

This Is Why We Worship

I awake in my study, pulling my head from the table and blinking until my vision clears. Another night spent studying. Papers cover my desk, a pen slipped from my hand and blotted my notes, the inkwell uncapped. "Not again" I think, looking down at the small mess.

I rub my eyes and fix my hair, and take a look where I left off. A small scribble right before the ink blot reads "76 Charlotte Street, 10 AM". I don't recall writing that, although it is undoubtedly my handwriting. Especially the part that trails off towards my previously limp hand. My watch's hour hand slips just past 9, and I rise.

Edward at the corner hands me a coffee. Marianne hands me a roll of bread and butter. I eat ravenously, my body demanding respect that I so rarely show it. The coffee is too hot, and forces me to mull around for a few moments. I exchange words with Edward, but remember none. My mind is still wandering the books and manuscripts scattered around my desk. The truths, half-lies, delirious texts I have spent this last year sifting through. The coffee is now cold, then gone, and I am down the street towards Charlotte.

I do not believe I have ever been on Charlotte St., yet my feet know where to go. I can see the address in my mind's eye. Perhaps my imagination is getting the best of me. The streets are pungent today, yet the closer I get to Charlotte I see less horse droppings, fewer drunkards hobbling home from their rest in the alleyways. Charlotte street itself is immaculate, hardly showing any use at all. I take a deep breath, and exhale. I haven't had air so crisp in years, and I'm almost loath to find my destination.

Of course my obsession does not allow me to enjoy my time. The most recent text was written in Chinese, and my immigrant friend was kind enough to write down some of the most pertinent words and phrases. I scoured the book translating what I could. A most interesting piece, the binding was clearly western, yet the text itself was Chinese, Mandarin he called it. I left slips of paper between pages I needed to revisit once my friend returned.

How long had it been since he was last in town? A week? Two? I could not remember when I last saw him. Yet I had those translations. A pity there were no better dictionaries nor translators. Relying on a sailor for my academic pursuits makes for inconsistent progress.

I slowly saunter up to 76 Charlotte Street. A simple doorway on a simple street, hardly any details to notice. I used to be more attentive of these things, fancying my intellect on par with the likes of Holmes, yet recently my memory has been more clouded. Perhaps crowded, occupied by texts and notes and languages I could not understand. I set that aside and hover my hand over the knocker. I do not have to go. I do not know why I am here. I don't even recall why this address was in my book. I grasp the handle and knock. Once, twice, thrice.

No answer.

I stand quietly, looking upwards, then down the street. Then the other way.

I knock again.

I pull the door's handle, and it opens easily. A fireplace in the center of the far wall illuminates the room. It is nearing winter, and I hardly noticed the creeping cold in my fingertips. The hearth brings back my self, reminding me that I am quite frigid, and I am inside before the thought completes. The coat rack is nearby for my hat and jacket, allowing the warmth to flow directly to me. I look around the room. Modest furnishings, a table, some chairs, nothing fancy or expensive. Two doorways flank the fireplace. A comfortable greeting room for those not preoccupied by wealth and status. The room is larger than expected, with some tables lining the sides, unused. I can peek at chairs in the corners too, under cloth for the dust.

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Once my eyes finish scanning the room, they settle on the left door, opened, with a small and elderly man. His appearance seems sudden. There was no sound, no movement that my eyes saw. He looks straight at me, staring. His simple clothing, nondescript, a little ragged. Balding head and jaw protruding forth, some slight stubble befitting.

"Come with me young man."

"Who are you?"

"I have no name, as that is not important. Now come." He turns and shuffles out of sight.

Left in a lifeless room, I follow. He has a small candle that I did not notice before, illuminating the hallway. His right leg limps across the ground, slowing him, yet he moves forward with purpose. I follow him a few steps back, cautiously.

"Sir, I do not remember meeting you before, and please excuse my rudeness. My name is Arthur Wilkins. If you would do me the service of reminding me our connection..." I trail off.

"Mr. Wilkins, I know who you are. I've always known who you are...", he mutters to himself. I pay him little heed. I will get some answers if I may sit and talk to him, even if I must sift through pleasantries and musings.

The hallway continues further and further. This house is much deeper than it seems, built almost all the way across the block. He opens a door to the right and continues down another hallway into a well lit room, deep in the belly of the building.

"This is the library Mr. Wilkins. You can find anything here. All words are written here..." He trails off again, gesturing solemnly towards the shelves and books.

I gaze up and over; the ceiling is tall, as are the bookshelves. No cobwebs, no dust. A fireplace along the far wall provides light, with an iron wrought screen to prevent anything from falling in accidentally. A few chairs circle it, with side tables, strewn with books. Nothing here is new. I spy a few titles in languages I cannot read.

He walks over near the hearth to a pair of chairs facing each other, a small table between. He gestures for me to sit across from him. As I sit he pulls a small box up from the ground and opens it, it is filled with chess pieces that he places onto the table. I didn't notice before but the black and brown grid pattern on the top of the table is clearly a chessboard.

“Mr Wilkins, do you know what you're looking for?”

I eye him closely. He seems earnest. I consider a response.

“What do you think you're going to find in all those books at your home? Those rare cultures and lost accounts. What will it have for you?”

How did he know about the books? Or what I'm researching? I begin to stammer a response. “I uh...”

“You have already found all that you will find.” He places the last chess piece on the board, the king.

“For your sake, please tell me what you've learned.” He shifts to rest his chin on his hand, considering the board. “It needs to be said.” He is white. He advances his King's pawn.

I think about hiding my research behind obscurities and half-truths, but the way he looks at me, glares, makes me think better. I feel this man knows more than he has said.

“I have found several texts alluding to rare religions. Few interviews. They survive in cults today, at the edges of the world”. I push up my King's pawn to meet him.

“And...?”

“I have one of the better collections of texts referencing these cults in Great Britain, perhaps even all of Europe. Which is not to say it is a great number of books, perhaps two dozen or so. But no library, no private collection I visited had more than two. I would imagine there are others out there like me who have made more progress. I have yet to meet them.”

King's knight. He stares upward, waiting.

“The texts speak of communing with old gods. Unlike the Abrahamic traditions, Hinduism, even Greek and Roman pantheons. Some of the texts are copies, calling back to oral traditions, stone carvings, scrolls. Most are archeological publications, although one scroll is authentic.”

I reinforce my pawn, then continue.

“Beliefs considered rare even by obscure cultures. African tribes, Celtic families, sects in Cairo, Louisiana. It is unclear how these beliefs are so diffuse. None of the texts or people I spoke to mentioned having any communication with the other cabals. Like they grew out of the ground at all the ends of the earth.”

He sits and ponders the board. “So what have you learned?”

He continues to push forward his pieces, not breaking the peace quite yet.

“I have learned that there are dozens, perhaps hundreds of these cults. They worship old gods, maybe monsters. It is hard to tell, the texts lose meaning when translated. Some attach themselves to a local anomaly, a large creature or statue. Worshipping it, asking for help and guidance. It seems that some do receive that help. Historical documents corroborate it.”

I scan the board, considering the next move.

“Yet these are the more practical ones. Better fishing, harvest, children. There are other texts from darker covens that confuse me. I can understand seeing a whale as a god, a bird or an alligator. My knowledge of biological sciences makes them mundane. I’m sure to them they seem otherworldly, divine, magical. Some worship icons, totems, representations of their gods. They speak of how they are sleeping, or dreaming.”

I capture the first piece. The old man looks down, knowingly.

“I have not yet bet on these findings. There’s not enough evidence for me to beg for a patron or a grant. Dozens of snippets of texts from 10 languages does not make a convincing argument. But it does provide enough connection for me to keep searching.”

The old man captures in turn, a predictable move.

“I have read the accounts of many explorers and anthropologists. Professors and sailors. They have traveled these places, seen the lives and environs of these cultists. None have documented any of the living deities, nor the statues drawn in their texts. Perhaps the natives distrust them, but I would assume that one of them would find something. A totem, an idol. The site of a burial or ritual. To that extent, their search has been fruitless. Just an account of a small society at the edge of the world.”

I consider the board. My hand across my face in thought. I sit quietly for a few moments, and push a pawn.

“These texts, they cannot all be falsities. They show age, wear, and authenticity of material. I

believe they originated from those regions. Although most of what I have is duplicates, so perhaps someone is playing the most amazing prank upon the world.”

The old man doesn't appear to be listening. I don't care.

“How can it be that a dozen different small religions each worship parts of the same pantheon? These cultures are disparate, worlds apart, unaided by modernity, boat or rail. There is no chance they are able to communicate with each other. Yet they speak of the same gods, allowances made for the characters, but the sounds are the same. Cthulhu, Hastur, Yig, and others are mentioned. Yet unlike the Abrahamic religions, they do not spread geographically. Only at the fringes, encroaching inwards. Somehow maintaining their numbers throughout time, despite no evangelists, no missionaries, no way to know what they're doing without sneaking, spying, stealing that knowledge from them.”

I sigh. “It is maddening.”

The old man takes the pawn. “That it is.” Then sits back in his chair. “Why is it they worship them?”

I inhale deeply, pulling forth my research like the air into my lungs.

“It seems as if these gods grant power unimaginable. Yet their lack of publicity makes it difficult to believe there is anything to be had. As far as I can tell, the worshippers remain a steady number, despite their host societies slowly growing in population. One would think gods granting miracles would get more attention. Yet they do not, just enough to maintain their orders.”

I push another pawn to threaten. “The representation of these gods is grim. Gods of madness, time, space, and reality. Gods that do not care about you or me. In the same way that the god of the sun will not set early, these gods seem deaf. They worship for no reason that I know. Christians wish to live a good life and ascend to heaven. Hindu wish to leave the cycle of rebirth. I cannot see what these cults want. They worship gods of vileness and abstraction, as if prayers to a knife would save you from death.”

“I see.” Says the old man. He takes this pawn as well. “You have not contemplated what these are gods of. What they represent.”

I look at him, puzzled. “I told you I have done abundant research. The last year, committed to this, to...” I take his piece, so I may focus on the conversation. “Finding out what these gods are, and what there is to know, to do about them.”

“There is nothing to do, but to understand, or not. It does not matter, we are all but pawns.” He takes my piece in turn, my position weakening. “But it sounds like you would like to know. What it is you are missing. Is it? True?”

“Yes old man. I know you know more. Speak.”

He gently picks up a single taken pawn.

“Imagine this pawn. Put yourself inside it.” He turns it, admiring it. “You live in the darkness, in a box. It is opened, and two massive hands come and plant you onto the board. You have a place there, a role to fulfill. You move, and capture, and are defeated, all to the whims of those hands. The game ends, and you are returned to the box, where there is only darkness, until you are called again to play.”

I stare at the pawn.

“My boy, do you remember life before you were born?”

What an odd question. “No. Nobody remembers.”

“Exactly. Before you entered the game, you were in the box. For untold time. No, even beyond time. For time to you is only the length of the game! And you may think that you are making your own decisions, yet it is these hands that push you to victory, defeat, life, and death.” He drops the pawn back into the box. “You are not as free as you would believe.”

“So you are saying that we are playthings of the gods?”

“Yes and no. We are indeed their playthings, but in a more fundamental way than that.” He moves his knight forward. “Tell me, what are the gods?”

“The gods of my childhood are the Father, the son, and the holy spirit. I know of other gods, Yahweh, Set, Jupiter, Ares.” I see in my mind, each so clearly from the books I have read. “Then there are these old gods of the cults. Their descriptions are baffling, inconsistent. Some are like fish and men, others a set of features, eyes and mouths. They are also a force or energy or existence itself.”

The old man nods along. “Fairly apt. Do you believe it?”

“No. How can something be both flesh and concepts? All things born will one day die. That is the way of the world.”

He gently pinches his rook, sliding it forward. “When I touch the rook, do you think it can feel me? To the rook, made of wood, I am warm, and sponge-like to the touch, giving in a way that the rook doesn’t understand. I appear from nowhere, I guide him forward, then disappear. Does it think that because it can touch me, I will one day die in the game? Will my hand be taken by the queen, or a pawn? If you hit me with the board I would hardly smart. The entirety of the rook’s world, an inconvenience to me.”

His point is taken heavily. I look down at my hands, and at the board. To these pieces, we are as gods. They do not have the conscience to understand it, but if they did, we would seem so strange, and monstrous.

“So how are those details explained in the texts? The fleshy fish-men, the unknowable creatures?”

The old man looks at his hand and grins. “You only know what you know. To the rook, my hand is some sort of soft, warm wood. It doesn’t know of flesh. It tries to understand it from their perspective. In the same way, those accounts try to understand what they saw as flesh and blood, like you and me.”

I reply solemnly. “You are saying they saw it as flesh, and it was not.”

“Yes my boy! Now you are beginning to understand.” He slaps his knee and gestures to his rook, threatening my king. I move it to safety.

“So although there are accounts of fish, squid, octopus features, you are saying that these are just our interpretations of them, in our eyes. They are actually something more and different that we cannot understand.” I say to myself, mulling it over. “So why do they worship them?”

The old man again grabs a pawn, two this time. “This one, I will name George.” He smiles, revealing a hidden mirth. “He has served me well, and now I will keep him in my pocket.” He places it in the pocket of his trousers. “The other one, I will name Bethany, and she will stay here.” He rises, and places her on the mantle, above the fireplace. “From here, Bethany can see the entirety of our game, she can see us, and the true world she lives in. She can feel the heat of the fire, although that heat is foreign to her, hard to understand. When the next game begins, she will return to the board, but never having been in the box, she will know that she is in a game. That there are many games, and the gods change from one to the next.”

The analogy is making more sense than I would like to admit. My mind is absorbing it slowly.

“George here does not get all the benefits Bethany does, but he does travel with me. By being on my persons, close to me, I may pull him out when paying at the tavern, or butchers, or at the shore. Before he only knew the box and the board. Now he may know a dinner table, or the outdoors, under the sun.” He throws his hand towards the fire. “Or burning”

I look at the hearth, incredulous that he would throw away the piece and ruin his set. He looks at me and grins, before revealing he palmed George.

“I would never do that to George.” He says, before returning him to the table. Bethany remains on the mantle.

“I... I think I understand.” My mind goes back to the texts. “These worshippers are seeking a

way out. A way to traverse our existence, to not be bound by our rules.” I’ve basically forgotten about the game we were playing.

He nods, like he was waiting for this.

“So they grasp at these old gods, the ones that are beyond the game, and by becoming closer, they can achieve a kind of... power? Can this be a power?” I look at him, uncertain.

“To some, maybe. It is both a freedom and a curse. There is some solace in the box.” He looks at Bethany.

I lower my face into my hands. I feel overwhelmed. The research I have done has too many sources pointing at the existence of these old gods. There is a man before me who seems to already know all this. Who limped into my consciousness this morning, on the...

“Old man, how did I know to come here. How did you write your address on my notes, without me remembering?”

“I did nothing.” He leans back. “You were guided by unseen hands.”

I think about my memories. I do not recall the final moments before I slept. I don’t recall much of anything. Yet that writing was unmistakably mine.

“Do you have proof?”

“Only a parlor trick for you, my lad.” He grabs a knight and throws it up in the air gently. Then nothing falls, just gone from my sight. “Like magic.”

I sit, staring, slack-jawed. I look to the ceiling, look at his hands. I wonder where it could have gone. “Magic?”

“Magic defies rules. I follow them.” He places his palm up, and the knight falls straight into it. “The knight never left the game, it simply moved.”

Perhaps the most convincing magic trick I have ever seen, done by a man claiming there is no magic. I am in disbelief. “Again.”

“No.” He crosses his arms. “If once is not enough, I don’t see how twice would do anything more. We have a game to play.”

I look down at the board. I don’t remember it being this dire. Down on material and position, the old man didn’t make any particularly strong moves that I saw. I must be off my game, not that I have much to start. I certainly didn’t expect to consider resignation so few moves in.

I bring my focus down, I ignore the old man. Protect the king, gain ground, then material. I move my bishop forward.

We play in silence awhile. Time seems to stop. I gain a pawn, then a rook. The old man is not as strong as before. He seems to be growing weary. He slumps in his chair, grumbling a bit.

“What do I get if I win?” I tease.

“I win this game.”

“It seems not, old man.” I speak with familiarity. “I have more questions for you, I would like them answered for my time.”

“You best ask them now, before you lose.” He takes my rook with his queen. I am prepared, and a series of trades unfold. We have a handful of pieces and pawns each now. I believe I’m slightly ahead with a rook and bishop.

“We spoke of the old gods, Cthulhu, Hastur, Yig. How we don’t really understand them, as they are the players beyond the board, so to speak.” The old man nods to me. “But they are still worshipped.”

He takes a pawn. I take a pawn.

“There are other names. Azathoth, Yog-Sothoth...” I can’t remember the other ones. They are mentioned so infrequently. “What are these old gods? The texts do little to describe them. They don’t seem to worship them directly.”

“Ho!” He exclaims, a smile crossing his face. He pushes his bishop. “Check”

I grimace, and focus. His smile won’t go away.

“My friend, you called them old gods. This is correct. Your err was in calling Cthulhu and Hastur old gods. They are not.” He inspects his fingernails. “Those are old ones.”

I move my king. “Old man please be clearer.”

“The old ones are not gods. They are the players in the game. The hand that moves.” He re-positions his bishop. “The old gods are more than that. They care not of pawns and kings. The old ones are small enough to care for winning and losing.” He groans as he stands up. He shuffles to a nearby table, finding pen and ink and a sheet of paper there.

“Mr. Wilkins” He hands me the pen and ink. “Please write me a story. Just one line.”

I do fancy myself a writer from time to time, but not just in one sentence. I think quietly before scribbling.

Jane clasped his outstretched hand, wishing she had fled with him before the war began, before being reunited in this hospital, before she saw his life wane.

The old man reads it over and nods, approvingly.

“Now make him live, and change their names.”

I consider for a moment, before editing.

Mary clasped his outstretched hand, wishing she had fled with him before the war began, yet glad being reunited in this hospital, for she saw James' life returned.

“A happy ending.” He ignores the page and returns to the game.

I am bothered. “Old man, what was the point of that?”

His body still, he looks up at me. “Before we considered the game as a pawn on the board.” He makes a move. “Now you must consider the story as if you were a character in it. What happened to Mary when you re-wrote the line?”

Strange. Hard to think about.

“At first Jane was sad about her lost lover, the war, and his passing. In the second Mary is sad things could have been better, but glad he is recovered.”

“Does Mary know she was sad before? Does James know he had died?”

“No, why would he? It is a new story.”

The old man pouts, and studies the board again. “Is it, Arthur? To you, the writer, it is the same story. To Jane, she had always experienced the sorrow of losing her lover. She will now forever have the joy of keeping James, as Mary. Her existence has been re-written by you, a mere flick of a pen, and her everything is undone. Be glad she never knew of his passing, she would curse you if she did.”

Troubling. Unsettling. To be a word on a page, a character in a story.

I inhale, my shoulders rise, bringing my posture upwards.

“Old man, are you telling me that Mary, that this word on this page, has feelings?”

“Only as many as you give her.”

“But feelings? It’s one word. There’s nothing there but ink and imagination.”

I realized what I’ve said. I think back to what I’ve read. Azathoth, the blind idiot god. It dreams our reality. Our existence is in their mind, fleeting, until it is gone.

It’s not the ink. It’s the imagination. Mary exists while I think of her, and will be gone when I forget. That is our fate. We are the dreams of an old god. I am a character, but I am as words on a page. Only as permanent as the writer wills me to be.

“This is even worse than your chess analogy, old man.”

“Oh yes, much worse. Cthulhu allows you to play. Although the box is cold, you are still the knight each time. Hastur may take you, but in the end you return to the box, then to the board.” He takes my last piece, leaving the king. “You rewrote James’ entire life. You undid Jane, and made her into Mary. You have forced her into a world of war and sorrow, when before there was a blank page, quiet and neutral. Now there is strife where there was none before.”

I wish to interrupt, but I have no words.

“If Jane prayed to you, would you listen? Would you hear her, an idea you had never considered alive?” He looks perturbed. “No. They are just words on a page. And you, the writer.” He stands up, his weakness gone.

“Words have power.”

I look down at the chess board. The pieces returned to their setup. I look up at him, but there’s no-one in the empty chair. I can hear him.

“This is why we worship.”

...

I awake in my study, pulling my head from the table and blinking until my vision clears. Another night spent studying. Papers cover my desk, a pen slipped from my hand and blotted my notes, the inkwell uncapped. “Not again” I think, looking down at the small mess.

I rub my eyes and fix my hair, and take a look where I left off. A small scribble right before the ink blot reads “Charlotte, 10 AM”. I recall writing that, just before my eyes surrendered. My watch’s hour hand slips just past 9, and I rise.

Theodore at the corner hands me a coffee. Daisy hands me a roll of bread and butter. I eat ravenously, my body demanding respect that I so rarely show it. The coffee is too hot, and forces me to mull around for a few moments. I exchange words with Theodore, his easy wit

waking me up. My mind is still wandering the books and manuscripts scattered around my desk. Before I know it the coffee is cold, then gone, and I am down the street to meet her, my Charlotte.