

The Letter

A Tale of Structural Dread

Michael S. Moniz, after H.P. Lovecraft

LV09

York Factory, Hudson's Bay

The 14th of November, 1702

Cousin,

I write this by tallow-light in the storehouse at York Factory, where the Company has kept me these nine months on account of my competence with mechanisms and my willingness to remain in a place that other men have found reasons to leave. The post is sound. The stockade is pine, squared and set close, and the storehouse where I sit is built in the English fashion with a good ridge and a plank floor raised above the ground, which is necessary here as the ground does not behave as ground should, but I will come to that presently. We are seven men. We were nine in the spring. Carver went south in August with the brigade and has not returned, and Fenn walked into the woods on the eleventh of October to check his snare line and did not come back, and we found his snares still set and his tracks ending at a place where the snow was undisturbed, which is to say his tracks ended where no tracks should end, and I have nothing further to say about Fenn except that he was a reliable man and not given to wandering, and that his absence is felt in the roster but not discussed.

I am in good health. The provisions are adequate though not various — salt pork, dried peas, flour, and the rum which the

Company supplies in quantity and which I have found more necessary than I expected, not for warmth or for companionship, which are the reasons the other men drink it, but for a purpose I will attempt to describe, though I am aware that description may not serve and that you may read what follows as the complaint of a man who has been too long in a cold country with insufficient society. I assure you it is not. I have been in cold countries before. I wintered at Moose Factory in '99 and found it tolerable. What I find here is not a matter of cold or of solitude. It is a matter of distance.

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I must explain what I mean by distance, as I do not mean it in the ordinary sense. The country here is large. You have heard this from other men and perhaps discounted it as the exaggeration of travellers, but I tell you plainly that the scale of this land cannot be communicated in a letter and that what I write here is a reduction of what I observe, in the same way that a chart is a reduction of a coastline. The bay itself is an inland sea. Standing at the shore on a clear day you can see the far side, or believe you can — a dark line at the horizon that may be land or may be the sky's weight pressing down on the water. I have attempted to reach the far shore by canoe on three occasions with the Cree men who trade here and who are patient with my questions in the way that men are patient with children who ask why the sun moves. On each occasion we paddled from dawn to dusk and the far shore was no closer at evening than it had been at morning. The water was calm. The current was negligible. The canoe moved at the speed a canoe moves when two men paddle steadily in still water, which I have measured by other crossings to be approximately four miles in the hour. In ten hours of

paddling we should have crossed forty miles. The bay at this latitude is not forty miles wide. The charts say it is twenty-eight. We should have reached the far shore by midday. We did not reach it at all.

I do not report this as a marvel or a curiosity. I report it as a survey finding. The distance across the bay does not correspond to the distance that is traversed when one attempts to cross it. The distance is larger on the inside than on the outside, in the same way that a room may feel larger than its walls suggest when one stands within it, though I have never encountered a room whose interior exceeded its exterior by such a margin. The Cree do not find this remarkable. When I asked the man called Askew — this is not his name but the name we use, as his name contains sounds I cannot reproduce with an English mouth — why the far shore could not be reached, he said something which the translator rendered as “the water keeps what it is given” and which Askew seemed to consider a complete explanation. I did not press the matter. I have learned that pressing the Cree on questions of this kind produces not resistance but pity, as though I am asking why fire is hot, and the answer is too obvious to deserve the effort of speaking it.

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The distances on land are similarly wrong, though I find them easier to bear because on land I can measure with my legs and verify with known references. The portage from the Hayes River to the Nelson, which the Company’s records describe as six miles, took Carver and me eleven hours to walk in June, carrying a standard load on a clear path. Eleven hours at the pace we maintained should produce approximately twenty-two miles, not six. We arrived at the

Nelson exhausted and confused and neither of us spoke of the discrepancy because there was nothing to say about it that would not sound like madness or complaint, and Carver was not a man who complained, and I am not a man who sounds mad if I can prevent it. The portage back, three days later, took four hours. The same path. The same load. The same pace. Four hours in the return direction and eleven in the outgoing. The path had not changed. The distance had.

I have observed this pattern in other traversals and I will describe it as plainly as I can. The distances in this country are not fixed. They are variable, and the variation is not random. It follows a logic that I have not been able to determine but that I believe to be consistent, in the same way that the tides follow a logic which a man who does not understand the moon might describe as inconsistent but which is in fact perfectly regular once the governing principle is known. The governing principle of the distances here is not known to me. I observe only the effects, which are: distances are longer in certain directions than in others, and the longer direction is not always the same, and the discrepancy is larger at certain times than at others, and the times when it is largest are the times when the sky is clear and the stars are visible and the cold is most severe, which is to say the times when the distance between the ground and the sky is at its most apparent.

I am a man who works with mechanisms. I understand tolerances. I understand the difference between a measurement that is wrong because the instrument is faulty and a measurement that is wrong because the thing being measured has changed. The instruments here are not faulty. My legs are the same legs. My pace is the same pace. The sextant reads correctly against known stars. The compass points north. Every instrument I possess confirms that the

world is operating as it should, and every instrument I possess is lying, because the world is not operating as it should, and the lie is not in the instruments but in the assumption that the instruments are measuring something stable.

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I come now to the matter of the trees, which I have postponed because it is the thing I least wish to report and which I am least confident of reporting accurately. There is a stand of spruce approximately two miles north of the post — or approximately two miles in the direction I have been calling north, which is the direction the compass indicates and which I have no reason to doubt except that the stand of spruce is also approximately two miles south of the post, and approximately two miles east, and approximately two miles west. The stand of spruce is in every direction. It is not a large stand. It is perhaps forty trees, tall, closely spaced, with the particular density of old growth that has never been cut. I have walked to it from the north and arrived. I have walked to it from the south and arrived at the same stand. I have confirmed this by marking a tree on the north approach with my axe and finding the mark present when I approached from the south.

The Cree will not enter the stand. Askew, when I asked him about it, said the same thing he says about all the distances: the land keeps what it is given. I asked him what the land had been given in that place. He did not answer. This was not evasion. It was, I believe, courtesy. There are things the Cree know about this country that they do not share with Company men, not from secrecy but from the same impulse that prevents a man from describing the colour of the sky to a man who has been blind from birth. The description would

be accurate and useless. I accepted his silence as I have accepted the other silences, which is to say I noted it, and recorded it, and did not pretend to understand it.

I entered the stand alone on the twenty-third of September. The trees were spruce, as I have said, and old, and their trunks were straight and close and the light between them was the kind of light that is not absence of dark but the dark's permission for a small amount of seeing. The ground was moss. The air was still. I walked into the stand for approximately ten minutes, which at my pace should have carried me clear through forty trees and out the far side. I did not emerge from the far side. I was still in the stand. The trees were still around me. The moss was still beneath my feet. The light was the same light. I turned and walked back the way I had come, and in ten minutes I was at the edge of the stand, facing the post, and the post was where it should have been, and the stockade was pine, squared and set close, and the storehouse had a good ridge, and everything was exactly as I had left it except that the sun had moved four hours and my boots were wet past the ankle with a moisture that was not snow-melt and not rain and that smelled of earth so deep it had never been in contact with the air.

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I drink the rum in the evenings now. I drink it after I have completed my entries in the Company's ledger, which is the only document I am required to maintain and which I maintain with the precision the Company expects. The ledger records pelts received, goods disbursed, provisions consumed, weather observed. It does not record the distances or the trees or the bay that cannot be crossed. These things are not the Company's business. They are not

anyone's business, except perhaps yours, because you are a Morne, and the Mornes have always been men who notice when a room is not the shape it should be, and I believe this country is a room, and the room is not the shape it should be, and I am standing in it, and the walls are very far away, and the distances between me and the walls do not hold.

The rum helps. I say this without shame and without medical justification. The rum does not warm me, though the other men believe it does. The rum does not make me sociable, though the other men believe it does. What the rum does is place a thickness between me and the distances. When I have had enough of it — not a great deal, two or three measures, sufficient to produce a heaviness in the limbs without affecting the balance — the distances settle. The bay is twenty-eight miles wide and stays twenty-eight miles wide. The portage is six miles and stays six miles. The stand of spruce is two miles to the north and only to the north. The rum does not fix the distances. The rum makes me less able to feel that the distances are wrong, and this is sufficient, because the wrongness is not in the distances. The wrongness is in my capacity to feel them, and the rum dulls the capacity, and the dulling is a mercy, and I am not too proud to accept it.

I am aware that a man who drinks to dull a perception he cannot explain is a man who will be understood as a man who drinks, and I am aware that this letter, should it be read by anyone other than yourself, would confirm that understanding. I accept the risk. I write to you because you are the only person to whom I can describe what I observe without being thought ill, and I write to you in Swansea because the name is the name and the name means what it has always meant to our family, though I confess I no longer know which Swansea I mean when I write it, and I am not

certain the distinction is important, as the name appears to designate not a place but a condition, and the condition is the same on both sides of the water.

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There is one further matter which I record here because I do not know where else to record it and because I believe you will understand it, though I cannot explain it. Last week, in the early hours of a morning so cold that the sap had frozen in the pines and the stockade was cracking with the sound of it, I woke in my bunk and lay in the dark and felt the storehouse around me. I felt its dimensions — the width of the room, the height of the ridge, the distance from my bunk to the north wall, the distance from the floor to the joists. I have always been able to do this. I do not need to see a room to know its shape. I feel it, the way a man feels the temperature of water before he puts his hand in it. This is not unusual in our family. You have it. Your father had it. The old letters from Wales describe it in men whose names I cannot pronounce but whose blood is ours.

In the dark of that morning I felt the storehouse, and the storehouse was the shape it has always been — thirty-two feet by sixteen, eight feet to the ridge, plank floor, pine walls, the door on the south side and the window on the east. I felt it and it was right. And then I felt past it. I do not know how to describe this except to say that the capacity which ordinarily stops at the walls of the room I am in did not stop at the walls. It extended. Past the stockade. Past the cleared ground around the post. Past the tree line. Into the country, which was dark and cold and enormous and which I could feel the way I normally feel a room — as weight, as shape, as the spatial fact of a thing, known without seeing.

The country was not the shape it should be. I have said this already about the distances and the trees and the bay. But feeling it in the dark, from my bunk, with the whole of the land pressing against my capacity the way the bay presses against the shore — this was different. The wrongness was not local. The wrongness was not a matter of this portage or that crossing or the stand of spruce that exists in every direction. The wrongness was total. The country was the wrong shape the way a broken mechanism is the wrong shape — not damaged but misaligned, as though the parts of it were correct in themselves but assembled to a purpose that the shape of the land could not accommodate, or rather could accommodate only by being a different shape on the inside than it was on the outside, which is what I have been observing all along, which is what the distances have been telling me, which is what the bay demonstrates every time a man paddles across it and does not arrive.

I lay in my bunk and I felt the whole of it and the whole of it was wrong and the wrongness had a quality I can only describe as patience. It was not hostile. It was not malevolent. It was not doing anything to me. It was simply there, and it was wrong, and it was patient, and the patience had a weight that was heavier than the country itself, as though the wrongness were not a defect but a feature, and the feature had been in place for longer than the land, and the land had been shaped around it the way a river is shaped around a stone, and the stone was very large and very old and very patient and did not know I was there and did not care that I was there and would not have altered its patience by a single degree had I never been born, and the rum was on the shelf beside my bunk, and I drank from it, and the distances settled, and the storehouse was thirty-two feet by sixteen, and the morning came.

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I will winter here. In the spring I will join the brigade south if the Company permits it, or I will remain if they require it. I do not fear the cold or the isolation or the Cree or the distances, which are the things the other men fear. I fear only the capacity, which is mine and which I did not ask for and which extends further in this country than it has any right to extend, and which the rum dulls, and which I dull gladly, and which will accompany me, I expect, for the remainder of my life, as it has accompanied every man in our family who has had it, and as it will accompany whatever son I produce, if I produce a son, and if the son has the capacity, and if the son is fool enough to go to a place where the distances are wrong.

I enclose a chart of the bay as I have measured it. Do not trust the measurements. I have made them accurately and they are wrong.

Your cousin,

Thomas Morne

Swansea