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I do not know if it ever existed--
That lost world floating dimly on Time's stream--
And yet I see it often, violet-misted,
And shimmering at the back of some vague dream.
There were strange towers and curious lapping rivers,
Labyrinths of wonder, and low vaults of light,
And bough-crossed skies of flame, like that which quivers
Wistfully, just before a winter's night.

Great moors led off to sedgy shores unpeopled,
Where vast birds wheeled, while on a windswept hill
There was a village, ancient and white-steeped,
With evening chimes for which I listen still.
I do not know what land it is--or dare
Ask when or why I was, or will be, there.

.....H.P. Lovecraft*

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DAVID H KELLER, M.D.:

NOTES ON STURGEON

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IT HAS BEEN STATED THAT in commenting on the ability of an author to tell a good story, his best story should be criticised and not his worst. Most authors show considerable variation in the quality of their tales; it would not be correct to judge any of them by their worst productions. Thus in considering Sturgeon as a story teller I will confine my remarks to but one story -- but one which is constantly being referred to as a very noted horror tale. This is titled It and can be found in the Sturgeon collection of tales WITHOUT SORCERY. In the preface, Ray Bradbury says of this tale, "It is incredible, an unsmiling mask of a story, written in a black refrigerator at two in the morning." Sturgeon writes, "I was feeling so good that I took what poisons were in me at the moment and got rid of them in one pure splash of putrescence. It was very easy to do at the time and I wish I could do it again."

At various gatherings of readers, Sturgeon is always recalled as the author of this story and all, except myself, agree that it is a very fine tale and can be thought of as tops in the horror class. When I differ with them they look at me as if I were abnormal; perhaps not feeble-minded but certainly a most peculiar person "who could not see the real beauty in a tale whose perfection is so easily discerned."

One of the most important features in a good story is its illusion of reality. It may be like a jog saw puzzle with a number of pieces that are oddly shaped, but they must finally fit together so that a perfect picture is formed without one piece left out. A story may be like a number of strings of various colors and lengths, but they can be tied together, rolled in a ball, and can be then placed in a library. If, however, the story has some iron pipes, long sticks of wood in addition to the strings, it cannot be tied together and made into a ball. Thus, no matter how bizarre or unusual a story is, it must not contain any contradictions. When the reader scans the story for the first time, he must believe it; later he may say that it is impossible, but he should be able to accept it when he first reads it no matter how peculiar a story it may be.

Sturgeon starts the story It with the description of a monster. He writes: "It was never born, but it existed. It grew but was not alive. It did not live." All this is contradictory. He asks us immediately to accept impossibilities. How can anything exist without being born or in some way created? Only living things grow -- how could it do so if it was not alive in some way? He continues the description: "It was lumped, crusted with some hateful substance -- pieces of it dropped off writhing and stilled and lay putrescent in the forest loam." And yet not too much later the author will tell us that this mass was formed around the skeleton of a dead man and that the monster's shape was human!

We try to visualize this monster. Evidently it is a mass of dough-like matter covering a skeleton. Parts of the dough drop off when the creature scrapes against a tree, and when the surface dries, it flakes. The monster has only two parts -- bones, and the covering dough. There are no muscles, there is no heart or circulatory system. There is a skull but no brain or nervous system. And yet on the first page Sturgeon writes that it has "strength and great intelligence." This fantasy is not based on any reality. He is asking us to believe that there exists a monster who is able to walk and is very

strong yet has no muscles! It is extremely intelligent, yet it has no brain! The reader tries to accept the existence of such a being, but . . . can not understand it.

Sturgeon supports his statement of strength by telling how this monster behaves. It takes a young sapling and tears it into pieces; it picks up a frozen field creature and crushes it in his hand to a bloody pulp. It fights a hunting dog and crushes its skull with one blow of its hand; it raises a little girl by her pigtail and holds her up in the air. It fights and kills a man. In the course of a few hours it accomplishes feats which would tax an athlete. It does all this with bare hands that are nothing but bones covered with dough so soft that particles of it drop off just from the vibration of its walking!

During its short life it is constantly thinking, wondering about the dark night and the dawn of day. It tried to understand the dog, the little girl, the man it killed after he had shot at it. It worries about life and about death. It does all this without a brain.

At last it falls into a stream and lies there while the water washes the dough from the skeleton. It keeps on thinking, and says: "I am growing smaller. Soon the part of me that thinks will be gone. I will stop thinking and I will stop being and, that too, is an interesting thing."

Without even a tiny brain the monster is now a philosopher!

Finally, only the skeleton of the monster remains. As the covering is removed from the bones the monster says that it cannot understand life; conversely, we can't understand the monster! His is a most curious combination of contradictions and outright impossibilities. This story irritates me because I believe that Sturgeon is too good an author to compose such a tale. Bradbury terms the story "incredible." He certainly describes it correctly. To me it is nothing more than poor mood writing in which many of the cardinal principles of story-telling are either discarded or ignored.

...David H. Keller, M.D.
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