December 2 - 9, 1999

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Horror's new home

Brett Rutherford, a creative descendant of Poe and Lovecraft, returns to Rhode Island

by Justin Wolff

Brett Rutherford

Be afraid. Be very afraid. Providence will soon be spooked by another horror writer.

The first was Edgar Allan Poe, who in the late 1840s roamed the streets of our sullen city (it used to be sullen, I swear) while courting the poet Sarah Helen Whitman, who lived on Benefit Street. Poe's half dozen visits to Providence were even scarier than his tales of physiological and mental decay. His health was broken, his mind was fragile, and he was prone to binge drinking. During the courtship, Poe attempted suicide with an overdose of the opiate laudanum. The next day -- pale, disheveled, and nauseous -- he visited a Providence daguerreotype studio, thus preserving the face of hysteria for future generations. Poe and Whitman did manage to negotiate a betrothal, but before they were married, Poe broke a vow to never drink again. Whitman canceled the engagement, and after months of intoxicated brooding, Poe died.

Though a grumpy nihilist and less frenetic than Poe, H.P. Lovecraft made a bigger mark on our city. His epitaph -- "I am Providence" -- testifies as much anyway. Though inspired by the specter of desperation that Poe bequeathed Providence ("My god of fiction," he said of Poe), Lovecraft's muse was the peculiar geography of College Hill, for his prose kept its feet on the ground and its head in the clouds. Lovecraft's supernatural fantasias succeeded at scaring his

readers, critics agree, because they intruded on pragmatic characters in realistic settings. The man was bleak -- a reclusive existentialist with a little too much faith in his aristocratic pedigree -- but he adored Providence because it indulged his temperament.

Now there's Brett Rutherford, who you may not know but who knows you, and where you live. Rutherford is as enamored of Providence as Lovecraft was, and it shows in his volumes of poetry, fiction, and drama. Rutherford first moved here in 1985 and stayed for eight years. During that period -- when he lived in a "gloomy Victorian on Transit Street," at one point occupying 11 rooms -- Rutherford published *Last Flowers*, a book of poems by Poe and Mrs. Whitman; released four books of poetry, including *Poems from Providence* and *At Lovecraft's Grave*; wrote a science fiction novel called *The Lost Children*; and put on two staged readings of his play about Lovecraft, called *Night Gaunts*, at the Providence Athenaeum on Benefit Street. Rutherford has been living more recently in New York and New Jersey, but plans on returning to Providence soon.

The last thing you would call Rutherford's poems is providential. In his 1991 collection *Poems from Providence* -- a book that attempts, in the writer's words, to "show what a rational poet can do employing the real, the supernatural, and the mythical" -- Rutherford's dreary vision penetrates the quotidian episodes we have grown accustomed to on our smart streets. He conjures an "Ivy League derelict" who "laughs at your torn umbrella/your wayward skirt/the pages of your thesis blown into traffic." In a poem titled "Winter Solstice, College Town," Rutherford describes the sun as a tumor and college boys "changing from demigod to semi-brute."

Like Lovecraft, Rutherford integrates terrestrial terrors with a more sublime, or cosmic, dread. In "Sacrifice," a poem from his cycle "Things Seen in Graveyards," he gives Cambridge's "civilized Mount Auburn" a "desiccated squirrel/its eyes a maggot nest/its scream frozen." In the same cycle, our verdant Exeter is haunted by a vampire, "poor Sarah Tillinghast," who will tap your shoulder and for whom you will "bare your throat for her needful feeding, your heat, your heart's blood erupting in her gullet."

Rutherford, 52, was born in southwestern Pennsylvania and spent his childhood in small towns in the shadow of coke ovens, coal mines, and steel mills. After reading his first science fiction at the age of five, he developed what he has described as a "conviction . . . that literal belief in religious cosmology and doctrine is for morons." During a sabbatical from college, Rutherford went to San Francisco for a year, where he wrote many poems and performed them in coffee houses, in

the style of Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg. "Many of these poems," he has said, "were protests against the horrors of the Vietnam War . . . but from the viewpoint of a radical for freedom, not a left-wing radical." He startled audiences, for example, by reading hard-hitting poems opposing the use of drugs.

Rutherford is an enigmatic poet. In his life and his work he straddles a radical libertarianism and a right-wing nationalism. He criticizes liberal politics yet holds on dearly to some of its gambits. For instance, Rutherford insists on publishing his own work and is perhaps best-known as the founder of The Poet's Press, an independent publishing house that once had offices on Thayer Street. Last year he self-published *Whippoorwill Road*, an anthology of his supernatural poems.

I met with Brett Rutherford at the bone-hued Providence Athenaeum, his "favorite library in all America." He showed me a Manet print of a raven that Mallarmé had inscribed to Sarah Helen Whitman, and then we sat and talked in the Art Room, under gloomy portraits of Mrs. Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe.

Q: *So, you're coming back to Providence.*
A: Yes, possibly during the next year. The house I live in now in New Jersey is about to be sold and I have to move somewhere. I dream about Providence. I have dreams in which I walk about the streets of Providence at night. It's the only city I dream about. I dreamt about Providence before I ever came here.

Q: *Because of Poe and Lovecraft?*
A: Right. Without even knowing the landscape, I had already seen it.

Q: *Why is the Athenaeum your favorite library in America?*
A: The scale of it is very much like a home. You feel like you're in a house full of books, not in a vast megalith or a mausoleum full of books. The Boston Athenaeum, for example, is cavernous, and you're often the only person in the place. This is a combination of a wonderful collection of books, a remarkable piece of architecture, and a staff of people who love books and literary programs.

Q: *Unlike Poe, Lovecraft actually lived in Providence. He was a bleak man though. What about Providence gave Lovecraft joy?*
A: Well, Lovecraft focused his writing on place and history, and he loved the history of all of New England -- Providence in particular. His style is very baroque and lavish, but his atmosphere is predicated upon this place. And here you have a rich city. But Lovecraft wound up inventing an imaginary New England. He combined a little bit of

Salem with a little bit of Providence. He took the mythology of the one and placed it in the other. There are several stories where he uses Providence as a specific locale. *The Haunter of the Dark* has a character who lives here near Benefit Street and who looks out over Providence at the so-called Starry Wisdom Church on Federal Hill [St. John's Roman Catholic Church, on Atwells Avenue]. That church was destroyed just a few years ago. It had fallen into ruin and was abandoned by its parish. I last saw it when there was one wall remaining and a gang of Lovecraft fans had descended on the place and we took shards of stained glass and wood. I have a little reliquary at home now full of pieces of the Starry Wisdom Church. The mayor drove by and saw the demolition going on and briefly ordered it to be stopped. He had some plan to save the single facade and make it a landmark. But that all fell apart.

Q: *Now for some tough questions. I have been reading your poetry and your autobiographical statements, and as far as I have been able to determine, your writing is both supernatural and natural; it is both romantic and realistic; it is both escapist and political. You yourself have spoken about your work in contrasting terms. When pushed, how do you describe your writing?*
A: I am a strange mixture of beliefs and esthetics. I am a romantic and I am a realist -- a strange bird. I have many supernatural poems, but as in the case of both Lovecraft and Poe, I don't believe in the supernatural. I play with it. I believe that man invented both gods and monsters, and I use them as devices in stories and poems for an objective. I do not believe for a minute in the supernatural.

Q: *One of the greatest divisions of 19th-century European culture is the romantic/realist division. But when you look at some of the romantics from that period, like Goya, you realize that he was in fact a realist whose primary concern was political freedom in the face of the Napoleonic threat to Spain. Maybe the divisions are a little bit artificial.*
A: Most romantic artists have a very strong awareness of the actual world around them. People think of Shelley and Byron as being dreamy romantics when in fact they were very much involved in the radical politics of their day. Shelley was thrown out of Oxford University for publishing an essay about atheism. I, in fact, am a libertarian, which mixes oddly with being a poet. The vast majority of artists are very left wing, but I'm neither left nor right; I'm back in the 18th century in the Age of Reason. I write satires in my political poems which no one can live with. They don't appeal to any one orthodox political camp. The conservatives hate me because I'm against religion, and the liberals can't stand me because I don't buy into their politically correct ideology or its jargon. I'm out of place.

Q: *Libertarian has many meanings today.*
A: I mean it the way Voltaire and Paine meant it. I'm an ardent defender of individual rights and individual liberties -- almost absolute freedom of speech. I am anti-authoritarian. I don't believe in anarchy. The problem with anarchy is that it is naive. Anarchism is fine if it's practiced by a group of people who all buy into the same values. But what happens when you have a sociopath or religious fanatics moving amongst the group? As long as we have evil, people will collaborate in order to protect themselves against force and violence.

Q: *You have stated a fondness for Ayn Rand and her Objectivist philosophy.*
A: I owe a tremendous debt to her writing. At the age of 13 I read *Atlas Shrugged*. All of my concerns about whether God existed, about whether what other people thought mattered -- all of those evaporated. I learned to trust my own judgment, trust my own intelligence, and never doubt my power to make the important decisions. More than anything, I learned to protect myself against bogus claims on my time and on my loyalty. I became a truly free person at the age of 13. The week before I read that book I was contemplating suicide.

Q: *The thing about Rand though is that while her philosophies can be extraordinarily empowering, they are also very frightening and downright cruel. In her world, if you falter, if you equivocate -- which we all do -- you will fail and will be consumed by power.*
A: If you based all your values on *Atlas Shrugged* you would become a cold, emotionally repressed person. Probably never able to even enjoy a good dinner without worrying about whether your order was the most rational one. Fortunately, I am able to balance my admiration for Rand with a passion for romanticism. I am a humanist and a rationalist. I am happy and I am tolerant of others no matter how they move through the world.

Q: *One of our greatest freedoms is that we aren't obligated to take anyone's philosophies or writings whole. We take what we need.*
A: Right. And sadly for Rand, her followers made an empire out of her. She wasn't even allowed to have opinions.

Q: *Lovecraft called Poe his God of fiction.*
A: Do I have figures whom I venerate? Absolutely. They would be Poe, Shakespeare, Shelley, Whitman, Beethoven, Mahler. I adore and emulate Ray Bradbury as perhaps the greatest American short story writer. His stories are poetic, they're magical, they involve a profound understanding of human character. The plotting is masterful and

sparse, in that uniquely American way.

Q: *Does you admiration for Rand have anything to do with your decision to self-publish your works?*
A: Yes, it has a great deal to do with it. I have never felt that I needed to wait for someone else's approval of what I was doing as a writer. I was in the middle of the underground newspaper phenomenon in San Francisco. I was writing for these papers, and doing layout and printing. When I got back east, I immediately started designing and publishing books. My first book of poetry was done on a mimeograph machine. I bound it and sewed it. I decided right away that I knew the value of my poetry. You have to fire your rockets into prosperity. I do that by making sure my poetry is published in nice books, on paper that will last 300 years.

Q: *On more than one occasion you have lamented the destruction of poetry by avant-garde obscurities and evasions.*
A: Yes, I believe that. The problem we have now is that we don't even know what a poem is. Many people who call themselves poets today have no intention of ever studying the craft or its history, or of even improving their work over time. Whatever they write on the page, they are satisfied with. "Here is my poem," they say. And all it has is a ragged right margin. I'm not a formalist, though. I love [Walt] Whitman, and I love the breath of liberation that he gave us. He sang long lines of poetry.

Q: *In your 1992 book* Twilight of the Dictators*, which you wrote in collaboration with your neighbor at the time in Fox Point, Pieter Vanderbeck, you celebrate the end of Soviet Communism. You said that you fully expected to take heat from the literary community for that book.*
A: In New York, when I first started reading poems from that book, I had people at one venue stand up on sofas and scream at me, telling me that I must be an agent of the CIA for daring to contradict their politics. These are the same people who believed that Solzhenitsyn was an agent of the CIA. I had a Brown professor verbally attack me at a reading here at the Athenaeum. I have close friends who refuse to discuss that book with me. It's the only book I've published that has never been reviewed. You would think that many of the poems in the book would be embraced by anybody with a love for liberty. There's a poem in there about the Romanian secret police recruiting athletes to go out and beat up writers. How can anybody regard that poem as politically objectionable? The tragedy in those poems is also about people learning that a system they defended was corrupt to the core.

Q: *To shift gears, what does Providence mean to you? What's the spell of the city? In the poem "At Lovecraft's Grave" you call it a "sorry and*

mean-spirited" *city.*
A: The appeal of Providence to writers -- and especially to writers of the weird and marvelous -- is due in part to Rhode Island's founding as the home of the "Independent Man," thumbing his nose at the Puritans of Massachusetts. Also, the East Side has a remarkable energy about it. I discovered a community of other outsiders, writers and artists who came here to escape Boston and New York. I made many new friends in, of all places, Swan Point Cemetery, at various ceremonies commemorating Lovecraft. And my love for Providence is very much like Lovecraft's. I love the place as landscape, as architecture. I could wander here for eternity. I dream of the atmosphere -- the remarkable restoration and preservation of Providence's Federal-era and Victorian homes, the splendid streets with their variety of trees, and now, the canals and bridges. Of course, Providence has its down side. It's a terrible place to be depressed. I could tell you stories about Rhode Island crazies, such as the psychotic mailman who threatened my life because I got too much mail. Also, I have a lot problems with native New Englanders. There is a strong feeling here in Providence of being ashamed of Lovecraft, that he is someone that you just don't talk about. Poe only came here five times, yet he is the one discussed as if he lived here. He came here with his carpetbag to try to marry wealth.

Q: *Are people ashamed of Lovecraft's extreme conservatism?*
A: Part of it is a backwater shame, a feeling that if he came from here he can't be any good. But also the fact that the horror genre is really held in contempt, as being pulp literature, as beneath anyone's attention.

Q: *One of my favorite poems of yours is "The McWilliams' Coffee Table." It begins like a Raymond Carver story -- there are two couples, who are neighbors, and they smoke and drink daiquiris together, and one of their small parties gets a little weird. Well, very weird in fact.*
A: The poem comes from a friend's poem, in which she discussed having seen a stolen tombstone in someone's house. I responded by saying, "Well if you think having a tombstone is strange what would happen if someone actually stole the body and placed it in the middle of the room in Plexiglas?" The poem is about how, in this country, do the McWilliamses keep up with the Joneses.

Q: *You've written a poem called "The State Versus Autumn" wherein Congress legislates against the gloomy months of fall and against horror writers as well.*
A: The poem was prompted by reading news accounts of various towns, mostly in the Bible Belt, where there have been attempts to get rid of Halloween. These people believe that Halloween is a satanic

conspiracy. And that's my High Holy Day. You can't outlaw things that are unpleasant. As I have said, "terror is our tightrope over life." We are the gentle ones; we know the smile behind the skull. It's a joke. Horror is a gigantic jest with death. We are even more alive because we can put on the monster mask, and then laugh. Horror is at the heart of all literature going back to the beginnings. *Beowulf* is the beginning of English literature. It's a monster story. Greek literature is only about gods and monsters. That which terrifies is with us always, and if you rip it out of literature, you wind up with pablum -- you have nothing. Horror, in the sense of fear, leads to wonder, even for rationalists. If you lift the top of your head off and entertain a universe that is large, then your life will be richer. Horror is just one of the sides of wonder. Without a dark side, there would be no enjoyment in wonder. In music, we love the major because it's escape from the minor.

Q: *Are you a throwback?*
A: I used to think so, but what, I wonder, could I be a throwback to? I know I'm not a modernist, because I don't feel alienated from anything. I like to think I'm a predecessor to something. I don't look in. I look out.

Q: *Strange that a horror writer would be so playful.*
A: Every horror writer that I have ever met or corresponded with has a wonderful sense of humor.

Q: *So you'll bring good news with you to Providence?*
A: I feel that I celebrate a broad view of the universe, one that includes light as well dark. And I feel that that's good news.

Justin Wolff can be reached at jwolff@phx.com.

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