suggestion of structure that did not correspond to human bone. His eyes were his eyes. They knew me. They were glad to see me. And they were set in a face that was in the process of becoming a face I would not be able to claim as my own.

He smiled at me. The smile was Silas's smile. It was also, by a margin so small that only a twin could have detected it, wrong — the muscles pulling in directions that Silas's muscles had never pulled, the expression arriving at warmth by a route that was not quite the route warmth had always taken across that face. There was kindness in it. That was the worst part. He was glad I had come. He had wanted me to see what he was becoming, and the wanting was not a cry for help but an offering, the way a man shows a brother the house he has built or the country he has moved to, expecting to be understood.

"Caleb," he said. "I wanted you to see."

I could not speak. I was a physician. I had seen death, deformity, the failure of the body in every configuration that disease and accident could produce. I had catalogued the symptoms of conditions that turned the skin to leather, the bones to chalk, the organs to masses that no textbook had prepared me for. None of it had prepared me for the specific

horror of looking at my own face and finding it occupied by a process that was neither disease nor decay but something more patient than either — a revision, carried out with the slow authority of geology, of the materials I had always believed were fixed.

He walked toward me. His gait had changed — not dramatically, not grotesquely, but with a looseness in the joints that suggested an increase in flexibility that the human skeleton does not normally permit. He moved the way a man moves when his body has recently been refitted and he has not yet fully memorized the new arrangement.

“It doesn’t hurt,” he said, and the fact that he thought I needed to hear this was worse than anything I had yet seen, because it meant he understood what I was looking at, and he was not horrified, and his comfort with the change was itself the final evidence that the change was real and complete in its intention if not yet in its execution.

He reached the edge of the pool and stood beside me, and we were reflected together in the black water — two faces that had once been identical, side by side, one of them still mine and one of them departing from mine by increments that the water recorded with a fidelity I will never be able to forget.

I looked at his reflection. I looked at mine. And in the black water of that cistern beneath the North Burial Ground, in the stillness of a pool that should not have been capable of reflection, I saw that the difference between the two faces was smaller than I wanted it to be.

I do not mean that my face had changed. I mean that looking at his face changing — seeing the alteration at work in features that were also my features, watching the departure

from a template that was also my template — made it impossible to look at my own face without seeing the departure as available. As pending. As a draft of my own future written in the flesh of the man who had always been my perfect copy.

He said something else. He said that the others were kind, that the work below was the continuation of work he had always been doing, that the dead were not what he had thought they were and that the boundary between the living and the dead was not a wall but a gradient, and that he had found his position on the gradient and it was comfortable and it was permanent and he wished me to understand that he was not lost but arrived.

I looked at the pool. I looked at the two reflections. I looked at the difference that was not large enough. And I understood — with a clarity more terrible than any diagnosis I have ever rendered or received — that I would never again look at my own face without seeing his face becoming what it was becoming, and that the mirror would never be safe again, and that every reflective surface for the rest of my life would show me not what I am but what my brother demonstrated I could be.

I left the chamber. I climbed the ladder. I crossed the burial ground in the dark, and the stones were pale and the grass was wet and the dead beneath me were only the dead and I envied every one of them for the simplicity of their condition.

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I do not remember how I reached the train station. I do not remember the journey back to Boston. I am told I was found in my consulting room three days later, sitting in a chair I had turned to face the wall, having covered every mirror, every window, every glass surface in the office with surgical drapes. I had not eaten. I had not slept. I had removed the glass from the instrument cabinet because the polished steel returned a face I could not bear to examine.

I have been at Butler Hospital for eleven weeks. The staff are conscientious and have made accommodations that I recognize, as a physician, are not standard for cases of my diagnosis. My room has been modified at my request: the window has been fitted with curtains that remain drawn, the mirror above the washstand has been removed, and the water in the basin is changed frequently enough that it does not achieve the stillness required for reflection.

They tell me I am well. They tell me my face is normal, that the features in the mirror — when they have persuaded me to look, which they do with diminishing frequency — are the features of a healthy man of thirty-two with no abnormality of skin, bone, or musculature. I believe them. I believe them because I am a physician and I know what a normal face looks like and I know, when I can bring myself to examine the evidence clinically, that my face has not changed.

But I also know what I saw in the pool. I know that the face beside mine — the face that was mine, that was made from the same materials and assembled by the same instructions and carried through the world by the same blood — was in the process of becoming something that the word “face” could no longer accurately contain. And I know that we were

identical, Silas and I, in every particular that a physician's examination could verify, and that what was available to his flesh was composed of the same possibilities as mine, and that the only difference between us was time and proximity and the particular arrangement of circumstances that had placed him below the burial ground and me above it.

They have asked about Silas. I have told them what I can. They sent an officer of the Providence police to investigate, accompanied by the burial ground's superintendent. The maintenance shed was as I had described it. The trapdoor was present. But the passage below extended only thirty feet before terminating in a collapse of earth and fieldstone that appeared, in the officer's professional opinion, to have been undisturbed for decades. No chamber was found. No pool. No evidence that any person had recently occupied the space below.

I was not surprised. The passages have their own economy. They are available to those who have been changed, and closed to those who have not, and the pool at their center reflects only the faces it has use for.

Silas Fenner has been listed as missing by the Providence police. His personal effects have been placed in storage. His position at the North Burial Ground has been filled. The official record will show a man who abandoned his employment and his lodgings without notice, a not uncommon event in a city of Providence's size, and the file will be closed when the statutory period has elapsed, and no one will connect his disappearance to the network of passages beneath College Hill or to the still black water in which I saw two faces that were the same face and are no longer.

There is a basin of water on the table beside my bed. The staff brought it this morning. I have asked them not to let the water go still, but they are busy and attentive to schedules rather than requests, and the basin has been sitting undisturbed for the better part of an hour. The surface has achieved a flatness that is very nearly perfect. I can see the ceiling reflected in it, the edge of the curtain, the iron rail of the bed.

I have not yet looked for my face. I know it will be there. I know it will be unchanged — the same face I have carried for thirty-two years, the same face my brother carried until he carried it somewhere I cannot follow.

But I also know that the pool beneath the North Burial Ground showed me something that cannot be unseen, and that every still surface is a lesser copy of that pool, and that the question the water asks is always the same question: which of the two faces in the reflection is the one that has not yet changed?

My name is Dr. Caleb Fenner. I am a physician. I am a twin whose twin has crossed a threshold that no instrument in my profession can measure and no diagnosis in its literature can name.

The water in the basin is still. I am going to look.