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THE
COLLECTED SHORT FICTION

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I was the only one among a local circle of acquaintances and associates who had never met Severini. Unlike the rest of them I was not in the least moved to visit him along with the others at that isolated residence which had become known as 'Severini's Shack.' There was a question of my deliberately avoiding an encounter with this extraordinary individual, but even I myself had no idea whether or not this was true. My curiosity was just as developed as that of the rest of them, more so in fact. Yet some kind of scruple or special anxiety kept me away from what the others celebrated as the 'spectacle of Severini.'

Of course I could not escape a second-hand knowledge of their Severini visits. Each of these trips to that lonesome hovel some distance outside the city where I used to live was a great adventure, they reported, an excursion into the most obscure and idiosyncratic nightmares. The figure that presided over these salon-like gatherings was extremely unstable and inspired in his visitors a sense of lurid anticipation, an unfocused expectation that sometimes reached the pitch of lunacy. Afterward I would hear detailed accounts from one person or another of what had occurred during a particular evening within the confines of the notorious shack, which was situated at the edge of a wildly overgrown and swampy tract of land known as St Alban's Marsh, a place that some claimed had a sinister pertinence to Severini himself. Occasionally I would make notes of these accounts, indulging myself in a type of imaginative and also highly analytical record-keeping. For the most part, however, I simply absorbed all of these Severini anecdotes in a wholly natural and organic fashion, much as I assimilated so many things in the world around me, without any awareness—or even a possibility of awareness—that these things might be nourishing or noxious or purely neutral. From the beginning, I admit, it was my tendency to be highly receptive to whatever someone might have to say regarding Severini, his shack-like home, and the marshy landscape in which he had ensconced himself. Then, during private moments when I returned to the small apartment in which I resided during this period of my life, I would recreate in my imagination the phenomena that had been related to me in conversations held at diverse places and times. It was rare that I actively urged the others to elaborate on any specific aspect of their adventures with Severini, but several times I did betray myself when the subject arose of his past life before he set himself up in a marshland shack.

According to first-hand witnesses (that is, persons who had actually made the pilgrimage to that isolated and crumbling shack), Severini could be quite talkative about his personal history, particularly the motives and events that most directly culminated in his present life. Nevertheless, these persons also admitted that the 'marvelous hermit' (Severini) displayed a conspicuous disregard for common facts and for truths of a literal sort. Thus he was often given to speaking about himself by way of ambiguous parables and metaphors, not to mention outrageous anecdotes, the facts of which always seemed to cancel out one another, as well as outright lies which afterward he himself would sometimes expose as such. But much of the time—and in the opinion of some, all of the time—Severini's speech took the form of total

nonsense, as though he were talking in his sleep. Despite these obstacles to both credibility and coherence, all of the individuals who spoke to me on the subject somehow conveyed to my mind a remarkably focused portrait of the hermit Severini, an amalgam of hearsay that attained the status of a potent legend.

This impression of a legendary Severini was no doubt bolstered by what certain persons described as 'Exhibits from the Imaginary Museum.' The entourage of visitors to the hermit's dilapidated shack was composed of more or less artistic persons, or at least individuals with artistic leanings, and their exposure to Severini proved a powerful inspiration that resulted in numerous artworks in a variety of media and genres. There were sculptures, paintings and drawings, poems and short prose pieces, musical compositions sometimes accompanied by lyrics, conceptual works that existed only in schematic or anecdotal form, and even an architectural plan for a 'ruined temple on a jungle island somewhere in the region of the Philippines.' While on the surface these productions appeared to have their basis in a multitude of dubious sources, each of them claimed the most literalistic origins in Severini's own words, his sleepwalking, as they called it. Indeed, I myself could perceive a definite unity among these artworks and their integral relationship to the same unique figure of inspiration that was Severini himself, although I had never met this fantastical person and had no desire to do so. Nevertheless, these so-called 'exhibits' helped me to recreate in my imagination not only those much-discussed visits to that shack in the marsh country but also the personal history of its lone inhabitant.

As I now think about them—that is, recreate them in my imagination—these Severini-based artworks, however varied in their genres and techniques, brought to the surface a few features that were always the same and were always treated in the same way. I was startled when I first began to recognize these common features, because somehow they closely replicated a number of peculiar images and concepts that I myself had already experienced in moments of imaginative daydreaming and especially during episodes of delirium brought on by physical disease or excessive psychic turmoil.

A central element of such episodes was the sense of a place possessing qualities that were redolent, on the one hand, of a tropical landscape, and, on the other hand, of a common sewer. The aspect of a common sewer emerged in the feeling of an enclosed but also vastly extensive space, a network of coiling passages that spanned incredible distances in an underworld of misty darkness. As for the quality of a tropical landscape, this shared much of the same kind of darkly oozing ferment as the sewer aspect, with the added impression of the most exotic forms of life spawning on every side, things multiplying and also incessantly mutating like a time-lapse film of spreading fungus or multi-colored slime molds totally unrestricted in their form and expansion. While I experienced the most intense visions of this place, this tropical sewer, as it recreated itself in my delirious imagination year after year, I was always outside it at some great remove, not caught within as if I were having a nightmare. But still I maintained an awareness (as in a nightmare) that something had happened in this place, some unknown event had transpired that had left these images behind it like a trail of slime. And then a certain feeling came over me and a certain concept came to my mind.

It was this feeling and its companion concept that so vividly arose within my being when the

others began telling me about their strange visits to the Severini place and showing me the various artworks that this strange individual had inspired them to create. One by one I viewed paintings or sculptures in some artist's studio, or heard music being performed in a club that was frequented by the Severini crowd, or read literary works that were being passed around—and each time the sense of that tropical sewer was revived in me, although not with the same intensity as the delirious episodes I experienced while suffering from a physical disease or during periods of excessive psychic turmoil. The titles of these works alone might have been enough to provoke the particular feeling and the concept that were produced by my delirious episodes. The concept to which I have been referring may be stated in various ways, but it usually occurred to my mind as a simple phrase (or fragment), almost a chant that overwhelmed me with vile and haunting suggestions far beyond its mere words, which are as follows: the nightmare of the organism. The vile and haunting suggestions underlying (or inspired by) this conceptual phrase were, as I have said, called up by the titles of those Severini-based artworks, those Exhibits from the Imaginary Museum. While I have difficulty recalling the type of work to which each title was attached—whether a painting or a sculpture, a poem or a performance piece—I am still able to cite a number of the titles themselves. One of them that easily emerges in recollection is the following: No Face Among Us. Here is another: Defiled and Delivered. And now many more of them are coming to my mind: The Way of the Lost, On Viscous and Sacred Ground (a.k.a. The Tantric Doctors), In Earth and Excreta, The Black Spume of Existence, Integuments in Eruption, and The Descent into the Fungal. All of these titles, as my artistic acquaintances and associates informed me, were taken from selected phrases (or fragments) spoken by Severini during his numerous episodes of sleeptalking.

Every time I heard one of these titles and saw the particular artwork that it named, I was always reminded of that tropical sewer of my delirious episodes. I would also feel myself on the verge of realizing what it was that had happened in this place, some wonderful or disastrous event that was intimately related to the conceptual phrase which I have given as the nightmare of the organism. Yet these artworks and their titles allowed me only a remote sense of some vile and haunting revelation. And it was simply not possible for the others to illuminate this matter fully, given that their knowledge of Severini's past history was exclusively derived from his own nonsensical or questionable assertions. As nearly as they were willing to speculate, it appeared that this deranged and all-but-incognito person known as Severini was the willing subject of what was variously referred to as an 'esoteric procedure' or an 'illicit practice.' At this point in my discoveries about the strange Severini I found it difficult to inquire about the exact nature of this procedure, or practice, while at the same time pretending a lack of interest in actually meeting the resident of that ruined shack out in the marshland backroads some distance outside the city where I used to live. It did seem, however, that this practice or procedure, as nearly as anyone could speculate, was not a medical treatment of any known variety. Rather, they thought that the procedure (or practice) in question involved occult or mystical traditions that, in their most potent form, are able to exist inconspicuously in only a few remaining parts of the world. Of course, all of this speculation could have been a cover-up orchestrated by Severini or by his disciples—for that is what they had become—or by all of them together. In fact, for some time I had suspected that Severini's disciples, despite their parade of artworks and outlandish accounts of their visits to the marshland shack, were nevertheless concealing from me some vital element of their new experiences. There seemed to be some truth of which they had knowledge and I had not. Yet they also seemed to desire that, in due course, I might share with them this truth.

My suspicions of the others' deception derived from a source that was admittedly subjective. This was my imaginative recreation, as I sat in my apartment, of the spectacle of Severini as it was related to me by those who had participated in the visits to his residence in the marsh. In my mind I pictured them seated upon the floor of that small, unfurnished shack, the only illumination being the hectic light of candles that they brought with them and placed in a circle, at the center of which was the figure of Severini. This figure always spoke to them in his uniquely cryptic way, his sleeptalking voice fluctuating in its qualities and even seeming to emanate from places other than his own body, as though he were practicing a hyper-ventriloquism. Similarly, his body itself, as I was told and as I later imagined to myself in my apartment, appeared to react in concert with the fluctuations in his voice. These bodily changes, the others said, were sometimes subtle and sometimes dramatic, but they were consistently ill-defined—not a matter of clear transformation as much as a breakdown of anatomical features and structures, the result being something twisted and tumorous like a living mound of diseased clay or mud, a heap of cancerous matter that slowly thrashed about in the candlelight which illuminated the old shack. These fluctuations in both Severini's voice and his body, the others explained to me, were not in any way under his own guidance but were a totally spontaneous phenomenon to which he submitted as the result of the esoteric procedure or illicit practice worked upon him in some unknown place (possibly 'in the region of the Philippines'). It was now his destiny, the others elaborated, to comply with whatever was demanded of his flesh by what could only be seen as utterly mindless and chaotic forces, and even his consciousness itself—they asserted—was as amorphous and mutable as his bodily form. Yet as they spoke to me about these particulars of Severini's condition, none of them conveyed any real sense of the nightmarish quality of the images and processes they were describing. Awestruck, yes; passionate, yes; somewhat demented, yes. But nightmarish—no. Even as I listened to their account of a given Severini meeting, I too failed to grasp fully their nightmarish qualities and aspects. They would say to me, referring to one of Severini's metamorphoses, 'The naked contours of his form writhed about like a pool of snakes, or twitched like a mass of newly hatched spiderlings.' Nevertheless, upon hearing statement after statement of this kind I sat relatively undisturbed, accepting without revulsion or outrage these revolting and outrageous remarks. Perhaps, I thought at the time, I was simply under the powerful spell of social decorum, which so often may explain otherwise incomprehensible feelings (or lack of feelings) and behaviors (or lack of behaviors). But once I was alone in my apartment, and began to imaginatively recreate what I had heard about the spectacle of Severini, I was overwhelmed by its nightmarish essence and several times lapsed into one of my delirious episodes with all of its terrible sensations of a tropical sewer and all the nightmares of exotic lifeforms breaking out everywhere like rampant pustules and suppurations. It was this discrepancy between my public response (or lack of response) to the purportedly objective data with which I was being inundated regarding the whole Severini business and my private response (or hyper-response) to this data that ultimately led me to suspect that I was being deceived, even if the deception was as much on my part as it was on the others'. Then I considered that I was not as much the victim of a deception as I was the subject of a manipulation—a process of seduction that would culminate in my entering as a full-fledged initiate into the Severini cult. In either case, it remained my conviction that some vital element had been withheld from me concerning the recluse of St Alban's Marsh until a propitious moment had arrived and I was prepared to confront the truth that was hitherto denied me, or that I was willfully denying to myself.

Finally, on a rainy afternoon, as I was working alone in my apartment (making Severini notes), the buzzer signaled that someone was downstairs. The voice over the intercom belonged to a woman named Carla, who was a sculptress and whom I barely knew. When I let her in my apartment she was wet from walking in the rain without a coat or umbrella, although her straight black hair and all-black clothes looked very much the same whether wet or dry. I offered her a towel but she refused, saying she 'kind of liked feeling soggy and sickish,' and we went on from there. The reason for her visit to my apartment, she revealed, was to invite me to the first 'collective showing' of the Exhibits from the Imaginary Museum. When I asked why I should be receiving this personal invitation in my apartment on a rainy afternoon, she said: 'Because the showing is going to be at his place, and you've never wanted to go there.' I said that I would think seriously about attending the showing and asked her if that was all she had to say. 'No,' she said as she dug into one of the pockets of her tight damp slacks. 'He was really the one who wanted me to invite you to the exhibit. We never told him about you, but he said that he always felt someone was missing, and for some reason we assumed it was you.' After extracting a piece of paper that had been folded several times, she opened it up and held it before her eyes. 'I wrote down what he said,' she said while holding the limp and wrinkled note close to her face with both hands. Her eyes glanced up at me for a moment over the top edge of the unfolded page (her heavy mascara was running down her cheeks in black rivulets), and then she looked down to read the words Severini had told her to write. 'He says, "You and Severini"—he always calls himself Severini, as if that were someone else—"you and Severini are sympathetic..." something—I can hardly read this. It was dark when I wrote it down. Here we go: "You and Severini are sympathetic organisms."' She paused to push away a few strands of black, rain-soaked hair that had fallen across her face. She was smiling somewhat idiotically.

'Is that it?' I asked.

'Hold on, he wanted me to get it right. Just one more thing. He said, "Tell him that the way into the nightmare is the way out."' She folded the paper once again and crammed it back into the pocket of her black slacks. 'Does any of that mean anything to you?' she asked.

I said that it meant nothing at all to me. After promising that I would most seriously consider attending the exhibit at Severini's place, I let Carla out of my apartment and back into that rainy afternoon.

I should say that I had never spoken to either Carla or the others about my delirious episodes, with their sensations of a tropical sewer and the emergent concept of the 'nightmare of the organism.' I had never told anyone. I had thought that these episodes and the concept of the nightmare of the organism were strictly a private hell, even one that was unique. Until that rainy afternoon, I had considered it only a coincidence that the artworks inspired by Severini, as well as the titles of these works, served to call up the sensations and suggestions of my delirious episodes. Then I was sent a message by Severini, through Carla, that he and I were 'sympathetic organisms' and that 'the way into the nightmare is the way out.' For some time I had dreamed of being delivered from the suffering of my delirious episodes, and from all the suggestions and sensations that went along with them—the terrible vision that exposed all living things, including myself, as no more than a fungus or a collection of bacteria, a kind of monumental

slime mold quivering across the landscape of this planet (and very likely others). Any deliverance from such a nightmare, I thought, would involve the most drastic (and esoteric) procedures, the most alien (and illicit) practices. And, ultimately, I never believed that this deliverance, or any other, was really possible. It was simply too good, or too evil, to be true—at least this is how it seemed to my mind. Yet all it took was a few words from Severini, as they reached me through Carla, and I began to dream of all kinds of possibilities. In a moment everything had changed. I now became ready to take those steps toward deliverance; in fact, not to do so seemed intolerable to me. I absolutely had to find a way out of the nightmare, it seemed, whatever procedures or practices were involved. Severini had taken those steps—I was convinced of that—and I needed to know where they had led him.

As might be imagined, I had worked myself into quite a state even before the night of the showing of the Exhibits of the Imaginary Museum. But it was more than my frenzy of dreams and anticipation that affected my experiences that night and now affects my ability to relate what occurred at the tumble-down shack on the edge of St Alban's Marsh. My delirious episodes previous to that night were nothing (that is, they were the perfection of lucidity) when compared to the delirium that overtakes me every time I attempt to sort out what happened at the marshland shack, my thoughts disintegrating little by little until I pass into a kind of sleeptalking of my own. I saw things with my own eyes and other things with other eyes. And everywhere there were voices...

It was all weedy shadows and frogs croaking in the blackness as I walked along the narrow path that, according to the directions given to me, led to Severini's place. I left my car parked alongside the road where I saw the vehicles of the others. They had all arrived before me, although I was not in the least bit late for this scheduled artistic event. But they had always been anxious, I had long before noticed, whenever a Severini visit was planned, all that day fidgeting with some restless impulse until nightfall came and they could leave the city and go out to St Alban's Marsh.

I expected to see a light ahead as I walked along that narrow path, but all I heard were frogs croaking in the blackness. The full moon in a cloudless sky revealed to me where I should next step along the path leading to the shack at the edge of the marsh. But even before I reached the clearing where the old shack supposedly stood, my sense of everything around me began to change. A warm mist drifted in from either side of the path like a curtain closing in front of my eyes, and I felt something touch my mind with images and concepts that were from elsewhere. 'We are sympathetic organisms,' I heard from the mist. 'Draw closer.' But that narrow path seemed to have no end to it, like those passages in my delirious episodes which extended such great distances in the misty darkness of a tropical landscape, where on every side of me there were exotic forms of life spawning and seething without restraint. I must go to that place, I thought as if these were my own words and not the words of another voice altogether, a voice full of desperate intensity and confused aspirations. 'Calm yourself, Mr Severini, if you insist I still address you by that name. As your therapist I cannot advise you to pursue this route... chasing miracles, if that is what you imagine... this "temple," as you call it, is an escape from any authentic confrontation with...'

But he did find his way to freedom, although without properly being discharged from the

institution, and he went to that place.

'Documentes. Passportas!' Looking around at those yellow-brown faces, you were finally there. You went to that jungle island, that tropical sewer, a great temple looming out of the misty darkness in your dreams. It rained in every town, the streets streaming like sewers. 'Disentaría,' pronounced the attending physician. But he was not like any of the doctors whom you sought in that place. Amoebic dysentery—there it was, the nightmare continued, so many forms it could take. The way into the nightmare is the way out. And you were willing to follow that nightmare as far as you needed in order to find your way out, just as I was following that narrow path toward your shack on the edge of St Alban's Marsh to enter that same nightmare you had brought back with you. The Exhibits of the Imaginary Museum. Your shack was now a gallery of the nightmares you had inspired in the others with your sleeptalking and the fluctuations of your form, those outrageous miracles which had not outraged anyone. Only when I was alone in my apartment, imaginatively recreating what the others had told me, could I see those miracles as the nightmares they were. I knew this because of my delirious episodes, which none of the others had known. They were the sympathetic organisms, not I. I was antagonistic to you, not sympathetic. Because I would not go into the nightmare, as you had gone. The Temple of Tantric Medicine, this is what you dreamed you would find in that tropical sewer—a place where miracles might happen, where that sect of 'doctors' could minister with the most esoteric procedures and could carry out their illicit practices. But what did you find instead? 'Disentaría,' pronounced the attending physician. Then a small group of those yellow-brown faces told you, told us, about that other temple which had no name. 'For the belly sickness,' they said. Amoebic dysentery, simply another version of the nightmare of the organism from which none of the doctors you had seen in the past could deliver you. 'How can the disease be cured of itself?' you asked them. 'My body—a tumor that was once delivered from the body of another tumor, a lump of disease that is always boiling with its own disease. And my mind—another disease, the disease of a disease. Everywhere my mind sees the disease of other minds and other bodies, these other organisms that are only other diseases, an absolute nightmare of the organism. Where are you taking me!' you screamed (we screamed) at the yellow-brown faces. 'Fix the belly sickness. We know, we know.' They chanted these words along the way, it seemed, as the town disappeared behind the trees and the vines, behind the giant flowers that smelled like rotting meat, and the fungus and muck of that tropical sewer. They knew the disease and the nightmare because they lived in that place where the organism flourished without restraint, its forms so varied and exotic, its fate inescapable. 'Disentaría,' pronounced the attending physician. They knew the way through the stonework passages, the walls seeping with slime and soft with mold as they coiled toward the central chamber of the temple without a name. Inside the ruined heart of the temple there were candles burning everywhere; their flickering light revealed an array of temple art and ornamentation. Intricate murals appeared along the walls, mingling with the slime and the mold of that tropical sewer. Sculptures of every size and all shapes projected out of the damp, viscous shadows. At the center of the chamber was a large circular altar, an enormous mandala composed of countless jewels, precious stones, or simply bits of glass that gleamed in the candlelight like a pool of multi-colored slime molds.

They laid your body upon the altar; they knew what to do with you (us)—the words to say, the songs to sing, and the esoteric procedures to follow. It was almost as if I could understand the things that they chanted in voices of tortured solemnity. Deliver the self that knows the sickness

from the self that does not know. There are two faces which must never confront each other. There is only one body which must struggle to contain them both. And the phantom clutch of that sickness, that amoebic dysentery, seemed to reach me as I walked along that narrow path leading to Severini's shack at the edge of St Alban's Marsh. Inside the shack were all the Exhibits of the Imaginary Museum, the paintings lining the damp wood of the walls and the sculptures projecting out of the shadows cast by the candles which always lighted the single room of that ruined hovel. I had imaginatively recreated the interior of Severini's shack many times according to the accounts related to me by the others about this place and its incredible inhabitant. I imagined how you could forget yourself in such a place, how you could be delivered from the nightmares and delirious episodes that tortured you in other places, even becoming someone else (or something else) as you gave yourself up entirely to the fluctuations of the organism at the edge of St Alban's Marsh. You needed that marsh because it helped you to imaginatively recreate that tropical sewer (where you were taken into the nightmare), and you needed those artworks in order to make the crumbling shack into that temple (where you were supposed to find your way out of the nightmare). But most of all you needed them, the others, because they were sympathetic organisms. I, on the other hand, was now an antagonistic organism who wanted nothing more to do with your esoteric procedures and illicit practices. Deliver the self that knows the sickness from the self that does not know. The two faces... the one body. You wanted them to enter the nightmare, who did not even know the nightmare as we knew it. You needed them and their artworks to go into the nightmare of the organism to its very end, so that you could find your way out of the nightmare. But you could not go to the very end of the nightmare unless I was with you, I who was now an antagonistic organism without any hope that there was a way out of the nightmare. We were forever divided, one face from the other, struggling within the body—the organism—which we shared.

I never arrived at the shack that night; I never entered it. As I walked along that narrow path in the mist I became feverish. ('Amoebic dysentery,' pronounced the doctor whom I visited the following day.) The face of Severini appeared at the shack that night, not mine. It was always his face that the others saw on such nights when they came to visit. But I was not there with them; that is, my face was not there. His face was the one they saw as they sat among all the Exhibits from the Imaginary Museum. But it was my face which returned to the city; it was my body which I now fully possessed as an organism that belonged to my face alone. But the others never returned from the shack on the edge of St Alban's Marsh. I never saw them again after that night, because on that night he took them with him into the nightmare, with the candle flames flickering upon those artworks and the fluctuations of form which to the others appeared as a pool of twisting snakes or a mass of spiderlings newly hatched. He showed them the way into the nightmare, but he could not show them the way out. There is no way out of the nightmare once you have gone so far into its depths. That is where he is lost forever, he and the others he has taken with him.

But he did not take me into the marsh with him to exist as a fungus exists or as a foam of multi-colored slime mold exists. That is how I see it in my new delirious episodes. Only at these times when I suffer from a physical disease or excessive psychic turmoil do I see how he exists now, he and the others. Because I never looked directly into the pools of oozing life when I stopped at the shack on the edge of St Alban's Marsh. I was on my way out of the city the night I stopped, and I was only there long enough to douse the place in gasoline and set it ablaze. It

burned with all the brilliance of the nightmares that were still exhibited inside, casting its illumination upon the marsh and leaving the most obscure image of what was back there—a vast and vague impression of that great black life from which we have all emerged and of which we are all made.