

REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

UINTATHERIUM, I DREAM OF THEE

We take for granted the strangeness of the not yet extinct animals with which we share our planet—the long-nosed tapir, the even longer-nosed elephant, the remarkable big-mouthed hippopotamus, the towering elongated giraffe, the jowly orangutan. Australia has given us a whole menagerie of oddities, the kangaroo, the bandicoot, the wombat, the echidna, and of course the platypus. We take their strangeness for granted—in fact we do not see them as at all strange, because we become familiar with them in childhood in our visits to the zoo. Their weirdness vanishes before we are old enough to see it. Is a camel not a peculiar-looking creature? Is there nothing bizarre about a scaly low-lying alligator? What about the very strange bird we call a pelican, with that huge dangling sack below its beak? No, alas, they are just camels and alligators and pelicans, giraffes and elephants, hardly more strange to us than the dogs and cats that abound all around us. Whereas such creatures as the Uintatherium and the Moropus, the Glyptodont and the Baluchitherium, long vanished from this Earth, would seem unutterably outlandish to us if we were to see them wandering around in our neighborhood park, or, heaven forbid, strolling along the other side of the street from us. Most of the animals that ever existed in the world are extinct now, and it is the extinct ones that are surrounded by an aura of invincible strangeness, precisely because we can never visit them in our zoos.

They are not in any zoo, no, and will never be, but their reconstructed skeletons are on display in our museums, and that is where I got to know them. As a small boy, passionately interested in dinosaurs like most small boys (small girls may be just as passionately interested in them, but I never discussed the subject with them when I was young), I would make the long journey uptown to the American Museum of Natural History on Manhattan's West Side as often as I could persuade my father to take me there, and I would head at once for what I recall as the fourth floor Hall of Reptiles and stare in awe and wonder at the colossal Brontosaurus and the stupendous terrifying Tyrannosaurus rex and all the rest of those immense creatures, before whom I stood, a boy of eight or nine, like the merest speck of an organism.

I never have lost my early fascination with the giant reptiles, and to this day I respond with profound emotion to the thought that for hundreds of millions of years these great creatures occupied our world when we ourselves were not even the merest twinkle of evolutionary possibility. But after my first few dozen visits to the Museum of Natural History I began, after paying my traditional visit to the Hall of Reptiles, to begin to see the dinosaurs as familiar old friends and to drift into the adjacent rooms, where I discovered fossil skeletons of lesser size but equal fascination.

Many little children can discourse learnedly of Stegosaurus and Triceratops, but here in the hall where the fossil mammals were displayed I found a whole new world of extinct beings whose very names were unknown to me, and whose appearance, as reconstructed in skeletal form and in the occasional mural painting nearby, struck me as tremendously strange, unfamiliar in every way, creatures not out of the zoo, but out of some sort of dream. Though the nearby dinosaur hall was always crowded, hardly anyone seemed interested in seeing the more obscure prehistoric mammals next door. I began to think of these eerie monsters as my special property.

Here was the Baluchitherium, for example. The Museum of Natural History didn't

provide a skeleton of it, because very little in the way of *Baluchitherium* bones has ever been found, but what it did give me was ever so much more astounding: a bas-relief of the beast as we think it may have looked in its own era, some twenty-five million years ago. It was mounted against one wall of the Hall of Mammals, taking up pretty much the entire space. (I don't think it's still there, but I live three thousand miles away from the museum these days, and can't easily check.) The ceiling of the Hall of Mammals is extremely high, and the *Baluchitherium* went up, and up, and up, right to the ceiling. For *baluchitherium* was the largest land mammal that ever lived, a titanic critter sixteen feet high and more than twenty-five feet long, weighing some twenty tons, nearly as much as three big elephants. Its head alone was four feet long. Imagine this great beast casually browsing on treetop vegetation. Imagine nine-year-old Robert Silverberg staring endlessly upward at the sculpted version of it that filled that lofty wall of the museum. "Sixteen feet high" may be hard for you to visualize, but I was about four feet high myself at the time, and that two-dimensional *baluchitherium* on the wall seemed vast indeed, Something did this colossus in, though—perhaps a change of climate that eliminated the trees on which it grazed. Just as well: they would be an enormous traffic hazard if we had them among us today.

And then consider *Moropus*, which in my boyhood I always called "Sourpuss." As portrayed in an artist's reconstruction, it had a gloomy look indeed, a biggish animal, eight feet high, with a long head that made it look a little like a horse, though instead of hooves it had claws, and its front legs were longer than the powerful, very unhorse-like hind ones, so we can readily imagine it rearing up on those thick-thighed legs and using its long front legs and claws to pull high branches down for munching. A horse with claws is an odd thing indeed, but *moropus*, which inhabited North America about twenty million years ago, is nowhere to be seen today except in museums. When its trees began to vanish, so did sad *Moropus*.

Then, too, we have the *Glyptodont*, a kind of giant armadillo, which seemed to me much like an animated tank when I saw a fossil specimen of it years ago in a museum in Australia. What this specimen was doing in Australia, I have no idea, because *glyptodonts* were native to South America, and Australia had become an island continent long before any *glyptodonts* appeared. It is most unlikely that these massive animals, enclosed in heavy armor, had been able to swim across the Pacific from Peru or Ecuador to the vicinity of Melbourne, but there it was in the museum there, a huge domed creature, a harmless herbivore whose armament protected it easily against predators—it merely had to roll itself up and wait for a frustrated attacker to go away. One kind of *glyptodont*, though, the three-thousand-pound species we call *Doedicurus*, was even better defended than most of its kin: it had a formidably powerful tail that culminated in a mass of spikes, much like a medieval mace. Even the hungriest of carnivores would hesitate to get near that flailing tail. Nevertheless, all the various *glyptodonts*, after thriving for millions of years, became extinct about eleven thousand years ago, victims, perhaps, of climate change and also the clever new inhabitant of its territory, *Homo sapiens*, who apparently had figured out a way to deal with its armor and its mace.

There were so many others, these fantastic vanished creatures—*Megatherium*, the giant ground sloth, and *Smilodon*, the formidable saber-toothed cat, and *Megistotherium*, a terrifying fifteen-foot long carnivore that could have eaten a *moropus* for breakfast, and *Megacerops*, a sort of rhinoceros with a Y-shaped horn, and an assortment of elephant-like creatures with tusks arranged in ways that would look very strange to us, and so on and so on, a grotesque menagerie of yesteryear. And we probably have only a small sampling of the fossil remains of the strange creatures that once inhabited our world.

My favorite of them all, for reasons I scarcely can say, was a prehistoric native of Utah called *Uintatherium*. It was not, I suspect, a very intelligent animal, nor an attractive one, but somehow it has haunted me ever since I came upon a mounted skeleton of it many decades ago. *Uintatherium*, whose heyday was about thirty-five million years in the past, looked something like a rhinoceros, a huge lumbering thing thirteen feet long, which is to say about the size of a small elephant; but no rhinoceros ever had *uintatherium*'s fantastic facial ornaments, three pairs of blunt horn-like protuberances running from its snout to what we might call its forehead, plus a pair of saberlike curving tusks arching downward. I suppose those tusks were used primarily for digging up tasty roots, because the heavy, lumbering *uintatherium* was a vegetarian, no sort of warrior, whose chief defense would not have been its tusks but its great size. Its extraordinary set of facial decorations, I think, is what brings this particular beast into my dreams from time to time. I see the last of the *uintatheriums* slowly drifting through what will someday be Salt Lake City, peering around with little piggish eyes, shaking its huge head sadly from side to side as it searches for the mate it cannot find; and then, at last surrendering to its fate, lies down quietly and waits for time to make it a fossil that I will stare at in a museum millions of years later.

So many weird beasts—all of them lost as the millennia rolled by. We should, I think, be grateful that in the madcap expansion of our own dynamic species we have not killed off all of our own zoological marvels, our tapirs and camels and giraffes and hippos and kangaroos, or the strangest and most marvelous of them all, Australia's shy little duck-billed platypus. They, at least, are still here for a while for us to treasure. I would not like to see a *baluchitherium* or a *moropus* in my neighborhood, or a *uintatherium* anywhere but in my dreams. But how glad I am to have seen them in museums, and to have had the opportunity to muse on the alien world of the distant past when once they roamed our world.