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The Strain

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THE STRAIN

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THE STRAIN

by

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THESIS

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Preface: Dark Spaces of Consciousness: Reality and Unreality in the Dystopic Journey

What are the constituents of a reality in which existential discordance abounds? How do we process our perceptions according to the inclinations of fixed or malleable subjectivity? Can such perceptions, once cultivated, yield a world steeped in deception or replete with heightened revelation upon which we can bestow some trust? My experience writing fiction has revolved around an impulse to manipulate the realities of my central characters, enough so to generate gross amounts of wonder, anxiety, and a dark spatiality that corresponds to a conception of dystopia in which the fictive world is upended. Moreover, such an impulse is grounded in my own approach to managing the reality in which I find myself, a reality that is more composed of insidious questions that lack immediate or assuaging answers. What results is a metaphorical journey into the heart of discerning what is initially and pervasively obscure, that is, the world, the myriad realities by which it is framed, and the elusive means of finding meaning under turbulently vacillating circumstances. My novel, *The Strain*, hence marks my indulgent exploration into darksome themes, revolving around characters who see and think and feel in dissimilar yet interconnected ways, as they endeavor to grope for a protective purchase on solid ground, however beset they are by internal turmoil. What more appropriate way to address this tumultuous collectivity of elements than through a dystopic architecture, made up of insistent binaries, specifically the highly polarized reality/unreality pairing.

The action of the novel takes place in Terra, a walled nation-state, the structure of which is meant to embody an unbreakable distillation of class stratification; the location is composed of a business district, a factory district, a field of indigent habitations called the slums, and the suburbs. The primary protagonist of my novel, a rogue journalist named Ben Gottman, has fallen subject to the haunting reality of a war the general populace of Terra seems disinclined to

acknowledge. He returns to the suburbs after a stint at the front, his world consumed by a highly fertilized morbidity, the sense of alterity to which he is bound contributing to his feeling of detachment from his wife, Carol. In a way, his reality is splintered. He is at once bound to the war around which his reportage has revolved and removed from it, desiring it and abhorring it simultaneously, this position, as it is framed by an antithetical reactivity, coinciding with his conflicted interiority. The dystopian world in which he is enmeshed is darkly colored by both the direct experience of and the yawning shadow of warfare. In some respect, the ubiquity of war as it is portrayed in the narrative represents the centrality of a diseased realm, made all the more amplified by the notion that the war, as a behavioral construct representing the darkest of human interactivity, is known by Ben but unknown by the residents of Terra, thus establishing an *us and them* framework that accentuates Ben's otherness in the face of the implacable masses. By extension, Ben inhabits a dark space of consciousness.

In what sense can the war experience be articulated when poised before an audience that either does not exist or is situated in a state of immovable apathy? The war narrative, of which Ben is the vehicle, consequently falls flat, divested of weight and largely disregarded. Terra, the setting, transforms into an immense vacuum, Ben's efforts to report on a war existing on a plane of futility and obsolescence according to the nation-state's general sensibility. Ben has no agency in this regard. His will to influence the like-minded deflates at the behest of a culture comfortably positioned in vast entertainment mediums, to such an extent that the domain of propagandized simulation prevails, the technology that authors and preserves it becoming monolithic, the true agentic directive in sustaining the war and manipulating the minds of its subjects. But there is another war going on, a war in the vessel of Ben, manifesting as he attempts to grapple with the world at large, as he feels inundated by an inscrutable reality, the

very substance of which is a violent composite of disparate elements that beg to be questioned, tirelessly, compulsively observed, and deeply internalized.

This reality of war, being at once positioned in the background and foreground of the narrative, incites the question of veracity in the midst of its transference between those who experience it firsthand and those who receive in the form of a story, the former being Ben and the latter being the nonexistent audience in Terra for his reporting. What is truth to a limited few is an unreality to a majority. In other words, that which is written and not read may in fact not even exist. This conundrum problematizes Ben's position in the vector of war, leading to his burgeoning position in a dystopic space characterized by a sense of nothingness, purposelessness, and trauma. It is here that we can address the theoretical nature of the war narrative, when it is conveyed by a knowing subject to an unknowing audience. Tim O'Brien expresses this most intensely in his book, *The Things They Carried*, when he writes "In many cases a true war story cannot be believed...In other cases you can't even tell a true war story. Sometimes it's just beyond telling" (71). This condition of beyondness complicates the resort to constructing a war experience into a narrative removed from any falsity or potential embellishment. What is to be believed when a narrator makes a disclosure to a given audience, when the story can, in essence, be shaped by the fact that the audience does not exist, that the process of divulging the story is made profoundly tenuous by an existential vacancy? The discourse between the narrator and the audience is obscured or rescinded completely. Hence, Ben's perilous position in an area of nonexistence. The narratives he composes, his reportage for *The Strain*, a newspaper, do not, by extension exist, thus catapulting him into a state of unreality that transcends physicality, and which is itself a reflection of the beyondness of the war narrative

that cannot be related to others, situated as it is in a voiceless vacuum, never to be exposed yet hauntingly simmering in the traumatized confines of the direct experiencer.

By situating Ben in this absent discourse, it was my intention to emphasize a sense of separation between him and the reality governing Terra. These two entities are diametrically opposed. Ben is a character entrenched in his own disequilibrium. Terra is a vast setting that, however visibly divided, is presided over by both a sovereign abstraction called Central Government and an indefatigable thrust towards entertainment as manifested in propagandized cinema, what I have conceptualized as a very powerful, indomitable source of reality manipulation, conveyed by a plethora of highly stimulating screened machines. This is the juncture at which I invoke the theoretical concepts of Jean Baudrillard, specifically those outlined in his book, *Simulacra and Simulation*. The key process that must be addressed is the point at which reality becomes something fabricated, shaped by a blatant artificiality that mirrors the said reality. When Ben, peregrinating the desolation, looks upon the ruinous death-scape of upended buildings, he ventures into the world of simulacra, seeing the layout as a cinematic rendering, a set so to speak. This disquieting experience can be paralleled with Baudrillard's treatment of Disneyland, when he writes, "Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra. It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms...The imaginary world is supposed to ensure the success of the operation. But what attracts the crowds the most is without a doubt the social microcosm, the religious, miniaturized pleasure of real America" (12). This interpretation of a locality in which simulacra abound--- as in the Disney castle most outstandingly---is oriented towards stimulating the senses of droves of visitors, what I will call the masses. A form of inundation ensues, and one gets lost in the play of disparate levels of reality. What is most conspicuous in Baudrillard's postmodern exegesis of Disneyland is his

reference to “real America”. What is in fact real when the site of stimulation is governed by gross likenesses rather than authenticated objects emanating a lack of mendacity? Again, such sites provide a vast amount of amusement for those teeming its fantastical thoroughfares. However, I, as the writer, am not amused, and this lack of mirth and enjoyment in response to the implementation of simulacra in the framing of a tenuous reality, is one of my central thematic concerns, thrust into the world of Ben Gottman as he navigates the dystopic terrain of Terra. My orientation may be construed as a condemnation of the postmodern preoccupation with the more real than real, the point at which reality is subverted and replaced by simulacra. But I cannot relinquish a deep, fetishistic fascination with such problematic conditions, paired with an ambivalence towards addressing the trepidation that might arise when considering the usurpation of reality by deceptive images. Moreover, the aforementioned scene in which Ben, looking upon the broken urban world, feels connected to simulation more than reality, is meant to be allusive to Baudrillard’s concepts, as well as being an indication of reality’s fragility, that through the proliferation of unchecked cinematic output, the grounding of the real begins to crumble, replaced thereupon by a new reality, the sovereignty of the hyperreal. Ben is subject to this inarguable dark space of consciousness, and the consequent breakdown inhabiting his perceptions, as a resident of Terra, a highly technologized domain, generates a rupture in his interiority, placing him in a position of alterity or otherness, where the question *what is real* abounds to the point of yielding no immediate rational answer.

The intertextual reference to Baudrillard manifests in another narrative moment when Ben and Carol confront Albert and Isaac, the pair of humanized simulacra, or artificial intelligence. These two creatures of technology, these mechanisms of the gaseous Central Government, are employed to embody reality’s capacity to create that which opposes it. Albert

and Isaac are walking representations, hyperactive, purposefully strange, possessed of the capacity to invade psychically, exuding a symbiotic interconnectedness with the provisions of television. They have power and agency in this regard, facets that Ben feels acutely and by which Carol is swayed and inundated, to the extent of her reaction becoming intensely sexual and characterized by highly conflicted desire and avoidance, want and repulsion, a kind of uncanny sexual pull that discomposes and entices her. It was my intention to characterize Albert and Isaac as manifestations of technology that influence outside parties in ways insidious, uneven, and unpredictable. As walking humanoids, they clash with perception, invoking technological objects like television, the unreal texture out of which they were formed inducing a sense of unreality, which, as the narrative progresses, becomes quite dominant as a thematic motif, as a reoccurring dilemma into which Ben is thrust. Baudrillard writes, “TV is watching us, TV is alienating us, TV manipulates us, TV informs us” (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 30). This panopticon effect filters not only into Albert and Isaac, as re-presentations of reality, as objects whose shared function is to eerily mirror the effects of television, but also into the entity or authority construct of Central Government. More importantly, I want to complicate the inseparability of real and unreal, and by doing so, position the reader into a Disneyland like modality, where the “illusions” and the “phantasms” are present to challenge perception, to place Ben and secondary characters into a kind of existential morass, where the provisions of the known world defy epistemological and experiential fixity. Reality bends and when it bends, to what mendacious dimension does it direct us? Can we trust our consciousness when so swayed by agentic entities, the very scaffolding of which is pieced together to problematize what we regard as real?

Hence, when Ben next encounters Albert and Isaac, they stand adjacent to a screened machine out of which Ben pulls the imprisoned Andrew Gardner. This moment is meant to

generate a correlative symbolism between the two simulacra and the very machine out of which spews a profusion of simulacra, as in commercials, dramatized depictions of reality, and ample programs of various questionable natures. By coupling Albert and Isaac with the television, by implementing such a machine as a torturous locality in which Andrew is positioned, I am commenting on the role of machines, either of flesh or not, in confronting what can and cannot be trusted as mediums before which we are positioned constantly and unavoidably. Through the influence of such devices, the question of reality's veracity is underscored, and the hold on definitive truth becomes troubled, tenuous, if not inaccessible.

Postmodernism and the concepts elucidated by Baudrillard coincide, because the gaze of the real is complicated by a reality replete with representations and less so firm ground that does not alter into an abyss imbued with the disconcerting power of a vacuum. How does language obfuscate rather than clarify a given condition? Out of a plethora of belief systems, upon which one can we found some appropriate dependence that functions towards the installation of some form of equilibrium? It seems that the more populous the signs, the less stable reality becomes. Yet a door opens, and this door into true reality, is accessed by Ben Gottman, simply by advancing questions, doubts, and extracting one from the masses, and in the process, finding a space of otherness. For example, the narrative in which the character of Victor Proto---the editor in chief of *The Strain*---is introduced revolves around the destabilization of his perceptual world. What can we make of this relative to the binary of real and unreal? Can the audience trust what his experience yields? The array of visuals he falls witness to in the church occasions a reactivity between what he sees as reality and what he sees as unreality. That the episode primarily takes place in a church, or a sacred space, induces a commentary on religiosity at large. When he states that he is merely observing the awesome structure of the church, he breaks from his

visionary/hallucinatory reverie, and, by consequence, illustrates the limits of language, that his experience cannot be rendered down into a veracious explanation because, like a war story, it embodies a beyondness, a stumbling into the ineffable. More significant is the fact that he does not tell Ben of his experience in the church. It is then a private event, markedly composed of a dialectic between an erroneous, perhaps deceptive psychological incident or a transformative revelation upon which he can bestow some probity. This threshold state, this position at the centrality separating opposing conditions, emphatically appeals to the postmodern condition in that there is no definitiveness; we are confusedly positioned at the borderline, slipping between polarities as the ground upon which they sit is not solidified but wet and perilous and terribly fissured.

At one point in Ben's engagement with Albert and Isaac, he feels that he is positioned on a movie set, that a director would soon appear calling for the cessation of action. This admitted hemorrhaging of the real, as much as it is going on in the interior of Ben, occasions a focus on the way reality can be manipulated, or stimulated into another dimension. Here is where I will address the power or agency of film and its imagined presence in a given reality, resulting in a blending of elements that facilitates a shift in behavior, whether the shift is visible or contained within. In Michael Herr's account of his time as a journalist in the Vietnam War, *Dispatches*, a work that is appropriate to consider, as Ben is a journalist himself, having acquired knowledge of war through his attempt at reportage at the front, the parallel between the real and the cinematic is illustrated. Take for example this extract: "You don't know what a media freak is until you've seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the

networks” (225). Apparent in this passage is a nod to performativity, a kind of intermingling between reality and the placement of the camera. Actuated is a behavioral shift in those who discern the presence of the media. One reality is supplanted by a new reality, one that is sculpted by dramatization of war, a stimulant so to speak, that alters a given subject’s action. This shift in elements coincides with Ben’s uncanny sensations of the cinematic medium, that at any point the world of simulation will divest itself of its subterfuge, revealing thereupon its capacity to deceive and manipulate. In my effort to address this rather conspicuous alteration, how it unsettles, how it initiates the feeling of disequilibrium, I place Ben in a location of discomfort, and by extension, a dark space of consciousness, largely informed by the concomitant reactivity of primary reality with the cinematic reality, the former being at times unsustainable, the latter especially evolving with potent immediacy, leading to an upended state that correlates with the dystopian persuasion of the narrative.

What is the City of Terra but an immense template to explore the collective consciousness of the masses, the stratified consistency of tiered society, the world of aloneness faced most conspicuously by Victor Proto on his nocturnal traversal of sleepless urbanized thoroughfares. I have structured the metropolis as such for the purpose of engendering a technologized aura, a demonstration of separateness wrought by class, an exemplification of power in the way the populace is seduced by variegated machines, in the ubiquitous shadows of general apathy and Central Government. When Victor Proto stands outside the church and perceives the rotating billboard for the most recent cinematic production, he has admittedly entered the consciousness of the metropolis, the eyes with which he sees becoming vehicles to capture and implicitly comment upon the eternal marquee, that space in which entertainment is the most saturated and corpulent of occupants. In his conceptually loaded exegesis of the

American landscape, entitled *America*, Baudrillard brings to mind the pervasiveness of the cinematic effect when he writes, “It is not the least of America’s charms that even outside the movie theatres the whole country is cinematic. The desert you pass through is like the set of a Western, the city a screen of signs and formulas...The American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies” (58). This curious dynamic, of the cinematic preceding reality, weaves its way into my narrative, albeit through a rather gloomy channel. From a rather fatalistic perspective, the narrative’s morbid preoccupation with cinema as a cultural medium propagated by an incessant thirst for diversion revolves around a breakdown in reality rather than a reality unto itself. Victor Proto perceives this entanglement of effect as does Ben Gottman, not without feeling an unsettling incursion of the uncanny. Herein lies the element of dystopia upon which the narrative is hinged, where those existing outside normativity, as in Ben when, at the conveyor, he observes all those surrounding him absorbed in small, portable consoles, are confusedly beset by fear and trembling when confronting the upending of reality by the matrix of cinema. Additionally, it is not cinema that insights one to think, or configure some gesture of critical commentary on the nature of the world; it is cinema suffused with propaganda that maintains levels of nescience and which allows Central Government to maintain its acme of power, transcending awareness and thought, lest one be on the same plane of consciousness occupied by the main characters.

As my narrative is powered by a dystopian persuasion, I cannot ignore the influence Cormac McCarthy’s novel, *The Road*, has had on my approach to stylistics and thematization. The novel, in itself, is an exploration into dark spaces of consciousness, as experienced by the father and son around which the narrative revolves. They are propelled into an upended world, the ruination of which, though presented rather ambiguously, was caused by some sort of agency

of destruction, whether it is a nuclear holocaust, or something vaguer but no less manifold. In a sense, reality as portrayed in the novel is quite bound to an understanding of extreme conditions, the means by which the father and son perpetuate their survival, and the world of morbid wonder as to how such existential disequilibrium manifests in the perceptions of the characters. This segues into the world of insight that burgeons when confronted with circumstances extensively embedded in the domain of destruction to which the father and son are wedded, as they navigate a blighted landscape deeply colored by violence and utter, irrevocable decomposition. For example, facing such a destabilized reality, the father “walked out into the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable” (McCarthy, 131). This event evokes a certain degree of mysticism, or transcendence, the broken world upon which the father looks yielding to a sense of totality, of absolutes, further informed by the dire indigence in which he and his son are positioned. What is this “absolute truth of the world” but a doorway into something inexplicable, far reaching, but tangible by way of perception and continuous exposure to the unending “darkness” to which, as readers, we are paired, attending as we are to the torturous gongs-on of the father and son. The road they travel is similar to the road faced by Ben Gottman, specifically when he leaves the confines of Terra, in search of Andrew Gardner. The site of destruction upon which he happens, the apparent refuse of bombing exercises, becomes a radiant semaphore or signifier of the insoluble ubiquity of war, the incessant global disturbance.

Even in *The Road*, cinema is not too far away. In an attempt to save his wife from voluntary death, the father talks to her insistently, but to no avail. Opposing his entreaty to survive, she states, “We’re the walking dead in a horror film” (55). This equation conflating two conditions, one being the imperative to survive, to travel through the deathscape, the other being

the use of cinema to illustrate an existential position, does much to amplify a tenebrous comparison, at the center of which is an appeal to ways of conceptualizing human experience through fictive mediums. The world and cinema seemingly collide, thereby complicating the true nature of reality, much as would occur in a surreal moment of trauma when a person might say, “It felt like I was walking in a movie.” In the case of *The Road*, the horror film marking the father and son’s embarkation into a broken world, functions as an uncanny re-presentation of existence, borrowing as it does from the filmic world until there is not much distinction between what is really perceived and what is configured through the influence of simulation. What is even more devastating to the structure of reality upon which we can tenuously depend independent of its confluence with cinema, is the fact that *The Road* inarguably borrows from the known world to generate an exegesis of our worst fears. Dystopia, by extension, is a dire response oriented around the hypothetical scenario in which man’s capacity to destroy is foregrounded. Fictive mediums are not necessarily limited to those of cinema. Books, too, can simulate reality. Hence, *The Road* works to distill an intimacy with a kind of existential nullification, a “what if” description of a world functioning in a state of termination.

When Victor Proto finds himself subject to a series of perceptual alterations, he is divested of the ability to craft the experience into language, as indicated by the fact that he does not voice its nature to Ben Gottman, thereby creating a barrier of privacy that is additionally informed by a state of ineffability. According to Linda Woodson, in her article “Mapping *The Road* in Post-Postmodernism”, “Postmodernism questions the role of language accurately to represent reality, at the same time positing that language is in fact all that humans have to record their concepts” (90). Clearly, Victor Proto, positioned on the threshold separating trustworthy vision from heightened hallucination, cannot resort to language to elucidate the extent to which

his perceptions have in some way undergone a vast transformation, thereby conforming to the postmodern preoccupation with language's limitations. If reality is stretched so far into a space of inexplicability, then is there anything external to language that can illuminate the contours of such a space? Like the event of wordlessness Ben had experienced at the front, in a momentary skirmish, almost as to suggest something mystical, or something like the aforementioned beyondness of a war story, the altered world of Victor Proto behooves the creation of a location where the resort to language does not suffice. Similarly, the world of "absolute truth" upon which the father in *The Road* falls subject in a moment of private revelation reads rather limitedly, by which I mean, that the absolute truth addressed is not extrapolated upon, leaving the reader to wonder what exactly is this absolute truth, especially when language offers no further elaboration on its nature independent of the epiphanic feeling that it engenders in the father.

A pointed question is raised in the midst of Victor Proto's dubious visionary experience: *What did he know?* This question, possessed of an immense space that challenges fixed epistemological states, can then be paired with the cryptic message he types on his console in the cold privacy of his residence: *suffering breeds insight*. These aspects of narrative and characterization invoke a domain that is in a constant and turbulent condition of destabilization, in which *the absolute truth of the world* is challenged and unverifiable, at least in its inchoate position prior to Ben Gottman's internal revelation, the moment in which he discovers the capacity to exact through his being a psychological paradigm shift, almost as though he has been endowed with an unclassifiable power over collective human consciousness. And prior to this transformation, he, too, struggles with trying to understand the nature of reality, especially when he is near the troubled, ideologically destitute Dr. Eliot, who represents the extinct intellectual whose cultural artefacts, coming in the form of books imbued with existential commentary, have

been reduced to forgotten discard. Ben queries on the whereabouts of reality, mired as he is in a state of doubt, hopelessness, and confusion, the path that he travels being at once unconventional, nearly allegorical, and ultimately characterized by an externality of strangeness that forcibly exerts an effect upon him similar to what Victor Proto experiences within and without the church. In other words, unreality becomes a prominent force in inciting Ben to question his perceptions, his cerebral wellness, and whether anything at all makes sense. This is, by extension, a dark space of consciousness.

The dark space of consciousness implies an absence of light, an obscurity, a certain gloom residing in the realm of thought, so experienced by Ben as he navigates a world divested of the ability to see beyond its own corrupt condition. It is here that I invoke the presence of shadow with its capacity to contort perception, to permit habitation in the unreal. And in so doing, the narrative relies on an intertextual moment in which Plato's allegory of the cave is summoned, specifically when Ben, speaking to Virgil, describes past thinkers and authors who "supposedly saw the light of truth, and it was painful. Then they returned to the cave where reality was only a shadow on the wall. They sought to change the world of the cave, taking creative measures to do so. They placed warnings and foreshadowing in their art. Then Central Government came to be through some kind of terrible evolution, and these prophets enacted a diaspora, but were found and destroyed." Again, addressing the conspicuous artificiality of Disneyland, Baudrillard writes that "It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms" (12). Can we equate this aspect of Disneyland to the shadows perceived on the wall by those imprisoned in the platonic nightmare of the cave? As Socrates states in *The Republic*, men so shackled and immobilized "would firmly believe truth to be the shadows of artificial objects" (176). It is my attempt here to conflate the world of simulacra to the shadows perceived on the wall of Plato's

cave, to address the moment in which something illusory is perceived as real and is governed by the senses, both within and without the mind. As Ben and Victor, both sleep deprived, consider a reality shadowed by the enigmatic Central Government, enough for the general populace to be absentmindedly coerced into a state of apathy while a global war is sustained, the two characters find themselves beset by an odious awareness of an existence inextricably bound to propaganda, a perpetual cinematic overload, an unbreakable class stratification, and an overriding preoccupation with technology. In a sense, they both see the shadows on the wall of Terra as synthetic amalgamations, thereby generating the sensation of separateness to which they are attached, especially in light of their motivation to educate the masses through their rogue reportage on the war. *The Strain* being their publication endowed with their audacious wish to chronicle the bellicose corruption inhabiting the world, yields no fruits, however. It is important to note the polyvalent signification of the words *The Strain*, as it suggests a struggle, an avenue of thought or discourse that pervades a given condition, or something that is injured. By implementing this multidirectional semantic aspect, it was my hope to capture a certain a depth of meaning in *The Strain*, especially given the nature of suffering embedded in both Ben and Victor that seeps into their publication in light of how it fails to incite a much desired paradigm shift in how people view the world.

Again, I am drawn into a thematic zone in which a postmodern sensibility finds its purchase. In his publication *Understanding Postmodernism: A Christian Perspective*, Stewart Kelly addresses the notion of truth in the eyes of postmodern thinkers when he writes, “Many postmoderns, rather than seeing ‘truth’ as simply an accurate expression of a preexisting reality, instead see what is called ‘truth’ as more often than not an attempt to establish and assert power of some sort” (101). Truth, therefore, is not premeditated, or a priori, but is formulated according

to how the world is structured by hegemonic formations. In light of this conception of truth, my narrative takes on a postmodern cast, especially when we adhere to how Central Government, as a manifestation of power, as an insidious construct, plays a significant role in how reality is perceived and perpetuated through variegated machinations. As a foil to Central Government, Ben *sees* beyond the fabrication of truth, and positions himself in a state of cognizance that transcends the boundaries of fixed reality, therefore compelling him to question what is in fact real. The very act of questioning, the innateness to his doubt and uncertainty, the inundation of thought that unsettle his perceptions, all contribute to his journey towards realization, that he is in fact situated above general consciousness, and so located, is possessed of the power to change the world, to counter the sovereignty of Central Government, to break the postmodern vise of gloom, to disseminate a new truth into the minds of the masses.

It behooves me to address the otherworldly nature of Ben's journey, which entails a significant break from the conventional *road*, propelling him into dark spaces of consciousness and out into the ether of new being or rejuvenation, which ultimately lends a numinous aspect to his peregrination of disparate elements once he finds himself outside the city of Terra in search of Andrew Gardner. It is here that I will address the transformative nature of Ben's ascent into a higher reality, what eventually sunders him from the seething oppression of dystopia. Much of what Ben experiences---his encounter with Darkspeak, the goddess named Gaia, Dr. Eliot, and finally the Unconscious---is colored by an allegorical hue, adding a degree of unreality to the narrative's proceedings. A dialectic emerges, structured around Ben and Central Government that once synthesized yields an alteration in Ben's subjectivity. What I hereby stress is the capacity for reality to be known, adjacent to which is the struggle to eventuate such a capacity in the consciousness of the tortured protagonist, given the presence of a ceaseless questioning that

invites us to constantly evaluate where Ben's mind is in fact located, whether positioned in lucidity or inundated by a viscid imbalance. Revelation, like the moment in which Ben discovers the unconscious as representing Central Government, can destabilize as much as it can conceive a new beginning, a new form of perception. I find this accentuated in the opening pages of the dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451*, by Ray Bradbury. Guy Montag, a book burner, encounters the mysterious Clarisse McClellan after a day of work. Guy Montag is embedded in his profession of destruction while Clarisse McClellan is contained in an aberrant state of cognizance that offers a view onto a world that is concealed, due to conditions of existence that are adverse to such a perceptual position. The following passage, capturing the conversation between the two characters, serves the purpose of illuminating the meeting of opposites and the inchoate destabilization that results, setting the stage for change in how reality is assessed. Clarisse McClellan explains:

“I rarely watch the ‘parlor walls’ or go to races or Fun Parks. So I’ve lots of time for crazy thoughts, I guess. Have you seen the two-hundred-foot-long billboards in the country beyond town? Did you know that once billboards were only twenty feet long? But cars started rushing by so quickly they had to stretch the advertising out so it would last.”

“I didn’t know that! Montage laughed abruptly.

“Bet I know something else you don’t. There’s dew on the grass in the morning.”

He suddenly couldn’t remember if he had known this or not, and it made him quite irritable. (7)

As this interaction foregrounds the rich and thoughtful world of Clarisse and its superimposition upon the destructive world of Guy Montage, employed as he is to burn books, it signals a nascent rupturing in how Guy sees the world, what will eventually grow and spread and induce in him a profound shift towards the act of preserving what he once unquestioningly immolated. Clarisse does not appear again in the novel, yet her influence is incalculable; it represents the significance of wondering and thinking, rather than negating and being controlled by the manipulative proclivities of a corrupt world. That Guy Montage becomes a living container of books by the

end of the novel lends to his conversation with Clarisse a radical agency, while securing her position in the realm of otherness, much where Ben Gottman is positioned in my narrative.

The story by Nathaniel Hawthorne entitled “Young Goodman Brown” can be superimposed upon the goings-on of my narrative, both with regards to theme and symbolism. As I have stressed that the dystopian journey undertaken by Ben Gottman is significantly colored by an allegorical hue, with special emphasis placed upon the nature of an upended reality in which the unreal has an inarguable trajectory, the journey of Young Goodman Brown into the forest as well rings with an allegorical component, and in turn presents the dialectic existing between wakefulness and dream states, how perception can alter to such an extent such that what was initially known is inverted, especially when we attend to the inherent religiosity of Young Goodman Brown’s plight, centered around the realization that all those composing a puritan community are seen in the forest partaking in a nocturnal demonic ritual, thereby negating the resolute faith that once so grounded the hapless Young Goodman Brown. The short story is undoubtedly revolving around the darkly transformative orchestration of events that signal the cessation of Goodman Brown’s faith and his concluding position in the realm of disconsolate disenchantment, for all that he once knew to be true is falsified. Hawthorne writes, after Goodman Brown has returned to his village after the ill-fated journey through the forest, “Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?” (123). The ambiguity that is advanced by this turn of reality, this modulation towards tenuous dream state, challenges Goodman Brown’s experience in the forest. It is an appropriate question to be purposed, as it functions to confront the veracity and extremity of what Goodman Brown witnesses. Similarly, Victor Proto’s experience in the church, the extravagant, far reaching visuals to which he falls subject, invoke, confusedly, the binary between the real and

the unreal, the visionary and the hallucinatory. Ultimately, it is reserved for the reader to entertain these concatenations of oppositions, to choose between their antithetical terms, so as to arrive at some comforting definitiveness. But perhaps there is no such comfort to be had. Moreover, as much as Goodman Brown changes, or is impelled to change, so that his religious solidity is deconstructed, and the world of private despair surges through his tumultuously ruptured ideology, one by which, before his tenebrous traipse through the forest, he devotedly abided, the world of Ben Gottman, in contrast, moves from doubt into certainty, this mobilization resulting in the rebirth of his world, the transformative nature of his being, his elevated consciousness. His journey, by extension, amounts to a new reality found, one that is grounded in hope and the dissolution of all that by which he was haunted, one oriented towards his newfound capacity to alter the world at large, much as would occur in the mind of an overman.

Now a note on the narrative of Clayton Dunbar as presented in the prologue and epilogue of my novel. What is immediately discernible is the western setting, it being Fort Mound, calling to mind the inspiration I found in the westerns of authors Elmore Leonard and Larry McMurtry. However, what initially seems disconnected from the novel proper is an interconnectivity of theme, characterization, and symbolism, as my focus is on the strangeness beyond the cedar trees, out of which is birthed a mysterious individual who is chanting the word, “Got, got, got,” otherwise a translation of the word “God”. This individual represents what can be considered the grandest of enigmas, the most potent of metaphysical deliberations, that God exists, and for such an existence to be driven home, supplanting belief and incredulity with knowledge, I had to employ a fictional foundation for such wonders to be explored, much as is the case with Victor and Ben’s preoccupation with a turbulent reality and the effulgent truths to be found therein, many of which come through psychologically in the form of inner and outer visions. In the case

of Clayton Dunbar, mysteries abound, contained in the book owned by his father called *The Fate of the Mind*.

As we have seen here, the texts to which I refer, in the contexts of theme and stylistics, find their place in the network of my manuscript, and permit a kind of extrapolation on such subjects as metaphysics, the whereabouts of consciousness, the multivalent reality of revelation, and the problematic, pockmarked binary between the real and the unreal. As my manuscript is inarguably dystopic in persuasion, such a mode of expression allows for a fusion between the world as it exists outside the text and the world as it exists within. Both locations converge and diverge according to some indispensable reactivity with the ever mutable, ever mobile imagination. Also foregrounded is the reality of a journey Ben Gottman is fated to embark upon, signaling the necessity for change, the interplay between disparate reality states, and the world of Terra as it is contained within him. Like Young Goodman Brown, like the nameless father and son in *The Road*, Ben embraces a road, so to speak, that leads him down avenues of strangeness, ultimately concluding with the meeting he has with engine powering Central Government, what I have conceptualized as the Unconscious. Here, I must stress the state of awareness inhabited by Ben throughout the narrative. It is as though he has punctured the molecule of nescience to allow his inner world to accommodate, however torturously, an existence marked by technologized simulation, the overproduction of and societal overreliance on cinema, and the ubiquity of war. And the path he is forced to navigate, in his search for Andrew, brings to the fore the concealed entities upon which existence is grounded, much to the unknowing of the general populace of Terra, an entity unto itself, what I have stressed in the narrative as being a source of influence against which we can prop characters like Ben and Victor in order to emphasize their sense of otherness or singularity, thereupon calling to mind the *us and them* binary.

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Table of Contents

	Page
Preface: Dark Spaces of Consciousness: Reality and Unreality in the Dystopic Journey.....	iii
Works Cited.....	xxiii
Table of Contents.....	xxiv
Prologue.....	1
The Strain.....	6
Epilogue.....	120
Vita.....	125

Prologue

Fort Mound was a dilapidated edifice. It was located at the border of unexplored terrain. Men of varying levels of temerity manned the walls. They peered out before them, holding their carbines, wondering all the while what existed beyond the expanse of cedar trees that rustled in an intermittent wind. Come night, the men would project their thoughts out into the darkness. The flickering torches located in fixtures around the wall provided broken illumination and accentuated shadows. On clear nights, where the stars shown vividly and the moon hung waxing, the men would disconnect from feelings of tension and observe the affable play of the cosmos overhead. On nights when the clouds covered the sky, the men would feel more disquiet than was custom. They could all agree, the mysteries beyond the cedars seemed more inexplicable and threatening when the stars and moon were obfuscated by the opacity of clouds.

One such officer, a nineteen year old named Clayton Dunbar, found it most befitting to distract himself with retrospection when it was his time to man the walls at night. Clayton was a timid sort, indisposed to involved conversation, as he was often moved privately by the goings-on of his mind. For him, the world of thought was something to be explored. This condition made up for his timorous nature. He came from a neighboring settlement, ten miles due east. There, as he moved through the tumult of adolescence, he was subject to the eccentricities of his father, a general store owner who often spoke of the incomprehensibility of the known universe, stating that the provisions of science were not enough to explain reality, that there was another element out there in the existential ether, waiting to be discovered. Clayton's mother had long disengaged from his father. Now she simply lived according to her detached prerogatives, disinterested by men as a sex, largely taciturn and comfortably aloof. Clayton had no siblings.

So, upon the turn of his nineteenth year, Clayton decided to join the company at Fort Mound, persuaded to this location by way of a need for adventure, a need to escape the quotidian and banality of the general store, however flavored it was by his voluble father whose moods oscillated, whose statements came characterized by a curious spontaneity, although he was wont to silence his disclosures in the company of customers. Clayton understood that he was like his father in some sense.

Clayton was situated at the wall of Fort Mound. A nearby torch undulated, gave off a hovering warmth. He felt the heaviness of the carbine in his hands. He measured the viscosity of the darkness that encroached upon the fort. There was movement beyond the wall, an approaching shadow, emerging as though authored by the shadow-encased cedar trees. Clayton heard broken conversation among the other officers. When what moved finally reached the clearing before the fort's eastern entrance, Clayton saw, by way of the meager light of the torches, that it was a stooped man dressed in rags and trembling as though possessed by some nervous compulsion.

“Got, got, got,” Clayton heard the man say.

The man then knelt down upon the ground and assumed a position of genuflection, arms raised as though crucified, head depending as though bearing a weight of thought. It appeared as though the man was harmless, and was perhaps calling out for help, although all he was saying was, “Got, got, got.”

Clayton heard the eastern gate open and saw his fellow officer named Chief emerge and approach the man and raise him from the ground gently and guide him into the fort. There was no evidence of resistance; the man was compliant. Clayton turned to look down at the yard where he saw Chief taking the man to an adobe hut situated by the barracks. A curiosity seized

Clayton with a suddenness for which he was unprepared. What manner of man was this stranger, appearing like a specter speaking another language, repeating himself? Clayton became so interested in this stranger that he forgot the weight of the carbine in his hands. He descended the ladder and approached the adobe hut around which several other officers had convened. There was fragmented conversation, indistinct and muddled. One officer, an Officer Richman, was calmly smoking a rolled cigarette while Chief was standing over the stranger now supine on the cot in the hut.

“Clayton,” said Officer Richman, a man with trenchant eyes and a calm demeanor, his countenance often exhibiting an enigmatic placidity, as though he knew more than he readily exposed. “Shouldn’t you be up at the wall?”

“Yes sir.”

“Then why are you down here?”

Clayton paused and realized he could not produce an instantaneous excuse.

“I came to see about this stranger.”

“I had a feeling that was why you came down.”

Officer Richman looked down at the stranger on the cot. Then he brought his cigarette up to his mouth, pinched it calmly between his lips, inhaled, and emitted a stream of smoke in the direction of a lantern hanging on the outside wall of the hut.

Chief exited the hut.

“The man is clearly dazed by something,” Chief said to Officer Richman. “He keeps saying got, got, got. He appears harmless.”

Chief exhaled loudly. He was clearly tired. The lines of strain etched upon his face seemed more pronounced. His dark complexion was clarified by the luminosity of the near

lantern. As a native, and having seen his people subjugated by militant settlers, he was an anomaly among the men of the fort. He spoke when necessary. Much of what he uttered was accompanied by a concealed sorrow, which Clayton perceptively measured while wondering about its nature. Chief had about him a gravity that no words could render clear. Clayton had an intuitive sense that Chief knew what was existing beyond the cedar trees, that minatory vagueness, that maddening unknown the night seemed to distend.

“We’re going to need a person to watch over him tonight,” said Chief.

Officer Richman dropped his cigarette to the ground, crushed it with his boot, and turned to Clayton.

“What do you say, Clayton? You up for the challenge?”

“Yes sir,” Clayton said.

Chief nodded.

Clayton entered the hut, leaned his carbine against the wall, and sat down on a nearby chair, all the while pondering the quivering mass on the cot.

“Got, got, got,” the stranger said, having assumed a fetal position where he lay. Then the word disintegrated into unintelligible nervous mumbling.

Clayton noted the rags in which the stranger was attired, stained here and there with grime. The stranger was emaciated, his skin ghostly in aspect. His face was devoid of hair, strangely aquiline. His eyes were half-closed as though he was in some sort of trance.

The congregation around the hut broke away. Clayton was alone with the stranger. Gradually, the broken conversation the stranger was having with himself dissolved and there was only silence, a silence so profound that everything surrounding Clayton assumed an air of unusual quiescence. He felt himself drifting into sleep. Images materialized before his drooping

eyelids, images at once vivid and melding into one another. Was he in some sort of aberrant dream state? Or was he awake, positioned in some alternate space of consciousness? He heard “Got, got, got” being uttered by a resonant voice polyphonic in nature. He saw the sky open up whereupon a gathering of winged creatures, perhaps angelic cherubs, circled on currents of air redolent of the richest, most profuse gardens. He felt himself enter a world so terrible and transfiguring, so sublime and endless, that his heart began to pulsate loudly and the susurrations of his blood to shed its silent flow. What then proceeded, in the narrative of this strange, conglomerate state of sleep and wakefulness, he could not remember, for come morning, when the rising sun sent panes of light through the window of the hut, when the hut’s exterior was alive with activity, he awoke suddenly and looked to the cot to find that it was empty, with no indication of having been slept upon.

Clayton rubbed his eyes, a perplexity growing within him. Where was the stranger? He gathered up his carbine and left the hut and sought out Officer Richman who was exiting the mess hall.

“Officer Richman,” Clayton said, almost out of breath, “the stranger is gone. Did anyone see him leave?”

“I thought you were going to watch him?”

“I did, but I fell asleep.”

“Go get some breakfast. I’ll ask around.”

Later that day, Clayton learned that no one had seen the stranger leave. He had inexplicably vanished.

The Strain

Shafts of rising summer sunlight were coming through the slightly shuttered window of a bedroom in which Ben Gottman and his wife Carol lay. Ben was wide awake and enmeshed in thought. He was ruminating over his haunting time at the war front as a journalist. Carol was clothed in a white nightgown. She was sleeping tranquilly. A somnolent smile was impressed upon her face. Her breathing was steady. Ben was turned towards an unadorned wall, a blank expanse, on which he felt witness to scenes that illustrated the coldness and carnage of war. He had not slept for days. His face was profoundly strained. There was a tension in the home. The reality of the global conflict was in a state of perpetuity. It reached into his being as it reached to the far corners of the world.

Ben's tired eyes squinted and refocused. Once so colored with energy and exuberance, a kind of effervescent will for adventure, his face was now crushed by his time witnessing the horrors of warfare. A disheveled crop of black hair framed his face. An unruly, shadowy beard reflected a broken routine to groom. His thin frame additionally captured the extent to which food no longer offered any satisfaction, contributing to its diminished shape.

Recumbent next to him, yet seeming to be far away, Carol was sleeping the sleep of the pleasantly unburdened. He thought of touching her shoulder with a gentle brush of his hand. He extended his hand only to recoil with sudden realization that she was just a body. He turned away, feeling the presence of a meaningless void that supplanted his desire for human contact. It made Carol feel remote, like an inanimate presence whose emanating warmth broke upon his solitude.

What had it been like, upon his return? He recalled the disquieting sensation of seeing Carol expressing a false surprise. Her short blond hair possessed a fixed aspect, and her smiling expression worked in contrast to the gloom occupying Ben's spirit. Her physicality had not changed. Their initial embrace felt lacking in warmth.

Their moments of intimacy seemed forced and awkward. Above all was the immediate struggle of determining who among them had changed. Ben supposed it was himself, his mind feeling the corruption of the violence he had seen, enough to destabilize his sense of self and reality. But perhaps his perceptions had altered so greatly that Carol was the same, only now her behavioral features were displayed with greater clarity.

Now lying in bed, Ben felt a disturbance surface in his mind, a voice that proceeded to speak to him:

Your silence is profound, the world in which you are submerged composed of doubt and uncertainty, yet here I am speaking to you in your mind, imparting to you confusion, like a toxic aftertaste, contained in the corruption governing the world, where entities like me have existed long before time instituted itself as a measurement of the many paths taken by wanderers, those bound to thought, those floundering on the shores of intellectual impotence, predicated upon the fact that the given subject is hardly whole but fragmented, contributing to an understanding of superstructures, born out of manifestations of power, that to feel it, to see it, is to look out of the window and gaze upon the false tranquility of domestic compounds, the goings-on in which vary according to how existence is grasped by those who solidify the otherness in which you are steeped, through your own insistent agency, or through the anathema that populate your life, the state against which you contend being at once grounded in and characterized by the fabrication of realities lacking in clarity and veracity, thrust into mendacious modalities that suppose the

existence of entities among whom I am one, nameless, latent, implicit, the need for words to elucidate my shape verily unrealizable and by extension insufficient, as I am a mystery, something so enigmatic, so blanketed with unknowns, so infused with the wordless real, that it requires a far reaching shift in consciousness to accommodate the immense ether in which I am housed, and which is equivalent to the philosopher's abyss, the penetrating eyes therein returning your apprehensive gaze with a certain pernicious knowing, the temerity you muster to face the surge of energy as a result of such a position of sight doing little to allay the dread assailing your inner world, that said extravagant ether, that gaping nothingness, convincing you of the futility of life in a mutable setting, the shifting contours of which move according to your vacillating dysphoria.

The voice seemed to oscillate in timbre, belonging neither to a male nor female. The pace at which each word was enunciated seemed connected to a rapid stream. Yet upon the dissolution of this voice, upon its return to whatever locality marked its origins, Ben seemed to return to basic consciousness, not without a sense of having gone to some place unknown. The consequent feeling of dissociation was terrible. To whom could he speak on the nature of this mysterious inner voice? Had his mind, encumbered with trauma, produced it? Again, so that the echo of the voice would desist and disintegrate, he affixed his concentration to the blank wall, only to feel the lethargic movements of his wife removing herself from her repose.

“Have you been sleeping, Ben?” she inquired, a listlessness to her voice.

“Yes, I’ve been sleeping. I’ve been sleeping soundly.”

“Don’t be silly. I felt you awake even as I slept.”

“How were your dreams?”

“Oh, wonderful. Things that I can’t put into words, but they were...wonderful.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Ben said despondently.

“How about your dreams?”

“I didn’t have any.”

“I figured as much.”

“Then why did you ask?”

The question hung suspended in a molecule of tension. Ben felt the cushion of the bed, but found no comfort thereon. He thought of turning to see Carol, but the image of her bathing in the secret comforts of the unencumbered was enough to produce in him a sense of aversion. So he remained gazing at the wall in hopes to find some hidden pattern that might proffer an anodyne to his private struggle.

“I thought you might have made something up, you know, created an elaborate dream for me to get lost in,” Carol said. “You know I like the world of make-believe. Why don’t you give me a dream?”

Ben was silent.

“Please,” Carol insisted playfully.

“Let me see here,” Ben said. “A dream that I didn’t have, a dream that will interest you. Let me see, ah yes, I’m stuck in a nightmare, some industrial scene. There is a weapons factory. The smokestacks are spewing gas. I’m a journalist, looking at a corpse of a young soldier. His body has been mangled by enemy fire. I’m looking at death not that I want to...more because I have to. I’m shaking as I hold a pen and a small notebook, while the other soldiers are breathing heavily but not speaking.

“I feel that they resent my being there. I’m a civilian stranger of sorts there to write on the violence occupying what remains of a city. I’m there holding my pen I use for reporting that

may or may not be published or read. I decide not to write. I decide to gaze into the empty expression of the dead soldier. There is something I'm looking for, yet I can't find it. It's beyond me, like a good dream.

“A nearby soldier asks a question that I half-hear: ‘What’re you writing there, journalist?’ ‘Nothing’, I say. ‘Good’, he says, ‘because there’s nothing to write. You might as well pick up a gun and fight with us. Warfare has its moments.’ I think about what he’s just said, ‘Warfare has its moments.’ What kind of moments? An orgasmic response to being shot at, to feeling the spray of bullets cutting through the air? The bone-deep wonder of real, tangible violence? I turn away from the dead soldier, walk several paces away and attempt to vomit ---”

“That’s not a dream,” Carol interjects. “That’s real.”

“Is it?” Ben queries. “Who’s to say if it’s real or a dream? Could it be both? Could it be some indication of something that dictates how we think and feel?”

“That’s not what I want. I want a dream, a colorful dream, something uplifting and fascinating. Not this death and violence.”

“I’m afraid that’s all I can come up with,” Ben stated. The reality of war sat positioned at the forefront of his mind, enough so for him to conclude that it was all he knew. The vexation normally accommodating such a thought was then supplanted by a cold wish to once more hear the sounds of war, to embrace the violence, to surrender to the incessant, maddening motion.

Carol was silent. Ben closed his eyes against the blankness of the wall. The bed creaked as Carol got up. She approached the window and opened the shutters. Ben turned and saw her gazing out of the window. His words had been mere shadows. He observed Carol as though from a great distance. The morning light was superimposed upon her body.

Then Carol changed. No longer was she donned in a white nightgown. It was replaced by a tight fitting black slip. She raised her hands and placed them against the window frame as though having fallen subject to an as yet invisible force. She depended her head, at which moment a man appeared with inflated musculature seen rippling beneath his brown and olive green fatigues. A glinting assault rifle was fixed to his back by way of a cartridge belt. He had a protrusive chin, cleanly shaven, an overhanging forehead obscuring his eyes. The man extended his arms and reached for Carol's hands. Then he pressed his body against hers. Carol voiced no protestation. She seemed to quiver with arousal. Her breathing quickened. The man directed his hands over her breasts and down to her hips.

"Oh, dear warrior," Carol said, "I've been waiting for you. I've been waiting for your touch."

"I'm here to seduce you. My hands bring death and destruction, but to you they bring pleasure. Feel their strength?"

"Oh, yes, I do feel their strength."

"Strength that has caused death."

The warrior brought Carol away from the window and turned her roughly so that they faced each other. They began to kiss passionately, and Carol, with her cheeks colored by a deep crimson, cooed with delight.

Carol disengaged from this moment of intimate unity that she might ponder the shape of this soldier's rough countenance. She proceeded to lightly stroke it with the tips of her fingers. She sought the eyes of the soldier, and in so doing, she shuddered with an unbidden orgasmic outflow of feeling, a strange union of the sexual with the violent. She was moved to speak, though her voice was trembling.

“How many confirmed kills?” she asked, her eyelids fluttering.

“In our most recent firefight...twelve. I counted them after the combat zone was cleared.”

“Wow...let’s fuck.”

Carol proceeded to moan excitedly. The soldier roughly turned her around and pressed her against the window. Then the image dematerialized. Ben was left observing Carol in her white nightgown peering through the window. She wore a wide smile, as though she was entertaining a private humor she desired to both share and to keep to herself. She turned away from the window. A strange form of joy gushed from her eyes. She returned to bed.

“I just had a strange idea,” Carol said.

“And what would that be?”

“What if there are those who like war, who desire it in some way.”

Ben exhaled, his existential fatigue amplified. Closing his eyes, he discerned, impressed upon his mind, images wrought by blood, like a reel of film turning and turning. “Yes, I guess there are those who do,” he said.

“It’s a wonder how it never seems to end. It’s both fascinating and absurd, don’t you think?”

“No.” Ben said, turning away from Carol. He raised a trembling hand to rub his eyes.

“I mean, it’s like a form of play, though instead of pretend, it brings together both life and death. What’s...what’s it like to see a violent death?”

“Terrible,” he said.

Carol continued animatedly: “There must be a thrill to it, like the feeling of experiencing something new. It reminds me of killing spiders when I was young.”

Ben registered her words with silence.

Carol continued: “I guess it’s difficult seeing a dead body as opposed to a dead spider...but I can’t help but feel intrigued with war, what it can do to a person. You know this, I’m sure, I mean, you were there.”

Ben pondered her words, more out of frustration than sincere acknowledgement. Carol’s curiosity seemed to morph into a bad dream, generating memories Ben wanted to suppress.

Yes...yes, I was there,” he said, “in the company of men trained to kill. What are you searching for, Carol? What is it you want me to say?”

“Oh, I’m just curious, that’s all. I guess I’m romanticizing a little bit. I’m going to make some coffee.”

Carol got up, and exited the room.

Ben felt a tense stillness. He waited for something to happen, for some intrusion.

You know of what she speaks. You know of it quite intimately, the ease with which death is presented in the theatre of war, how life begets death, how thanatos inundates the subject until all it thinks about is destruction and the war continues to thrive, and the blood it costs is burgeoning, your knowledge of which has contributed to your incapacity to engage others in conversation, causing me to broach a question---What good are spoken words when the voice required to speak them is rendered mute by the glorious play of violent memories?---You were among those who fought, men of tenacity, their methodology of violence thoroughly engaged. Kill, kill, kill. And there you stood, taciturn, impotent. Go now, drink some coffee, stare off into the distance, embrace alienation.

The voice, superimposed upon Ben’s thoughts, echoed ephemerally. It receded into the unknown vacuum whence it came. Ben exhaled loudly, not wanting to move. The presence of Carol, even without the bedroom, was a reminder of some unbridgeable social impediment. Ben

supposed that a pleasant jolt of caffeine might displace his ruminative world with something fresh, some golden thought.

He pulled his body out of bed. He put on a pair of sweat pants and went to the kitchen. The bubbling din of percolating coffee filled the room. Carol was sitting at the table, a newspaper positioned nearby, untouched.

“Aren’t you going to read the news?” Ben asked, taking a coffee cup out of a cabinet.

“No...why should I, it’s all the same. I feel like watching a movie. Maybe I will after coffee.”

The dining room window, facing east, was aglow with sunshine. It was a reminder to Ben that it was a new day, yet one he anticipated would be darkly colored by recursive memories.

Ben stood watching the coffee bubble and froth in the pot. It required of him some patience which he was willing to expend as he waited for the percolation to cease. When it did, he brought the pot to the table, poured the coffee into Carol’s mug and then into his own, and sat down. He observed the city newspaper with some hesitancy, though he wondered about the nature of the front page, with headlines like *War Continues, Tribunal of World Powers Highly Divisive and Ineffectual, New Entertainment Complexes Built in Urban Centers*---intimations of the madness inhabiting different spheres of existence.

Carol observed her coffee mug with disinterest. The sunlight on the window faded, perhaps obscured by a thick cloud meandering into its path of radiance. Ben reached for the paper. Then he became distracted by the expression of unsettlement exhibited on Carol’s face.

“I feel like something weird’s going to happen,” she said, as though speaking to herself, her face fixed on the window.

“What do you mean?” Ben asked.

“I don’t know. I just feel something weird. I don’t even want to drink my coffee anymore...what’s wrong with you? You seem so distant.”

“I’m not sure, really. There is a part of me that still wants to be at the front. All I have are memories.”

“Why would you like to go back to the front?” Carol asked incredulously.

“No reason,”

“Well, there has to be a reason?”

“What would you care if I told you?”

“I think you’re just being hyperbolic.”

“Hyperbolic?” Ben inquired, suddenly agitated. He forgot about his coffee. “You’re not the one plagued by nightmares. You’re not the one whose memories are filled with violence. Sometimes I get the feeling that, to you, this war on the outside of Terra is something to be humored by, to be ignored, to be dramatized for the purposes of entertainment. That’s all everyone thinks about. What to see next, what to do to avoid the truth.”

Ben regarded Carol coldly. The newspaper was face up on the table like a functionless rag to be observed fleetingly, superficially, before being thrown away.

“Oh, Ben,” Carol said, uninterested, “just drink your coffee, it can’t be that bad. Then, again, almost to herself, “I feel like something strange is going to happen.”

There was a loud knock at the door. Ben stood up and went to the door and opened it. He beheld two men, both contained in dark overcoats. Their faces were hidden by the shadow generated by the brims of their fedora hats. Without voicing a greeting, without waiting for an invitation to enter, the two men forcibly moved past Ben. Ben was immediately disoriented. He closed the door and turned to find that the two men were observing the properties of the room.

They removed their hats. There was a sheen emanating from their somewhat matching, expressionless faces. The sheen was not perspiration.

The one nearest to Ben turned and said, “Nice place, my name’s Albert.”

“Yes, nice place here, my name is Isaac,” said the other, his face twitching spasmodically.

Albert, his hair a polished brown, turned to observe Carol. “Wow, look at you. Hey, Isaac, look at her.”

“Yeah, she’s good looking,” said Isaac. “Could you get me some coffee, dear, I need a stimulant that’s legal, no sugar or cream. Thank you so much.”

“Ben, who are these men?” Carol asked.

“Don’t worry, Carol, just...just get him some coffee,” Ben replied.

“Yeah, get me some coffee,” Isaac said.

Carol got up and rushed through the kitchen and down the hall and into the bedroom, and slammed the door. Ben returned to his seat at the table. Albert and Isaac stood looming and indomitable and mocking, an odd confluence of jest and roiling aggression. Ben gazed into the interior of his cup of coffee. He saw a stagnant brown disc in which a reflection of the ceiling was captured. The upward floatation of steam had all but expired.

“I guess I’m not getting any coffee,” Isaac said, his expression of chagrin somewhat fabricated, as though he was acting. His face once more underwent a sharp spasm. His mouth formed into a smile, yet there was no coherent thought behind it. It simply suggested the reality of some emotional programming, some impenetrable façade. Ben observed Isaac and was disquieted by the artificiality of the man’s hair. It had the consistency of baked clay, unmoving.

“I know who you guys are,” Ben said.

“Is that right?” Albert said.

“Yes, I know---,” Ben began to state.

“Of course you do,” Isaac interjected.

The two men were examining the aspects of the kitchen through an in depth perusal. They were opening up cabinetry, running hands over surfaces, sniffing the air, studying the sink, their movements precise and fluid. What were they looking for? Their movements discomfited Ben. It felt as though he was watching a surreal film. At any given moment, a director would appear from behind the scene, calling for all action to cease.

Ben once more gazed into his cup of coffee while Albert and Isaac inspected the features of the kitchen.

“You’re here on behalf of Victor Proto,” Ben said, yet he did not feel that the statement belonged to him, almost as though an external force had compelled him to speak it.

Both Albert and Isaac ceased their movements simultaneously. After a pause, Isaac said, “How do you know?”

“Smart,” Albert said.

“I don’t know,” Ben said.

Isaac erected himself. Albert produced a wide grin and began to laugh.

“I guess he’s found us out, what do you say to that, Isaac?” Albert said through his laughter.

“Impressive,” Isaac said, his eyes fixed on Ben.

Feeling the penetrating gaze of Isaac, Ben turned away from his cup of coffee, and said with conviction, “You both reek of synthetics.”

“What if it was in reverse,” Albert said. “What if you’re synthetic and we’re as real as real can be. It’s hard to say, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Isaac said. “Think on that, oh wise one.”

“I can’t and I won’t,” Ben said, feeling charged. “You both are here as errand machines for Victor...what does he want?”

“He requests your services in the world of underground journalism...why else would he want you?” Albert posed.

“So he sent us,” Isaac added.

“As a friendly gesture,” Albert said.

Ben felt an encroachment on his mental space. These two synthetic beings seemed to be watching the formation of his thoughts. They seemed to be monitoring his emotional response to what and how they were speaking.

The air in the dining room was approaching a near insufferable aspect of congestion. Ben was reduced to consider his own powerlessness, generated by the nearness of these strange men. Albert and Isaac emitted waves of indeterminate emotion. At any moment, their moods could alter. Ben concluded that the only way to regain a sense of security was to entertain their statements with as much resignation and acceptance that he could muster. But one question hung suspended around his thoughts: how did they know about Victor Proto? Ben inhaled sharply, wanting more information.

“And if I refuse to go to Victor?” he asked, attempting to steady his voice.

“That’s crazy talk,” Isaac said, crafting a smile while exposing clenched teeth.

“Then we will be forced to distort your reality...violently,” Albert said.

“It’s already been distorted violently,” Ben countered.

“If you refuse this call, then you’ll not like the change in your physical environment. As representatives of Central Government, our beloved sovereignty of Terra, we are required to demand the utmost obedience,” Isaac said.

“There is no such thing as central government...only men bent on perpetuating war,” Ben heard himself saying.

“We’ll give you a brief time to reconsider the situation here,” Albert said. “We’d hate for it to get messy.”

Ben did not respond. His brooding eyes returned to observing his cup of coffee. Still, the pair of government agents loomed like monolithic entities. They were the spawn of some reaction between society and technology. Their behavioral capacities were wide ranging, menacing, and possessed of an intrinsic unevenness. They both emanated a violence not yet ignited.

Ben saw them peripherally, his trepidation rising. They stood like sentinels to some authoritative locality in which machines adorned in flesh walked the world in endless streams. Ben realized that these artificial beings had been surreptitiously integrated into society.

And amidst all of this inner commotion seething through Ben, something filtered into his consciousness.

You know you have to go. Victor waits for you while contained in a place of sleepless impatience. He had these machines programmed to seek you out. Why hesitate? Why exhibit a pathetic and gloomy reluctance? You are attached to the process of reportage. What would be your function without it? You are a component of this war that rages and progresses without any hint of end. You sleep, eat, and dwell in the bower of your own private anguish, yet you are drawn to the darksome abode of violence between humans, almost as though there is a part of

you that treasures a return to such an abode, to see it unimpeded, unprocessed, completely detached from simulation.

“He’s quiet; he must be thinking,” Albert smirked, turning to Isaac.

“Thinking too hard, I daresay,” Isaac added.

Ben felt the voice leave his mind. It diminished into whatever corner of consciousness had generated its existence. It was like a vast unknown. It was like the kind that all manner of explorers entertain before concluding that there is nothing to seek, nothing to understand, nothing to procure. Ben, fighting answerless questions in his pensiveness, turned away from his cup of coffee once more, and said definitively, “Ok, I’ll go to Victor.”

“Is he telling us the truth?” Albert tilted his head speculatively.

“Yes...it seems so,” Isaac said, narrowing his eyes at Ben. “Be prompt, Ben Gottman, Victor’s impatience grows.”

Albert and Isaac turned to each other and froze. Their smiles were wide and fixed as though having been etched by the same facial architect.

Ben stood up. He passed quickly through the kitchen and down the hall to the bedroom. Albert and Isaac returned to studying the myriad surfaces of the house as though they were in a museum. They moved from here to there, each location an exhibit worth exploring but done so with a programmed compulsion.

Ben opened the door to the bedroom. He remained standing at the threshold. The light in the room was dim. Carol lay curled up on the bed, turned away from the door.

“Are you alright, Carol?” Ben asked.

“Who are they? Who are those men?” Carol asked.

“I think they’re artificial intelligence.”

“I felt...I feel something strange,” Carol began. “When they came in, it was like my mind was in many different places at once.”

“I felt like that, too.”

“My mind...my mind felt stretched,” Carol said, almost whimpering. “It was like I was looking into my thoughts, and what I saw frightened me. There were images that were dark and disturbing, yet I didn’t want them to go. I wanted them to touch me...sexually.”

“My impression is that they’re here for a reason.”

“How do you know that?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

“I still feel them,” Carol admitted. “Searching my mind, penetrating me...I want more for some reason, but I’m afraid.”

Carol shifted in the bed. The whiteness of her night gown had darkened. There was a shadowy consistency in the room. The slightly shuttered window was no longer illumined by morning sun glow. Ben waited and exhaled heavily. Even to him, his voice sounded entangled, estranged from ownership.

“What are they doing now?” Carol asked.

“They look to be inspecting our kitchen. Are you ok?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Carol said, her voice trembling. “I still feel them though, I still feel this sense of penetration.”

“I felt like they entered my mind.”

“It’s all so strange.”

Ben passed into the room. He closed the door and went to the closet, from which he retrieved a shirt and a pair of khakis and his tennis shoes. He took off his sweatpants, and put on

the shirt and khakis and the shoes speedily, before walking to the door, opening it, and leaving the bedroom. Carol remained laying in a fetal position.

Ben passed through the house to discover that Albert and Isaac were sitting at the dining room table. Both of them had gotten a cup of coffee. Isaac turned to Ben and said:

“I hope you don’t mind, we both decided to help ourselves to the coffee, not that we need it.”

“Yes, not that we need it,” Albert said.

Ben ignored them, moving into the kitchen to retrieve his keys.

“You should read the news today,” Isaac said. “Apparently, the world powers are going deeper into contention. Terra is the expected victor, but who knows. Things might change. But, considering you don’t write for this newspaper here, given your place in the underground press, you probably will welcome change, yes?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Ben said, reaching for his keys on the kitchen counter.

“Of course you do,” Albert said. “Anyway, that’s where’re your headed, to the underground, to report on the war front for the purpose of informing those few who care on the nature of violence.”

Ben felt his movements still. He felt the weight of consciousness as one would feel a new but invasive thought, affixing itself to the mind in the form of an indelible taint. These spawn of technology, sitting at his table, gingerly sipping their coffee, had gained knowledge of his occupation simply by entering his mind without immediate detection.

What was next?

Ben rushed out of the house, feeling somewhat detached from his physical movements. Once outside, he felt a mild calm settle over him, now that he was out of the vortex generated by Albert and Isaac. He breathed in and out, engulfing the air in quick succession, feeling his nerves settle. Then, remembering Victor Proto, he proceeded down the block, knowing that he would eventually reach the machine-operated conveyor that would take him into the metropolis.

Victor Proto was by himself, wandering the sleepless streets of the City of Terra. The night hour had assumed a glacial progression as the towering buildings of the business district punctured the vaulted opacity of the sky, all astronomical matter, the stars and moon, rendered invisible by an expanse of seamless clouds that did little to offset the interminable motion of city dwellers, each to their own prerogative, the current marking their unbothered passage ingesting Victor who, having not slept in days, was apt to feel suspended in some nightmarish vagueness, the dark encumbrances sagging beneath his brown eyes, the components of his visage fixed in some inarticulate discomposure where they were once marked by an ease of expression, when life's vicissitudes were not so insufferable, not so burdened by the turn of the world towards unrelenting war. He gazed up at the encompassing buildings in an attempt to find their zenith, but saw only a shapeless, yawning immensity, an inverted, brooding abyss, working in counterpoint with his ongoing push to negate an inner turbulence through some elusive balm, some assuaging moment of sense, that would lessen the painful contortions racking his soul. He looked down and saw his worn sneakers superimposed upon the unforgiving pavement, while

that rush of civilian movement encompassed him, accentuating the eerie stillness in which he was momentarily positioned.

As his thoughts meandered down dark corridors better left unexplored for the weight they bestowed upon his spirit, he concluded that the very texture of his thoughts was informed by his aloneness. Feeling dwarfed by the looming buildings, he proceeded into movement, his steps unsteady, the sensation that he amounted to some unearthed specter hitting the foreground of his concentration.

Then he inhaled the city air. He smelled the fragrance of exhaust. He felt masticated by the stream of faceless pedestrians, all of whom were strangers. Automotive sounds assaulted his ears. He perceived the cracked sidewalk illuminated by the streetlights. He felt the mirage of some elusive utopic future. The war was beyond Terra, yet it was also in Terra, in ways that seemed to transcend general awareness. Victor's expression was unmoving with despondency. Stepping over the concrete, immersed in the city motion, yet feeling outside of it, he measured his movements against the current of his tempestuous interior. He did not know where he was going.

His aimlessness suddenly desisted. He found himself looking at a structure that seemed radically out of place. It had a stone façade, gothic in nature, figures etched thereon yet somewhat faded by erosion, the play of time. Victor could make out whispering angels, gesturing saints, demonic gargoyles, hovering cherubs. A steeple towered above him. Affixed to the apex of the steeple was a cross. He realized he was looking at a church. He realized he was beholding a relic of a past that no longer existed, a time long forgotten. Yet, he felt an ideological force coming from the church. It was a sacred space. And the figures carved into the stone were like signifiers of an order of worship upon which he projected mental images of people praying in

pews, listening to sermons, embracing the concept of transubstantiation, deriving lessons from a hallowed tome.

Victor was propelled into a locus of wonder. He forgot about the dense thickets of pedestrian traffic ever in motion around him. The orchestra of urban sound lessened. The profane space that was the city seemed to drip away, inciting Victor to forget where he was exactly. The church was like some aberrant locality, a recollection that had taken on form and substance. The epoch that marked its influence, a vague memory, was suddenly present, shedding its antiquated garments.

Victor thought of entering the church. He was swayed by an evolving curiosity. He approached the steps leading up to the church's wooden door. He stopped. His concentration settled upon a man sitting on the steps. The man was attired in dirty rags, his expression marked by the chronic fatigue of poverty. His skin was splotched and filth-encrusted and peppered here and there with contusions. His eyes were half-closed. He was stooped over, motionless. An apparition given material form, he looked like he could have melded with the figures on the church's façade. He shifted and smiled, exposing chipped and discolored teeth. Then he saw Victor and spoke, his voice somewhat cracked and atonal:

“You, too, want comfort for whatever burdens you. You walk with death. It calculates your movements with precision. All around you are inaccessible beings, thrust into an existence that you are removed from. This city, this raging cesspool inundates you. This church that you've been pondering is a near-dead indication of what goes beyond time, reaching into the eternal. Here, on these steps, we meet, your eyes assessing my condition.”

Victor stood immobile. He was transfixed by this man before him. The man's voice, otherwise dissonant, was resonating in his mind with a strange musicality, like a refreshing gust of air from some perfumed garden. He sought words to exchange, but found none.

“And I wonder,” the man said, “you're a wandering soul, seeking, seeking, seeking, what, may I ask?”

Victor remained transfixed. Then he hesitated, not knowing how to respond. The man's question pulsed within him, like a blinking semaphore. No answers were forthcoming. The void was real, the abyss offering a sigh of intimacy. Victor became distracted. In the background, there was the undulating noise of the metropolis. There was an interplay between disparate volume levels. It was like a language unto itself. The intermittent retardation of sound contended with sustained moments of loudness. The occasional pocket of stillness emerged. The auditory aggregate was like an orchestral depiction of oscillating moods. Victor then refocused his concentration on the man. He ventured a reply to the man's question. In so doing, he heard himself speak, yet he felt detached from the words, as though he did not own them: “I don't know.”

The man produced a pained smile, and said, “What is to be known and what is not to be known? The question deserves some thought if in fact thought exists. You see me on these steps. This is my world, these steps. I plead from them. My smell offends most people who pass by. I am invisible to them otherwise. Then you came. You could pass for me, in many ways. Perhaps you are here to deliver me from my fixation with death and decay. Tell me, regarding who you are. I must know.”

“I don't know,” Victor said, at which moment the man before him changed.

That which was initially visible---the defeated countenance, the stained rags encasing an emaciated body, the curvature of a spine wracked by intractable burdens---all underwent a falling away. They were replaced by another living form. Victor gazed at this new formation of life. He was seized by a deepening wonder. His breathing began to quicken, as he beheld the equivalent of a shimmering hieroglyph with more than one meaning.

“What are you?” Victor managed to ask. His eyes were wide open, seeing something that defied immediate description.

“I am a shape-shifter,” the form said. “I change according to the rotation of the world. I am seen only by those who entertain thoughts and doubts on what consciousness consists of, the overall make-up of the mind.”

Against the neighboring darkness of night, the figure before Victor was coruscating. Victor saw it as an insensate portrait given breath and animation. He saw it breaking away from the fixity of paint, from two-dimensional confinement. He suppressed a desire to survey his surroundings, as he was beset by the feeling that he had been extracted from reality. Yet he did not want to break from the trance in which he was enveloped. An air of fascination had settled over him with great force. All the while, in some remote thought-corner, he was wondering if he was the only soul present seeing this strange figure sitting on the steps of the church. Victor then noticed the figure’s face. Its expression was in motion, moving from one display of emotion to another. Victor observed the face’s continuous alteration. He saw happiness, sadness, joy, rage, humor, fear, expressed in succession or blending together.

“What are you?” Victor inquired again. He heard the question echo within him. It had exited his mouth as though by its own volition.

“Clearly, you weren’t listening,” the figure said. “You seek my identity. To put it simply, I am an enigma. You see me as though you are in a waking dream. As of now, I am at once something and nothing, a true vision and a flawed hallucination.”

Victor attempted to absorb these words. Yet, he fell subject to a burgeoning confusion. To be in two places at once. To be placed at the center of a dyadic construct, the resulting synthetic reaction leading to some position of impossibility, some beyondness. And as he mused over this dialectic, the figure began to change once more. The coruscation dissolved. The facial expressions ceased oscillating. Once more, Victor was looking at the impoverished man. He saw the stained clothes, the anguished expression, the stooped carriage. Victor felt time reestablish itself. He felt a disorienting return to fixed perception. He felt the sleepless motion of the city, a demonstration of life’s ongoing persistence.

“You religious?” the man asked. The question was a mere mumble beneath the din of city-sound.

“I...I don’t know,” Victor responded after a moment of hesitation. What did he know? The question was heavy in his mind. It was shining with a terrible light. He turned away from the man. His eyes settled on the venous concrete without seeing its solidity, its glacial decomposition, the way the numerous fissures displayed a geometric discordance. How many times had this surface been stepped upon? He felt the near rush of pedestrians, a concatenation of the living, moving with conviction.

“You don’t know? How can you not know?” the man asked. His voice sounded different now. It was etched into the air without any clear syllabic stress.

Noting this change, Victor reoriented himself. He removed his gaze from the concrete and turned to observe the man and saw yet another alteration. Gone were the stooped shoulders. Gone was the emanation of suffering. The expression was now smiling.

“I’m with the city cinema school. I’m an actor.” the man said, standing up adroitly. He brushed himself off. Then he removed a set of artificial teeth from his mouth, and spat and asked, “How did you like my performance?”

Victor recoiled in surprise.

“And you were just about to give me some money for my troubles, weren’t you?” the actor asked, producing a barely audible chortle. “Surely I jest, surely I jest. Never trust an actor, my friend, never trust an actor.”

The man skipped away. He filtered into the pedestrian stream. He was seemingly ingested by the frenetic motion.

Victor was left standing before the entrance of the church, discomposed. He was encumbered by an even greater aloneness. The near darkness of night, however impeded by the streetlights and the unending city-motion, was impregnated by a weighty tension. He found it hard to trust his perceptions and the yield of thought. What had just transpired, what had just arrested his focus, was now a thing of the past, lending to him a sense of incredulity. Reality was characterized by a newly fashioned and as yet unknown element to which he could not gain access. He passed a nervous hand over his brow. His subjectivity was further troubled. He felt invisible. He was reduced to being a mere monad, divested of body and matter.

He looked up, his gaze falling upon the windowed façade of a building adjacent to the church. Splayed upon the building was a virtual advertisement for the newest cinematic production. There was an image of a distended assault rifle. A serpent was coiled around the

rifle. Its scales were a sharp green. Its bifurcated tongue was exposed, touching the body of a voluptuous woman wearing a thin scarlet slip. Her expression was conflicted, intertwining uncontained sexuality and fear. Printed above these images were the following bold words:

Come Thrill Yourself.

Victor turned away. Against the air of immensity generated by the sleepless city, he saw himself miniaturized, diminished, depersonalized. The passers-by were moving swiftly. They appeared self-possessed and characterized by psychological independence. What were they seeing? What amounted to their reality? Should their eyes settle upon Victor, how would they perceive him? Perhaps they would take note of his defeated posture, the disorientation imprinted upon his face. Perhaps they would find him offensive, detecting some concealed strife, in the depths of which was his ongoing abode, coloring the world in opaque hues. But the swiftly-flowing cataract of pedestrians saw him not.

Turning to observe the progression of city-dwellers, Victor saw a strange, segmented creature. He saw the movement of limbs and the bobbing of heads. Each person represented a separate chamber of thought and perception. Once more, the incessant motion coalesced around the rush of noise. The symphony of cacophony, in the likeness of a composition absent of prolonged rests and harmonious caesuras. Victor saw the conductor of this magnum opus as some obscure force, some conglomerate of man and machine, wielding a baton above the fray, gesticulating wildly from a floating rostrum.

To get some relief from the noise, Victor decided to enter the church. He approached the wooden door, opened it, and passed over the threshold. Once the door creaked closed, he found himself in a circular vestibule. A lone candle burned in a nearby fixture. The immediate diminution of sound made him feel like he had entered another universe. He took several more

steps and passed through another set of doors. Now standing in the cavernous nave, he saw several rows of brown pews haphazardly arranged. The air was infused with an odor Victor could not recognize. The nave's acoustics were deadened, enough so to welcome a feeling of contemplation. Victor felt reverberations of mystery echoing soundlessly in the nave's shadowy spaces. He thought of the sacred and the profane, how they seemed pinned against each other in a state of continuous contention.

Victor proceeded up the aisle. He approached what appeared to be the altar. The wood out of which it was fashioned was dust-besmeared and chipped. The chalice, standing thereon, emitted a worn golden sheen. Beside the chalice was a plate, equally dulled by time. There was an imposing candelabrum, the three candles of which were lit, flickering, and contending with the abundance of shadow. Suspended above the altar was a sculpture of the august spiritualist around whom the world of the church revolved. He was the pariah prophet. The hallowed mouthpiece. He arose like a righteous tempest, brought into life to quell the raging concussions of iniquity. He delivered to the pagans and polytheists all manner of enigmatic parable. He birthed the sublime and the transcendent. Victor observed the representation of the savior, it seemingly levitating above the altar, its arms extended, its face appearing to be featureless in the dim light.

Victor's thoughts began to waver. His gaze, directed at the sculpture, deepened. The dingy surroundings lost their definition. The apertures of darkness diminished. The dense pockets of shadow receded. The candles of the candelabrum began to proffer more light. The face of the sculpture lost its inanimateness, becoming imbued with luminous features, the more prominent of which were the eyes. They bespoke some divine secret untold. Victor desired to turn away from these eyes, but was unable to do so. He was fixed in the realm of sublimity, a

place at once beautiful and terrible, a place where words of description were rendered inadequate.

Then, as if propelled into movement by a force external to him, Victor felt his head incline. His eyes settled upon the vaulted ceiling. He detected images and movement. There were radiant angels fluttering around mysterious symbols. There were beings of otherness, so intricate in detail, so otherworldly, as to appear ineffable to Victor as he felt his pained subjectivity wane, supplanted by a deep fascination. Time lost its contours, its definitive shape. The images on the ceiling coalesced into a single glowing orb. Victor, lost in some timeless place bridging external reality with consciousness, saw this orb. He took it to signify a power source from which all things acquired their substance, function, life. Yet he was assailed by doubt. He turned away from the ceiling, overwhelmed. He felt located at the center of a reaction combining certainty with disbelief, vision with hallucination. He directed his attention to the interior of his mind. He saw the space in which thought grew. The window that was the mind's eye was clear and unobstructed. A word appeared in this window, pulsating and luminous with a dark light: *MACHINE*. Before he could grasp what he was seeing, the word dissolved. He found himself staring at the sculpture suspended above the altar. The countenance that was once illumined and endowed with features was now a weathered blankness.

“Hello,” a voice, seemingly disembodied, extracted Victor from his conflicted meditations. He turned and saw a boy dressed in a white robe, holding a candle. “Can I help you?”

There was a part of Victor that wanted to say “yes”, but what help would he receive? Instead, after hesitating, he heard himself say, “Oh, hello, I was just admiring the structure of this place.”

“Are you here to pray?” the boy asked.

“No, just here to explore, really,”

“I am a candle bearer,” the boy spoke, approaching the altar. His feet were concealed by the robe, so that he looked as though he was floating across the floor. “The light of the candle is the light of hope. It’s supposed to symbolize the coming of our savior.”

“Is that right?” Victor asked. The boy sounded as though he was reading from a script.

“Yes.” The boy placed the candle on the altar. “Our savior is our last hope. Would you like to pray with me? The more we pray, the more likely our savior will hear us.”

“No,” Victor said, hearing the word puncture the quiet, hearing its contrived sound, its hollowness. He observed the features of this boy, noting the crop of brown hair and large eyes, in the depths of which was an unbending expression of belief. “No, I just came in...to find relief from the city noise.”

“I am the last of the order,” the boy said. “I am against the way the world is working right now. Our savior will come soon, and wash away all the wickedness. Our savior will bring salvation.”

“That’s very interesting.”

“Would you like to be saved?”

The concluding word of the question echoed stridently in Victor’s mind. He desired to leave the church. But he remained standing. He likened the boy’s statements to a form of ideology he could not completely, indiscriminately assimilate. All the while, he was wondering if the boy was real and not some visual fabrication conceived by an overly fatigued mind. The boy’s eyes were unmoving, as though illustrative of some state of hypnosis.

“What do you do?” the boy asked.

“I’m...I’m a writer.”

“I thought writers were taken over by machines.”

“No...there are still writers out there.”

“You should really take up with our savior. The more we pray, the more he will hear us. Then he will bring salvation.”

“I see...well, I best be moving on, it was nice talking to you,” Victor said, moving awkwardly towards the exit. All the while, his eyes gravitated to the eyes of the boy, noting their fixed and unwavering aspect. They were like two open wells imbued with religious conviction. And his voice conveyed an unbending belief in something from which Victor felt deeply estranged.

“Be careful,” the boy admonished as he watched Victor approach the doors, “a life without our savior is a life in trouble.”

Victor made his departure, passing into the vestibule and back out to the city streets. His thoughts were swimming. The concluding axiom expressed by the boy incited him to think, but to think without a sense of comfort. All that had transpired on this particular episode of wandering, the shift in perception, the visions experienced, did much to position Victor in a place of wonder and doubt. He stepped away from the church and entered the flow of pedestrians. The sky was turning into early morning. The saturation of clouds was trimmed by an inchoate light struggling to find a space in which to grow. The surrounding buildings stood stalwart and immovable. They were locations where business transactions were being conducted in an unending continuum, instigated by people in expensive suits walking down corridors, attending to deals over computer consoles in sectioned cubicles, dedicated to such concepts as monetary flow, gains and losses, financial health, speaking according to the idiom of capitalism.

Passing under a conveyor track, the underside of which resembled a metallic serpentine spine, Victor entered the factory district. An atmospheric grayness became more pronounced. The sense of lack was more palpable. He passed spectral men indisposed to smile as they prepared for a day of communion with machines. The air was redolent of incessant toil. Grease seemed printed upon all detectable surfaces. Imposing chimneys spewed billows of gaseous detritus behind tessellated gates. Amassed before these gates was the quiet embodiment of the disillusioned, awaiting the start of the workday signified by the harsh ringing of a bell. Nearing a desolate bar, Victor observed an inkblot display of pale vomit coloring a dust besmeared sidewalk. Edifices of eroding brick lent to the air a sense of historicity, only to be locations to which adhered posters advertising the latest movie or the latest device for simulated pleasure. Absorbing all of these visuals, Victor was compelled to meditate on the evolution of inequity in the City of Terra, something beyond remembering, like an ancient tome secreted away in some inaccessible catacomb, the parasitism of dust eating away at the ink where there was once a clear display of time's progression and its effects on the shape of society.

He reached the edge of the factory district. Beyond was the expansive plain of clapboard habitations obscuring the clarity of a horizon whose existence was in doubt. Victor turned a corner and descended a succession of stairs and stopped at the door marking his residence. It was a cellar apartment, housing an unregistered printing machine. He entered. A familiar darkness greeted him. He reached for a naked bulb fixed to the cracked, low hanging ceiling and twisted it. The room was then awash with illumination, although shadows remained. He surveyed the private surroundings, colored by an immutable stagnation. He walked past the printing machine and sat down before a desk. Standing on the desk was a towering ream of paper. He opened a large drawer from which he removed a small computer console. He placed the console on the

desk. He stared into the blank screen. He felt, as though for the first time, the gloomy aspect of the room. He exhaled loudly. He felt the force of recollection run through his mind. All that had occurred on his walk through the city, the strangeness, was like an impactful calling from another dimension. What was next? Could he trust his perceptions? Could he trust the constantly shifting reality which he had witnessed?

He rubbed his eyes. He felt a disturbance pressing upon his interior. He felt decentered, uprooted, propelled into a location where wakefulness and sleep intermixed. Doubt surfaced to distort his thoughts, much as a storm would disfigure a home thought to be impervious to the unpredictable forces of nature.

Morning had arrived. Victor's eyes remained fixed on the screen of the console, as though by looking into the blankness he could find some kernel of truth by which to abide, some certainty to offset the sensation of being pulled in various cerebral directions. All of this was paired with the awareness of the war perpetuating itself beyond Terra. The city press, composed by machines, was praising the politicians of Central Government. A clean militarized affair, the press said. Victor saw through the veneer. He was the editor in chief of a rogue news publication called *The Strain*. Its function was to inform the readers of the reality of violence, the shape of corruption. It called for change, cognizance. It proposed a moral compass that would challenge those in power.

Victor ran a hand through his disheveled beard. He realized *The Strain* was lodged in some domain of romanticism. It had evolved into a stark unreality. The war would never end. It was like a cancer whose spread would remain unchecked. It was like a terrible maw ingesting the entire planet. Population control, general apathy, humanity's cathartic turn towards violence, the need to destroy the enemy, the subliminal propaganda extending its extremity into minds like a

mobilized unit of the unconscious--- all of these components, against which *The Strain* had been contending, Victor considered in the quiet of the room.

He turned on the console. He waited for it to load the writing program. Once the writing program was loaded, he typed the following words: *Suffering Breeds Insight*. As to what incited him to write this axiom, he could not say. Perhaps it was bred by the tenuousness of truth in an age of ongoing conflict and deception. Perhaps it was sculpted by the sharp nightmare in which he felt entrenched. *The Strain* was finished. The motivation surrounding its formation was exhausted. Who would read a circulated publication grounded in protestation? Who would read an expression condemning the intrinsic darkness of war? Who would read when the general populace was indifferent? To care, to voice opposition, were ineffectual actions. Terra would remain unchanged. It would continue conducting the war in order to prove its own domination on the world stage, the actors of which were architects of destruction and mind-control. Victor saw Central Government as a force so wide reaching in its influence that its power and thrust could not be felt by the masses. An easily detectable power, the masses were convinced of their own autonomy. They were sustained in a deep and radical oblivion. It had been Victor's hope that *The Strain* would unleash the truth, produce a united response adhering to pacificity, generate an alteration in thought that would cause people to wake-up and see the countless machinations discoloring existence.

It was then that an image materialized within his mind. The image was at once strikingly vivid and composed of dire import. He saw, as though from a removed promontory, the world overcome by a creaturely inferno. This force reached its fiery appendages into all locations. It heralded an apocalyptic devastation so massive that all efforts of foreign diplomacy were dashed to the ground and shattered, if they had ever existed. A new world order was then instated. It was

anchored by widespread death and decomposition. It signaled the creation of a global necropolis. The image became more detailed, forming into a nightmarish tableau. Victor saw droves of the spiritually bereft. They were searching for sustenance where there was none, combing through areas wracked and upended by destruction. Fallen cities, once centers promoting fiscal networks and class inequity, were reduced to irreversible brokenness. The buildings that once stood therein were dark shapes of contorted steel and concrete. The upper reaches of the sky they once kissed were painted over by a morbid grey, interspersed with cyclones of toxic dust. Who would survive such a violent rupture, such utter ruination? Would it be a remnant of the subaltern who, for time immemorial, had suffered perpetual economic strain? Would its representatives rise up and ascend the ladder of power? Would they inherit the world, and construct a new form of society revolving around a utopic hopefulness? Is this what the theorists of yore had anticipated in response to the corruptness of superstructures and the unequal distribution of capital? That it would take a violent event of manifold proportions to dissolve class structure and permit the oppressed to assume sovereignty over a planet raped by war? Or would further devolution proceed?

Victor meditated over these images and the questions they raised. Then this moment of deep thought passed. He was left feeling unsettled. He was left wondering about the fate of humanity. He was left with an image of a tree growing amidst the usurpation of life, and this tree was glorious to behold. Then it disappeared, and Victor found himself gazing into his mind where he felt a disconcerting absence. He took several deep breaths. He turned from the desk to observe the print machine. He looked at it as though it was a lover that could no longer purvey the wonders of physical delight. Again, he thought of his publication. *The Strain*. *The Strain* had

been in vain. Where there was once a powerful sense of purpose, there was now a surging force of impotence.

Victor then recollected what had occurred on his nightly passage through the city. The mendicant-actor, the church, the white-robed boy, all took on the texture of a tapestry. However, the tapestry was gradually losing its intricacy of design the more he contemplated it. Victor was compelled to confront the truth. What was it? Where was it? He saw it not as an absolute, but as an impermanence, an oscillation, fueled by doubt and skepticism.

His thoughts went further, stumbling into the world of recollection, where a member of the intelligentsia, a man by the name of Herman Caste, surfaced. Possessed of a deep, sonorous voice, a commanding comportment, a face that resembled a sculpted presentation of regality, with a prominent nose, and penetrating eyes before which rested brown framed spectacles, Herman Caste had watched, from a covert position and with a profound foreboding, the dissolution of the enclave that represented all those opposed to Central Government. It was not shortly after this breakup occurred that Caste disappeared, and the funding of *The Strain* disintegrated. For Victor, Caste functioned as an agentic medium of insight and sagacity, much to be admired, lofty in consciousness, made clear by his metaphysical purchase on the nature of existence.

What had Caste said? While contending with the murk of sleeplessness beleaguering his mind, Victor fell into recalling a moment in which Caste articulated, with ease and conviction, the state of Terra as a realm in which deceptive artifice abounded. Victor saw the powerful orator sitting before a cup of coffee, maintaining composure despite being beset by agitation that was an active ingredient in those possessing critical vision through which to process the world: “Society is composed of tenuous narratives in the guise of order. These narratives, authored by

those in power and spread through a process of mass psychological ingestion, would render disorder invisible. The reality of truth would then undergo a shift, evolving like an error in thought that, over time, sheds itself of its erroneousness, becoming something inarguable and fixed. Central Government was this error in thought made real, this propagator of faulty narratives. Central Government had latched onto consciousness at large. Perhaps it was the most effectual embodiment of authority imaginable. Machines of simulation, the kind that distracted, the kind that were produced in factories, the kind that entertained arrestingly, had in fact subverted what was real. And Central Government was instrumental in generating these machines. Such a condition of existence had realized the imprisonment of collective thought and feeling. Cinematic entertainment, the proliferation of highly technologized states of living, among other manifestations of simulation, had fueled the hegemony of the hyperreal..." But, as Victor understood it, the term hyperreal was used only by those who existed on the exterior of these forms of simulation, watching them spread, watching them corrupt, watching them deflect clarity of sight.

Deep within Victor was his own incapacity to accept these aspects of reality. He could not ignore the fact that change was impossible, that protestation was an exercise in futility. The forces governing the world, the face of corruption through which they acquired their expansive expression, could not be clarified enough to exact a societal alteration, a new form of recognition. What was it that contributed to this pernicious set of circumstances? As the printing machine stood suspended in immobility, as the computer returned his gaze with one of antipathy towards his philosophical deliberations, Victor felt something nameless, formless, churning in a sequestered corner of his consciousness. It went beyond discontent. It went beyond some unconscious drive to assuage a shattered ego. It began to swell, filtering into his thoughts and

musings. It was power. But this power did not belong to him. It belonged to all that had dictated the shape of existence hitherto. It was at once within and without him, its expression propagated by Central Government, the perpetuity of war, the reality of simulation. Its internal reverberation was, for him, like an ongoing discourse with the irrational and the unintelligible.

Then came a knock at the door. His absorption in thought deflated, much to his relief.

Ben made his way through the suburbs. He passed homes uniform in structure and appearance. What manner of life existed beyond the facade of sameness, he could not say. He thought of Albert and Isaac drinking coffee at the dinner table. He thought of Carol struggling to understand the form of stimulus to which she was subject upon her first experience in the company of the simulacra. These machines of the flesh were out there. They were circulating through the population. Some more advanced than others. They were present to seek out any covert opposition to Central Government, the indomitable construct of surveillance that had generated their existence. Their strangeness, their discernible artificiality, were aspects that contributed to the sensation of being in a dream, where reality and unreality spliced.

Ben walked on. He reached the automated conveyor. He stepped onto the platform. He was slow and beleaguered of foot. Soon the conveyor passed into the station and came to a hissing halt. Surrounding him was a thin crowd. The individuals thereof were all attending to their mobile consoles, hand-held machines with many different functions. Ben entered the conveyor. He found a seat near a window. He felt watched, inspected, identified, pierced. These feelings, he conjectured, amounted to the residual effects engendered by Albert and Isaac. It was

as though an over-eye was focused on him. It was monitoring not only his movements but his thoughts. As representatives of Central Government, Albert and Isaac were imprinted upon his consciousness, like an indelible stain that spreads the more one attempts to remove it through some ineffectual cleansing process.

The conveyor sped out of the suburbs. Ben gazed out the window. He regarded the looming cityscape. The steel and concrete edifices thereof signified some strange strata of fiscal domination. In the foreground was a vast blanket of identical clapboard houses. They were situated in all manner of disrepair and indigence. They resembled genuflecting objects, extending their worship at the foot of the business district.

The early morning sunshine had been supplanted by an onrush of billowing gray clouds. Ben passed his eyes over this sidereal saturation. He looked into the grayness. He sought some clue to the workings of a world he could not completely process or understand. What he encountered was something akin to an insoluble mystery. He realized that language was deficient in capturing continuity, symmetry, harmony in an existence rife with conflict, manipulated by power that was at once visible and invisible. As a writer, he sought words to ameliorate his disquiet, but there were none forthcoming. Something he recalled from his schooling. The Real, an organism of sorts, an intellectual creature whose very life was a conundrum that defied language. To enter its vicinity was to abandon all known conventions of reason, only to have it slip away at the behest of a terrible trauma.

He recalled a firefight on the front. He recalled crouching in a bunker, hearing the bullets speed through the air. At that moment, however fleeting, was a sensation of wordlessness. He forgot himself. He forgot that he was breathing. The experience was like the moment before a seizure inundates the epileptic. It was like another location entirely, a form of transcendence, the

binding between life and death obscured. It was like looking at one's shadow to discover a pathway into a dimension better left unexplored for the severe otherworldliness one would encounter therein, something too radical, too defiant, too resistant to classification. What would initially be a wonder could quite possibly destroy a person. When he heard the word "ceasefire" called out above the combat din, when his breath returned to him, when time reinstated itself, he recalled feeling an immediate sense of change in high concentrations. It contributed to his realization that war was something to be desired. It was like a drug. It was like the incessant prayer of a congregation convinced that a dialogue with some god was accessible and not some dubious conjuring of the imagination.

The conveyor pulled into the station marking the factory district. Ben exited the conveyor. He was greeted by the smell of leaden gas. Falling into a meager crowd of civilians, he descended a succession of stairs. He moved into the factory district. He walked down several corridors, passing brick buildings that seemed on the verge of deconstructing, as their structure was marked by eroding concrete. He passed a man in a black bodysuit. The man's head was jerking spasmodically. All manner of imprecations were spewing forth from his mouth at a volume that broke upon Ben's ears. Ben heard struggle but walked on.

Ben reached the cellar home of *The Strain*, descending the stairs and knocking on the door. The door opened cautiously. Victor emerged. He looked into Ben's eyes with an intent to impart words, but only a silence prevailed. A reticent acknowledgment was shared between the two journalists, something words could not describe, but something having to do with the tumultuous state of the world. Ben passed over the threshold. Victor closed the door.

The naked bulb fixed to the ceiling did little to combat the shadow inhabiting the room. Ben regarded the print machine. It resembled a specimen of dysfunction. He embraced its

stillness diffidently, while imagining it to be a cockpit that was now no longer in use. Victor brought out a chair from a closet and positioned it near the desk. Victor sat down.

“Take a seat, Ben,” Victor said.

“Ok,” Ben said. He sat down. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been better, much better.” Victor put his head in his hands. Then he straightened himself. He looked at Ben with incommunicable questions brimming in the depths of his tired eyes.

“Two synthetics came to my house this morning,” Ben said.

“Really?”

“Yes, they said they were sent by you.”

“I’ve had no dealings with them.” Victor looked perplexed.

“They said that you were waiting for me.”

“Ben, they entered your thoughts and made you think that. Central Government sent them, not me.”

Ben paused. He was hit by the sudden realization that he had been fooled, that he had exposed himself to Albert and Isaac unconsciously.

“It’s called mind-invasion,” Victor said, broodingly. “They are manipulators of reality. They must have waited for you to mention my name, then they pretended to be from me. Damn them! Central Government must know what we’ve been up to, more so now than before.”

“Shit,” Ben said, dismayed. “I should’ve known.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter now. Who knows what they have planned for us. Direct contact with synthetics, especially the evolved ones, can screw with the mind. They manipulate reality for it to resemble something artificial. The mind can’t block their influence. The simulacra have

the ability to calibrate personalities in seconds. They move in, sometimes without detection. As the war continues, technology becomes more advanced. This pattern is too clear for words.

Who's human? Who isn't? Machines of the flesh. How are you doing otherwise?"

"I'm doing great," Ben said. "I can't sleep."

"Neither can I," Victor stated.

They ceased talking. An elongate pause followed. Victor passed a hand through his beard. He squinted his eyes, intimating some deliberation he could not entirely grasp. Ben gazed off into the distance, as though by doing so, he could find an ever-elusive molecule of harmony to be acquired and projected onto his tiresome thoughts. The room's shadowy aspect had evolved into a vacuum, ingesting all clarity of mind.

"You've returned from the front unscathed," Victor said. "I'm relieved."

"Physically unscathed, though there are moments when I don't recognize my own body."

"Welcome my son...welcome to the machine," Victor said, his eyes unfocused.

"What?"

"Nothing," Victor announced with an emphatic wave of a hand. "Just some words I recall hearing a long time ago." Then, as though to an invisible audience, "The world is in a state of turmoil and no one seems to care. Terra is among the last of the nation-states that remain intact and functioning. Something is working through the synthetics. Something akin to a power that has limitless knowledge, that goes beyond general surveillance. Dead philosophers would agree, we're in the end phase of existence. *The Strain's* financing has vanished, along with the underground intelligentsia that provided it. Central Government's the great eye in the sky, an all-seeing tower. Meanwhile everybody goes about their business unbothered. It's like a book that has all the secrets in it, completely available, yet no one wants to read it. It's become a magnet

for dust and decay.” Victor exhaled. “I went for a walk earlier, a walk through the business district...”

The statement hung suspended in the air. Ben waited expectantly. The pause felt like an intermission in a theater. The curtain came down. It concealed a doomed melancholic, whose performance had evolved into an impassioned rant against the world. Victor seemed positioned in some pensive region of darkness, contributing to his momentary volubility. His need to speak, to reveal, to understand, was enforced by some conflicted epistemological location. What was known and what was unknown were two divergent states. The bridge separating them was unnegotiable, perilous to cross, obscured by a thickening fog.

“I found a church,” Victor continued. “I encountered an actor who fooled me into thinking he was a beggar. Yet, the more I consider the actor, the more I realize that he was a synthetic. He changed. He made me distrust my perceptions. I’m convinced that reality as we know it is growing more and more destabilized. And such a condition is preserved by the fact that Terra keeps doing what it’s doing, pretending to function in the midst of this disorder. I can’t go further. I fear that something unwanted would arise if I try to figure out the mystery I feel exists. My friend, Ben, all you need to know is that I’m here, we’re here, together, deprived of sleep, but together. We represent the word, though we can no longer give it to others because of this deplorable political climate. Which brings me to the priority at hand...Andrew Gardner, we’ve lost contact with him.”

“What?” Ben asked, nonplussed.

“Yes, I know. It can mean any number of things. He could’ve been shot, blown to bits, left to die after suffering terrible injuries. He could’ve deserted his post as a journalist after witnessing the horrors of combat. He could be wandering like a lost pilgrim, in possession of

knowledge that will never be disclosed. He could be imprisoned, sitting in a cell in his own refuse. The more I think about it, the more the hypotheticals begin to make me nauseous. I haven't slept in days. I feel like I should find a thought-suppressant of some sort. But then again, that's a raging impossibility. The days of heroism are over. Now there's only war for war's sake. Andrew is our one contact next to you, Ben. This contact has been severed."

"What now?"

"What now? I think you know, Ben. I want you back in the mess. Not to report, but to find Andrew, whether he's alive, dead, or in some other condition that words can't describe. I have a feeling, though. It's vague, but growing sharper. I have a feeling that Andrew has discovered something, something related to the fact that, like you, he's carrier of the word. You, Ben, must find him. Consider it your last charge before we completely retire *The Strain*."

"I don't know," Ben said with ambivalence. "I just got back from the front..."

"I know, I know. It's terrible. I know you've seen things, horrible things. But I feel Andrew is part of something, something that is so deep and profound, that...well, I'm at a loss for words. Sometimes I imagine others like us, living in Terra, victims of suppression enforced by Central Government. These others think and feel. They see the technological overload, the fully operating subterfuge. They see the war that goes beyond the vast death count. They feel a power that is not yet known, some kind of reality seething beneath the surface. I feel it. I think I've seen it. Ben, I haven't slept in days. Forgive me for talking so much, but Andrew is out there, and it's your job to find him. And when you do, something in the air will change. Don't ask me how I know this. Like I said, it's a feeling."

Victor's hands were trembling. The disjointed outflow of words struck Ben with force.

"What must I do?" Ben asked.

“Ben, you must get out of the city. There’s a secret location, in the slums. It’s a cellar that connects to the sewer system. You follow it. It leads you under the city wall and out into the war zone. Only this war zone has been mostly used for bombing trials. In many ways, it’s like an industrial graveyard. All you need are the bare necessities. Like I said, I have a feeling that this is no ordinary search. It all seems connected to what I witnessed not several hours ago. Reality isn’t linear. Reality is like an octopus. Each tentacle represents its own pathway towards some concealed condition. I saw things. I saw things that have convinced me that other dimensions exist. Keep all of this in mind. Be brave. Here, I will write down the address of the secret location.”

While Ben contended with a deep confusion, Victor, his hands still trembling, produced a small notebook and pen from a pocket on his vest. He tore a single piece of paper from the notebook. Then he wrote down the address. He passed the piece of paper to Ben. Ben took it tentatively. He regarded it. Then he placed it in his pants pocket.

“I have another feeling,” Victor said, “and I apologize for sounding cryptic. Central Government is tied to all of this. Central Government has eyes that pierce every surface. You know this, Ben. I fear that the path you will go down, in your search for Andrew, is connected to Central Government. It’s like spaces of consciousness. The reach of thought extends. Then you encounter what is invisible, but all-powerful. And that’s Central Government in a nutshell.”

Victor ceased speaking. He appeared exhausted. Ben discerned a strain affixed to Victor’s words, the full import of which he was attempting to grasp. The velocity at which Victor spoke had, for Ben, induced disorientation. Yet there was a sequestered corner of his mind-world that harbored an understanding of his purpose. He was to find Andrew Gardner.

Victor extended a hand, which Ben clasped in his own.

“Before you go to the slums,” Victor said, “go see Andrew’s wife, Rebecca. Tell her just enough. Provide comfort. I believe she’s pregnant.”

Ben shuttled into the conveyor on his route back to the suburbs. Andrew was missing. A return to the war front awaited him like a bad dream. *The Strain* was in a permanent state of suspension, in the depths of nothingness. Rogue journalism was extinct. Central Government’s insidiousness, the unstoppable war machine, the vacant efforts of diplomacy, all collected around the notion that reality was a caustic exercise in social experimentation. Ben felt this keenly, as one would feel a burning sensation in the ever-mobile realm of thought. Something was profoundly amiss. Ben recalled Victor’s words as though positioned near a riddle that refused to be solved.

Sitting in a booth in the conveyor, Ben regarded the other riders. They were absorbed in their hand held technological devices. Ben turned to the window. The cityscape was receding from view as the conveyor moved down a decline, and into a lighted tunnel, the walls of which were digitally bedecked with images advertising the newest cinematic production, something involving sex and violence. Ben felt a momentary arousal, looking upon these posters against the speed at which the conveyor progressed through the tunnel. The arousal diminished. Ben felt as though his mind had been entered. This occasioned him to conclude that the images were a form of heightened stimulus, penetrating and aggressive and infused with propaganda. He understood that cinema, at some point in the past, could have been politically subversive, could have assessed the world through a critical eye without penalty, employing nuance and every

imaginable trope, messaging ideas and notions that exposed the disharmony of reality. But this was no longer so. Something changed. Central Government evolved. The hegemony of alternate governments fractured. The world of cinema became an avenue to disclose and maintain the hyperreal. Anything to distract and divert.

Ben then fell to wondering about Andrew Gardner. He saw Andrew holding pen and paper, dressed in borrowed fatigues, his expression at once pained and hopeful. Like Ben, Andrew was a rogue journalist. A writer of understated conviction. A writer who would follow the story into the very depths of war, donning a half-smile. A writer who embodied the need for complete immersion in the violence in confluence with a need to see it end. Such a strange and conflicted mixture of elements, to which Ben felt an affinity, the war front being both a thing to be feared and a thing to be desired. Ben saw Andrew as one would see a multiform creature, bound to unknown fates, bent on absorbing the very essence of war, propelled to roam the blood-soaked devastation as though bereft of free will, the spectacle of violence in combination with the need to report generating a locality of knowledge that went beyond immediate reality.

Ben sighed. His thoughts did much to impart to him a cold exhaustion. The conveyor arrived at his stop. He lifted himself up from the booth as though carrying a great weight. The war front was nearer than he could surmise. He was to return to a space of reality he had come to approach with ambivalence, detestation, and anomalous interest. He left the conveyor, descended the platform via a stairwell, and proceeded along a suburban street, in the direction of Andrew's home. From his place on the sidewalk, he felt removed from the homes lining the street. They once more emanated a banal sameness. Life, he realized, was an intermixture of contradicting facets, some more obvious than others. Any attempt at reaching a stabilizing centrality was painfully ineffectual. It was here that the inner voice returned.

This mission is made of the stuff of peril, you know this, you know this, you know this. Why bother? Andrew is dead...or maybe he's alive, but what good is one journalist against the plethora of forces functioning through this ongoing war. Thanatos, a dear friend of mine, sits atop his towering pedestal of ubiquity, smiling, overseeing all of the wondrous workings of violence that stain the vast expanses of this planet a deep, impenetrable red. What can you possibly do, Ben, to allay a conflict that never sleeps? Your step is painfully timid, your thoughts are inhabited by a toxic dread, your heart bleeds tears of some nameless sorrow that knows no outward expression, the burden that is yours now heavier. And the answerless questions that propagate like parasites in your mind take on a terrible vividness amidst the terrible offspring of doubt and uncertainty. Where does reality start? Where does it end? To whom does this voice belong?

The voice dissolved. Ben walked on, pensive. He tried to establish himself in a mode of thoughtlessness. He looked up. The sky was awash in a low-hanging gray pall. It appeared smooth in texture. Like a blanket, it concealed the sun. The trees bordering the street were still, statuesque. They were markers of seasonal change. It being summer, their leaves were green. Ben saw them not as trees, but as manifestations of some contrivance of Central Government. He yielded to this perception, watching as it occasioned the knowledge that Central Government was everywhere and nowhere, present yet invisible.

Something Victor had intimated. That to be a thinking being was to realize how the world was sculpted according to the undying whim of those in power. He looked at the trees. He saw their shape, the outstretched nature of their boughs, bent and jointed and reaching in all different directions, like the many extremities of Central Government reaching into consciousness at large.

Ben reached the home of Andrew Gardner. He walked up to the door and knocked. The door opened and Rebecca emerged. Without any greeting or exchange of words, she motioned for him to enter. He passed across the threshold, and she closed the door. In the dimly lit interior, Ben turned and regarded Rebecca. She was pregnant. Her face, marked by striking features, an air of intelligence, was colored by sadness. In a moment's time, Ben saw her as some archetypal rendering of maternity. Her hands were resting gently on her womb, that which was growing therein clearly a source at which she directed a boundless love. Ben sought her eyes, large blue orbs, in the depths of which was some knowledge soon to be revealed.

"Rebecca," Ben said, solemnly. "Andrew is missing."

"I know, I know already," she responded, her voice trembling.

She averted her eyes. A silence evolved as they stood in the foyer.

"How did you know?" Ben asked, breaking the silence.

"I...felt it," Rebecca said. Her face was downcast. Her eyes were focused on some inner anguish. "I felt it two day ago. I woke up from a bad dream I can't explain. A part of me seemed to be reaching out to Andrew. But I couldn't reach him. I felt pain. Then I heard this voice telling me that Andrew was in trouble. At first, I doubted it. But it persisted. And it became clearer that Andrew was gone."

"Gone?"

"Gone, Ben, removed from his occupation. Captured, killed, injured. I don't know. Yet I feel hope. I stand here, with his child. This life inside of me keeps me from losing hope."

"I've been assigned to find Andrew," Ben said, tentatively, following a prolonged pause.

“I know that, too. It’s strange, yes, I know, but we’re all connected here. We’re all bound to each other. I feel the strain. I feel the pull of the planet. Terra is gone. We are nearing the end, I feel. But there’s hope inside of me.”

“I...I will find Andrew, Rebecca,” Ben said, although the words felt bereft of conviction. He declined his head. He impressed his discordant thoughts onto the stillness of the house, that he might find some aegis against his private hopelessness. Floating upon ribbons of silence was Ben’s tacit understanding that he was preparing for an impending death-mission. If he did not find Andrew, he would abandon his life for the incurable pain and confusion with which it was imbued. Then there was Rebecca. She was harboring a new life, possessed of some rare hope. This alongside of a mysterious clairvoyance that found expression in the cast of her eyes, however colored they were by a deep melancholy.

“Hold me, Ben,” Rebecca called out gently, as though from a great distance.

Ben approached her slowly, and embraced her. She stepped back. Her expression was suddenly exhibiting a surge of surprise. Her eyes opened widely. She stared fixedly into Ben’s eyes, as though there was a secret therein being readily exposed.

“I just felt something,” she said, a hand raised to her mouth. “I felt something, another world maybe. When we touched. I felt Andrew. I hear him calling your name. Ben, you must find Andrew. He’s inside of us. You must find him.”

“I will, Rebecca, I will,” Ben exhaled loudly, managing his surprise.

Then they embraced once more.

Ben once more resigned himself to a traversal of the cold and remote suburban streets. He resembled an alien-pariah amidst the uniform habitations. He emitted a detectable air of disquiet. His head was depended. His sight was enveloped by the fissures of the sidewalk. His inner considerations, focused largely on his charge to find Andrew, coalesced into a dissonant orchestra in his mind.

You must realize that war is necessary, that you must embrace the fact that it is a inviolable construct, a virtuous means to channel suppressed aggression into an outward manifestation, that it provides a means of cleansing the population of this hopeless planet, bringing to the fore a kind of vacuum for loving thanatos to realize its wondrous implementation of violence. Take for example the cinema, that mode of expression steeped in the cultural unconscious to which only a few are privy, and when they are, when they see the subtext beneath the words of a thespian, all is revealed with a terrible transparency I find so invigorating, while others find so destructive, and as the war progresses, technology finds its power in new creations, specifically the humanized simulacra; even now they are being fashioned for martial purposes, trained or programmed to kill without the second thought, for it is the second thought that afflicts one's conscience with reluctance and delay, enough for the act of killing to be questioned, and for a war to be perpetuated, this cannot be so, this cannot happen. A surprise waits for you at your home.

The voice diminished. He had no means to combat it. Ben harbored questions regarding its nature, questions that only led to further speculation. He could only embrace the notion that it was something over which he had no control. He felt haunted, cursed. The concrete across which he stepped sounded against his shoes, in counterpoint to the oscillating acoustics of his interior.

He looked up. A pedestrian, engaged in a hand held device, passed Ben without any form of acknowledgement.

He reached his home. He opened the door, and passed over the threshold. He was greeted by the sound of groaning coming from the bedroom down the hall. He ceased his movements in the shadow of the room. Albert and Isaac appeared to be gone.

“Carol?” he called out, confusedly.

The echoes of intense bodily exertion quickly ceased. After several moments, the door to the bedroom opened. Albert emerged. He was fully clothed, except for his overcoat which he had swung over his shoulder. He strutted down the hallway, a glassy smile imprinted upon his face. And as Albert neared him, he felt the presence of a waking nightmare. The very pillars of the real were trembling.

“What are you doing here, Albert?” Ben inquired, trembling.

“Fucking Carol, your wife,” the synthetic replied. “Why do you ask?”

Ben was silent. Albert put on his overcoat. He displaced the ruffles on his overcoat with a series of rigid hand motions. He looked up at Ben, his smile seemingly permanent. In the background, a high-pitched laughter sounded. It bounced off the walls of the house. It signaled the reality of some rare space of psychological delight. Ben’s confusion deepened. He could muster no reply. As he tried to fathom what had just been occurring, he was left reticent and discomposed. He recalled the voice in his mind: *A surprise waits for you at your home.*

“What?” Albert asked. “You can’t speak?”

“Carol?” Ben called out again. He tilted his head to look down the hall. There was another eruption of laughter coming from the bedroom.

“What can I say,” Albert said, “I followed my senses, and they told me that Carol wanted to fuck. She still does. You can hear it coming from the bedroom where moments ago she was riding my throbbing phallus...I like that word, phallus.”

Albert became distracted. He sniffed the air. His face twitched. Then he took several steps towards the dining room table. He found a surface thereon, and began rubbing it.

Ben remained fixed in disbelief. He was deprived of voice. His thoughts were experiencing a kind of discomfiting strangulation. Any minute he thought he might break out into a nervous sweat. He walked down the hallway towards the bedroom. There was another ejaculation of laughter coming from within the room. Ben stopped at the threshold. The laughter effected the realization in Ben that Carol was in a state of continuous climax.

He peered into the room. The light was dim, mingling with shadow.

“Carol?”

Carol was supine on the bed and half-embraced by disarranged sheets. Her face was adorned by a wide, ecstatic smile as her laughter died down. Ben could see that she was naked. Her white nightgown lay splayed upon the floor like a divested costume. The shape it assumed was like that of some contorted rendering of unwanted attire. Like an expression of pure sexual liberty.

“Oh, hi, Ben,” Carol said listlessly.

Ben sought her eyes in the dimness. They were unfocused. Ben was quiet.

“I just had the weirdest dream,” Carol began. “I dreamed that I was having sex with one of those men who came by earlier. The dream was so vivid. I felt everything. I still feel it, like I’m still dreaming. It was...wonderful.”

Her voice receded. She appeared encased in a delectable reverie. Then looking up, she said, “Ben...what’s wrong? You seem frightened.”

“Nothing’s wrong...nothing,” he sighed, lowering his gaze to the floor. The word “nothing” reverberated in his mind. Like a tainted utterance possessing more weight and influence than it should. Nothing. The word was loaded, concentrated with high levels of loathing and existential nausea.

Ben turned from the bedroom entrance. He walked dejectedly down the hall, come the end of which, he noticed that Albert was now running his fingers over various surfaces in the kitchen. His movements were swift and economical and fully energized. Isaac was nowhere to be found.

Albert looked up upon Ben’s approach and said, “Don’t mind her. Sometimes, when pleasure’s channeled in high amounts, especially with us simulacra, wakefulness and dream states merge. She’ll adjust.” Then he erected himself and stood motionless for several seconds. Then he said, “I have to leave. Central Government is honing in on my location.”

Ben sat down at the kitchen table. He donned an expression of gentle frustration. He felt suspended in a toxic internal state, an introspective storm. It was not composed simply of anger or crestfallenness. Rather it had the shape of a cyclonic surge, in which conflicting emotions were in motion and ricocheting against each other.

Albert left the house. Ben cupped his head in his hands. Carol emerged in the kitchen. She was half-clothed. Her movements were somewhat laborious, like those of an individual who is intoxicated.

“Don’t be mad, Ben,” she said. She sat down at the table.

Ben lifted his head from his hands. He looked at Carol, taking note of her post-coital lassitude. She had been compelled into some world of physical pleasure, from which Ben felt a great distance, a kind of private severing. He desired to speak, to disclose the pain he was experiencing from multiple angles.

Ben felt the following words leave his mouth: "I'm not mad, Carol."

In that moment, he was forced to recall his experiences of intimacy with Carol. They had been uninspired, impaired, lacking passion. He turned to the window. In the frame, he saw Albert walking down the street, donning his fedora and overcoat, his steps even and uniform. Albert left the frame. Ben turned to Carol and said, "They're everywhere."

"What's everywhere?"

"Nothing."

"You're funny sometimes."

Ben stood up. He walked to the bedroom. Therein, he took note of the entanglement of sheets on the bed. The dim light of the room seemed to settle over all surfaces like a spectral casing. The shutters of the bedroom window permitted a grayness to seethe through.

Exhausted, he sat down on the bed. He gazed at some dimensionless space before him.

The odor of sex permeated the room. Like wafts of poison undulating, taking on the shape of vaporous serpents that curved into Ben's nostrils. He saw Carol and Albert as one would see some pornographic material. He saw them realizing a heightened pleasure. A confluence of envy and repulsion descended upon him with a force against which he was helpless. He sighed heavily.

That your residence is now contaminated, you feel quite intensely, with dread coursing through your blood like an unchecked contaminant, the reality that is Carol, the ease with which

she abides by the influence of the humanized simulacra, as though she is at peace in her state of pleasure as it tirelessly circulates within her being, contributing to your sense of the unreal, her mercurial self like something monolithic one finds in a place of utter devastation, with the window into your soul frosted over by a deep conflict that cannot be voiced, as it conceives the sense that your assignment is death, the last and first of its kind, Andrew Gardner a wandering phantasm on the front of an endless war. You know what you must do, but can you do it? Go alone because that is what you are, alone.

Once more, the voice echoed and grew mute. He gleaned that it would return. As to when, he did not know and could not anticipate. He was further unsettled and confounded. The array of elements by which he was beset, over the course of the morning, was taking on the shape of an immense cloud of gaseous detritus, blooming upwards out of the silo of his soul. All that the voice had related to him, compelling him to feel suspended in a dream space, was part of some bigger puzzle that was hitherto elusive and incomplete. He sought refuge in his imagination but found only pictures of war careening therein.

Ben stood up and went to the closet, from which he extracted his worn rucksack. He looked into it, and found several packets of nutrient-infused freeze-dried sustenance, leftovers from his last time at the front. A deepening fatalistic part of him occasioned the feeling that his charge to find Andrew was his last assignment. The dichotomy of life and death surfaced in his mind. He watched as the two opposing constructs coalesced, yielding to a centrality that went beyond logic and language. He felt, in a moment's time, an elemental synthesis that displaced the sensation of doom haunting him. Then the loaded thought passed. He was left holding his rucksack. His hands were trembling. Life and death, however intertwined, were once more mere abstractions, eternally antithetical.

Carol entered the room. She was still lethargic. One of her breasts was exposed. Ben observed its roundness, an island of tipped flesh. He saw Albert stimulating it, pressing it, licking it, inciting Carol to groan with sensual pleasure.

“Where are you going?” Carol asked, drifting onto the bed. Her words were slurred.

Ben was quiet. He deliberated over what to say. “I’m going where there is only death.” He heard this utterance exit his mouth as though by its own volition, as though it was not he who was speaking, but some disembodied force propagating its influence through him. He thought of the voice. He thought of the erratic mobility of his mind at which he was privately gazing, a kind of kaleidoscopic effect fluctuating before his inner eye.

“What do you mean?” Carol asked, annoyed.

Ben exhaled loudly. He suppressed a wish to throw his rucksack against the wall. He suppressed a desire to weep for the world and all of its sorrowful content, for all the interminable anguish, for the war that the many had forgotten.

“I don’t know what I mean,” he said. “I’ll I know is that I have to leave... Victor wants me to cover another story.”

Ben proceeded to gather up his limited effects from the closet. He turned around to discover that Carol was breathing soundly on the bed, her eyes closed. Once more, he was propelled into a place of pictures, the bed on which Carol was reposing the site of extreme copulation. The imaging of their coupling became an unwanted film playing in his mind. He saw them from a promontory of sexual estrangement, inciting him to acknowledge his own impotence, his own absence in the realm of intimacy. He saw what they did. He saw what they did not do. These considerations, onerous as they were, imbued with both mystery and clarity, compelled him to desire a reprieve in the form of some archetypal woman benevolent in nature

who would embrace him, touch him, in ways at once assuaging and reifying to his sense of self. But there was only Carol and Albert, thrusting, panting, penetrating. Then a vivid superimposition manifested, the image of their sex melding with images of men operating high powered weaponry in some gross rape of the earth. And there Carol lay, spent, riding the soporific waves of some pleasant dream state.

He was moved to embrace his rucksack. He was bound to this item as he was bound to the inescapability of war. Memories cascaded into focus. They were dark. They were infused with violence. He saw bodies bloodied and mercilessly contorted and eviscerated and immolated. He heard voluminous cries of pain shooting through the air. He heard the heavy concussions of artillery fire. Yet, he remained alive, for reasons enshrouded in mystery. Now he was to return to the eternal war once more. The nation state of Terra would continue to function in oblivion, with Central Government present but not present, casting rays of surveillance over all dissent. It was a perfectly honed hegemonic construct. To feel its presence was to extract oneself from the happy indifference embraced by the general populace. All potential discontent was ameliorated by simulation in its many representations. There was entertainment. There were virtual reality diversions. There were technological marvels that induced hyper-stimulation and dissolved thought.

He once more observed Carol on the bed sleeping soundly. He shouldered his rucksack and left the room. He walked down the hall and approached the door. He regarded the interior of the house with a sweeping glance, as though looking upon it for the last time, this mixing with a sense of disconnect, a sense of the unfamiliar. His expression unsmiling, he exited the house and made his way to the conveyor.

It was early afternoon. The sun was obscured by a blanket of haze. The trees lining the sidewalk were still. They appeared imbued with a plasticity, as though they were facsimiles. This quality mirrored the dimension into which Terra was and had been entering. The promotion of unrealities having achieved sovereignty over consciousness, the shape-shifting, eldritch-like transmogrification of the known world---all of these elements occasioned the inaccessibility of truth.

Ben walked on. His thoughts were centered around Andrew. Gregarious, possessed of an endearing comicality, Andrew had been Ben's fellow rogue journalist. Andrew had seemed comfortable in such a position, a representative of the seditious fringe, adventurous, and charmingly free with narratives that more often than not induced in the auditor a smile or a laugh. What had he discovered? Ben entertained the question. No answers were forthcoming.

He reached the platform. The crowd was rather thin. Those amounting to its shape were absorbed in their hand held consoles. He gripped the strap of his rucksack. He felt the nearness of death. It was circulating within him, and seemed to grow sharper with each passing minute. It was like a shifting light activated in a room whose features were constantly changing as a result of the incremental displacement of shadow.

The conveyor arrived. He entered and found a booth. The doors closed and the conveyor started to move. He felt a sense of separation from his fellow riders. He took note of a digital advertisement suspended upon the wall of the conveyor. A new technological upgrade. Increase the extent to which one may socialize with others in the mechanized network. Channels of communication, faster, more sweeping. An image of an attractive woman holding a small device and smiling, her bulbous cleavage inching outward from her red blouse, oozing sexuality. The advertisement was a veneer for something all-controlling. Ben considered this display of power

with skepticism. He turned away just as the conveyor ascended a slight inclination. Through the window, Ben once more saw the City of Terra in all of its magnitude of space. The clouds were faltering, a blueness seeping through the cracks. The towering edifices of capital became magnets for slanted shafts of sunlight, enhancing the image of their indomitability. The business district resembled a massive battery that refused to expire. The neighboring factory district was like a doomed locality subject to the unbreakable process of production. Then there were the slums, to which Ben was headed. They collected into a field of brokenness, inhabited by the destitute.

Ben reached into his pocket and retrieved the slip of paper given to him by Victor. He observed the nervous scrawl, making out the following address: *111 Desolation Row*. He returned the slip to his pocket. He reclined further into the booth, as though hiding from something he could not name. Still, the conveyor moved forward. It was bound to some patterned continuum of motion, some tireless system of automation. In automation we trust. In Central Government we trust.

After several stops, the conveyor arrived at the edge of the factory district, at which moment Ben stood up from the booth, gripping his rucksack. He passed over the threshold of the sliding door and onto the platform. He meandered through the crowd. He descended a series of stairs. He ventured down a thoroughfare, winged by tall brick walls beyond which were countless chimneys conversing with the sky as they spewed out billowing toxins. Eventually, the brick walls receded, and Ben found himself in the slums. He was greeted by row upon row of clapboard hovels in all manner of decomposition. Under the vault of an afternoon sky marked here and there by wisps of clouds, all surfaces shown with a disconcerting clearness. Lining the gutter system was muddy water. A slight odor of defecation pervaded the surroundings. Ben

passed two naked children encrusted in dirt, frolicking and confabulating in a small lot. A gaunt mother figure looked on through a makeshift window nearby. She was chewing something that stained her mouth a deep purple. A man without legs, propelling himself on a scoot board with his arms, approached Ben cautiously, with questions etched upon his searching face. As though looking quizzically at a new art exhibit, the man paused before Ben. With concentrated eyes, the man appeared to be seeking words with which to address this otherness represented in Ben, only nothing issued from his grimacing mouth, only a muteness that betrayed his own sense of surprise. Ben moved passed him, feeling a profound solicitude.

Moving down the lane, Ben received the image of a mazelike configuration of the derelict residences. It was as though he had ventured into an alternative universe, a world unto itself. The only escape from such a devastating visual was through the address given to him by Victor, or so he thought. All those inhabiting this area of Terra were fixed in a realm of economic decrepitude. So far reaching was this condition, that the other districts could easily forget its existence through a perpetual process of disregard. Even for Ben, submerged as he was in this abject display of humanity, the suburbs in which he lived had evolved into a remote unreality, something out of a dream. Ben went on. He passed a man frustratingly tinkering with a small battery operated television showing an obfuscated signal. The pixels of agitated snow shown on the screen, churning out a discordant sound. The piece of technology was admittedly crude in comparison to the high definition televisions most possessed in the suburbs. The man turned and observed Ben reticently. The man grunted and returned to his struggle with the television. Ben looked forward only to espy a piece of paper floating atop a murky puddle of water. He approached the puddle and saw therein the front page of one issue of *The Strain*.

He did not know the direction in which he was headed. He retrieved the piece of paper from his pocket and once more observed the address written thereon. Then he looked for street markers or posts but there were none. Perhaps *111 Desolation Row* did not exist. Perhaps Victor, sleep deprived, was not thinking clearly when he wrote down the address. Perhaps Ben was unknowingly venturing into a trap. As such thoughts began to populate his mind, he ceased his movements. He turned around. He saw a person approaching him, short in stature, quick of step, donning a rimless hat and clothes loosely containing a body to the extent of rendering it shapeless. The person stopped and smiled. Ben could discern a wash of freckles on the person's face. He squinted to discover that the face possessed an obscured femininity.

“Are you Ben Gottman?” the person spoke out. The timbre of her voice was spritely, energetic.

“Yes,” Ben responded. “Who are you?”

“I'm Beatrice, of *111 Desolation Row*.” She beckoned for him to follow. “Come this way.” She seemed to skip down an adjacent lane.

Ben, although feeling somewhat circumspect, proceeded to follow her. The lane down which she was swiftly moving was composed of more hovels. Some looked to be uninhabited, but who knew?

He quickened his pace until he was steps behind her. She stopped and turned to him. She smiled eerily and pointed to her left. Ben followed her gesture and saw a slightly less ramshackle, a much more spacious hut. On a loose, plywood door was written in dark paint, *111 Desolation Row*.

“I hope you didn’t mind me guiding you,” Beatrice said. Her smile knew no erasure. It colored her face a wondrous animation. Ben gazed at her face. He realized the extent to which it was beautiful to behold.

“No, not at all,” Ben responded. He looked down, timidly, while wanting to prolong his gaze.

She motioned for him to enter. She approached the door and opened it. He followed her in, bending his head to evade the topmost edge of the opening. Upon passing over the threshold, he permitted his eyes to readjust to the shadowy nature of this new space. He observed the room. There was a plywood desk. Sitting at the desk was a man. He was writing in a notebook. The man looked up. Ben saw trenchant eyes that alighted upon him with a force of knowing. The man was bald, curiously pale of visage, and very thin. Beatrice, meanwhile, had skipped over to a chair and sat down. The darkness of her garments melded with the shadow of the room.

“You must be Ben Gottman of *The Strain*,” the man said. He aimed a hand of salutation at Ben. Ben took the hand and received several emphatic shakes. “Don’t mind the room. We tend not to get consistent electricity in here. I’ve heard much about you, especially your dedication to reporting on the war. The name’s Conrad. I assume you met Beatrice.”

“Yes,” Ben said. “She led me here, otherwise I would’ve been lost.”

“You come from the suburbs I take it,” Conrad said.

“Yes.”

“Well, to accommodate this area of Terra, one must be a little bit adventurous. Although what you’ve probably seen is enough to convince you of the inequity of the world. Sickening, isn’t it? Then again, you probably know that already. Please sit down.”

Conrad gestured to a chair near the desk. Ben took off his rucksack and sat down. He glimpsed at Beatrice. He began to perceive just how beautiful she was. Her freckles were now more pronounced, despite the room's dearth of illumination. The playfulness she emanated was becoming intensely attractive and mysterious. At any moment, she seemed like she would hop out of the chair, imbued with a secret energy.

Ben looked to Conrad.

"We've been informed by Victor Proto," Conrad began, "that you are returning to the outside of Terra to search for Andrew Gardner. I get the feeling that this will be no ordinary search. Something, how do you say, metaphysical. Do you have food, canteen, protection?"

"I have leftover food, but no canteen or protection," Ben said.

"I'll provide you with a canteen of fresh water from a pump in the yard, more food and a gun."

"I'll pass on the gun," Ben said, immediately.

"Ah, spoken like a true pacifist. Ok. I suggest you sleep here tonight. Tomorrow, early morning, I'll show you a path to exterior of Terra. There is a mat in the adjacent room. Please, make yourself at home."

"Follow me," Beatrice said, standing up. She gestured for Ben to follow.

Ben got up from the chair, and followed her into an adjacent room. He took note of two semi-besmirched cots. The air was stale, the space shadowy. He placed his rucksack on one of the cots. He suddenly felt the extent of his psychical exhaustion. He desired to lay down on his chosen cot, but something impeded him from doing so, something enigmatic occupying his thoughts. He turned to Beatrice. Her smile seemed to suggest a certain knowingness, a hidden knowledge that embodiments of transcendent beauty purportedly possess. He wanted to prolong

his observation, in an effort to displace the perceptions accumulating in his mind that were not so pleasant. And as he sought out this inner process, Beatrice turned and left the room, leaving him alone to ponder, much to his chagrin, the nature of his mission. He recalled hearing the word “metaphysical” exiting the mouth of Conrad, with a degree of confusion. Something having to do with reality as it deviated from anything straightforward, anything apparent. Ben’s fatigue then was augmented by a swiftly flowing perplexity. With ample resignation, he dropped onto the cot. He produced an extended exhalation, as though by doing so, he would eradicate the overall parasitism infecting his equanimity. No sooner than his breathing settled, he felt a soporific air wash over his body. He descended into sleep. A small window in the room displayed a square of the early evening blue sky, pure and vast.

Movement. A faint susurrant of motion, extracting Ben from his repose. He opened his eyes. The pockets of shadow contended with the glow of a waning moon distilled in the window. Ben saw Beatrice sitting on the other cot. She was removing her clothes. His eyes widened. She removed her hat. A cascade of crimson hair descended in ruffled billows to which the unobstructed moonbeam adhered. His eyes widened further, yet he maintained his stillness, transfixed by the beauty being exposed. After several more movements, Beatrice was completely nude. Her breasts were buoyant and round, and topped by strawberry hued tips that she proceeded to brush delicately with her hands. The exhibit of such corporeal perfection, the statuesque nature of her pose, occasioned Ben to wonder if he had opened his eyes into a dream.

“Do you like them?” Beatrice whispered. The affable tone of her voice was in concert with that element of knowingness her lineaments possessed, as though she was more of a spirit than a human being.

“Yes,” Ben responded quietly. He felt a stirring of arousal in confluence with an implacable wonder, the inviolate symmetry he was beholding as mysterious as the lunar phases were consistent and fixed.

Beatrice continued to gently brush her hands over her breasts, as though tracing intricate patterns thereon. As he measured the graceful movement of her hands, he envisaged elaborate floral designs bending, swaying, undulating around the totality of her exquisiteness. So absorbed in this private garden, he felt detached from the hideous aspects of reality. The impending desolation he was to traverse the following day lost substance and shape in his mind.

“Would you like to touch them?” Beatrice asked.

“Yes,” Ben heard himself say.

He got up from the cot, slowly, his fatigue relinquished. He drifted over to Beatrice. His eyes were affixed to her breasts as though witnessing a rare gift of nature, unadulterated and pure. He kneeled down in an unconscious gesture of genuflection. He saw that Beatrice was smiling. Again, the shadow in the room was contending with the lambency of the moon coming through the cut-out window. But she seemed encased in resplendence. Then he stilled his movements. He gazed deeply at the harmonious formations before him. They were aesthetic marvels that verified the notion that there was beauty in the world, that it was present, that it signified the multivalent mysteriousness of the universe.

“Go ahead,” she said, quietly chortling, arching her back.

Still he remained motionless, not out of reluctance or timidity, but swayed and inundated by a foreign feeling of having never been so close to such an embodiment of beauty.

“I feel like I’m in a dream,” he managed to say, his voice trembling.

“Here,” she said, welcomingly. “Give me your hands.”

He raised his hands glacially. She clasped them in her own and guided them to rest upon her breasts. She inhaled sharply, and cooed. Ben felt her warm skin. His whole perceptual domain was centered on her display of flawlessness, as though it was the whole world in one instance. The tenebrous reality that awaited him on the exterior of this seemingly sacred space, the ephemerality of this sacred moment, moved him into a sadness no words could express. He began to weep quietly. A slow deluge of tears streamed down his face.

“Where did you come from?” he asked through his muted cries of suffering. “Where did such beauty come from?”

“It’s a mystery even to me,” she said. “Embrace this image. Let it fill your mind, and, remember, even when the world is consumed in turmoil, there is always beauty to be found, beauty that will calm and comfort.”

Hearing these words spoken quietly into the night, Ben found himself pressing his face into her breasts, feeling her warmth. His muffled lugubrious moans continued unabated. She ran her hands through his hair, as would a painter delicately brush a canvas, the blankness of which would eventually be displaced by an image, a singular image, extravagant in its hold on the eye, inescapable for the weight of wonder it presented. Ben pulled away to regard her breasts again. He felt attachment and want. To turn away from Beatrice would return him to the darkness coloring his world. He inhaled quickly, a realization dawning upon him.

“You’re not from this world,” he said.

“No...no, I am not.”

“Then where are you from?”

“A place I can’t at the moment name.”

However beset by a powerful curiosity, Ben pressed his face further into her breasts, weeping softly. She continued to pass her fingers through his hair, as he felt her breath in the rise and fall of her chest. Soon, a serenity overwhelmed him. His weeping ceased. His breathing achieved a somnolent regularity, and he dropped into a dreamless slumber.

Ben awoke on the cot. The morning sun was coming through the window. Motes of light captured the undulation of dust in the room. He felt an immediate disorientation. He looked around. The room was empty, the neighboring cot vacant. The stillness he discerned precipitated a kind of incredulity as he struggled to recall what had happened during the night. The boundless mystery by which he had been arrested filtered into his memory, but it was encumbered by a distance, as though whatever architect had crafted the moment with Beatrice was beyond his grasp of understanding even in wakefulness. The murk of doubt surfaced within him, compounded by a surging disequilibrium of memory, inciting him to remember with dismay that he was to venture out in search of Andrew Gardner.

“Ben.”

The disembodied sound of his name sundered his connection to thought. He turned to see Conrad standing at the threshold of the room, appearing rather forcible, imbued with conviction for whatever the day entailed.

“Ben, wake up.”

Ben stood up awkwardly. He observed the empty cot across from him. He wondered about Beatrice, whether she was part of a dream or some manifestation of hallucinatory beauty on which he had gazed.

“Come with me,” Conrad said, turning into the next room.

Ben followed Conrad into the next room. He wanted to inquire regarding the whereabouts of Beatrice. He was moved by a private desire to see her again. The room into which he then entered was inhabited by a slight stuffiness, a stale redolence. He noticed his rucksack positioned on the desk, with Conrad standing over it as would a looming force stand over an imminent reality bathing in the opaque light of disquietude.

“Here’s your rucksack,” Conrad said. “I have filled it with necessities, food, canteen, and the like. How did you sleep by the way?”

Ben observed his rucksack. He noted its distended shape, the worn fabric, the history contained therein. “I slept fine.”

“Good, sleep is important.”

Conrad picked up the rucksack and placed it in the extended hands of Ben, who, feeling its weight, affixed it to his back through a series of laborious movements. He was then overcome with a private exhaustion. He was disconcerted by the speed at which the morning was progressing. He felt rushed. The mental image of Beatrice, imbued as it was with mystery and dreamlike aspects, was becoming vague, almost spectral.

“I’ll once more ask you to follow me,” Conrad said. He gestured at Ben.

Ben followed Conrad out of the room, to the exterior of the shanty. The morning sun bore down upon all surfaces. The heat enlivened the existence of myriad odors, some of which were

detritus, lingering in invisible pockets of air, others of which seemed divested of any clear origin or genesis, as though belonging to a garden that is comprised of anomalous vegetation never before discerned by the nose.

Ben raised a hand to shield his eyes from the naked morning sun. Conrad was several paces ahead. He walked with an air of authority. The thoroughfare they were now walking down was bordered by broken residences. The occasional child peered out through glassless windows as though beholding some alien progression, the puerile eyes intimating a mixture of curiosity and quiet wonder.

Conrad ceased his step and looked down. Ben saw that Conrad was looking at a manhole cover.

“See this,” Conrad said. “This is a passageway out of Terra, a protective measure just in case. Few people know about it. I’m going to pry it loose and then you’ll make your descent. All you need to do is follow it and you’ll eventually reach the outskirts, what is collectively called the *desolation*. Andrew Gardner is out there, at least that’s what my intuition tells me. It’s open for speculation. I ask again, I have a weapon, a gun to be exact, back at the house, do you want it for protection?”

Ben looked down at the manhole cover. He heard the question from afar, before regaining focus. He heard himself say, “No thanks,” after which he felt an incursion of mild nausea, although he had not eaten anything for a while.

Conrad extended his hand into which Ben placed his own, resulting in several vigorous shakes. Conrad then bent down and dislodged the manhole cover and slid it off to the side. A gaping orifice shown clear in the powerful morning sun. Ben peered down. He saw a series of descending rungs. He surveyed his surroundings one last time, noting the absolute indigence. In

the distance was the business district of Terra, the buildings thereof easily discernible, shimmering in the heat. He saw the smokestacks of the factory district, indefatigable in their gaseous emissions. What day was it? Into what dream had he entered?

“Remember,” Conrad said, “change can occur in concentrated amounts. I’m sure you already know this.”

Ben was not listening. He adjusted his rucksack. He kneeled down and entered the opening and made his descent, abiding by each rung carefully. Upon reaching the bottom, he looked up. Conrad’s face was framed by the circular aperture. Conrad gave Ben the thumbs up sign.

“Godspeed,” Conrad announced. He returned the manhole cover to its place, the grating sound rather voluminous, ricocheting against the walls of the tunnel in which Ben was now standing.

Ben looked forward and saw a dim circle of light in the distance. He walked forward, timorous of step. A sense of aloneness enveloped him. His journey was now in its inchoate state. He felt suspended in a vast state of unknowing, like a child divested of a maternal presence in the midst of a labyrinthine crowd of strangers. Sounds of dripping water were in concert with the sound of his shoes tapping, tapping, on the concrete floor of the tunnel. There was a redolence of space less traveled. As he progressed forward, it became clear to him that the tunnel was an escape route against nuclear war. In his mind’s eye, he saw droves of people pushing into this subterranean corridor, while the city of Terra lay in the apex of ruination, all the buildings collapsing while a sinister plume of gas rose above the site of a dropped bomb, the winged war machines circling the destruction before venturing off to some other corner of the world, the trumpets of victory sounding, yet to what end, it was exceedingly difficult to ascertain.

Ben attempted to steady his breathing which had accelerated as a result of such a dire, dystopic imaging. His thoughts deepened, coerced down a pathway at the entry to which was a sign that read *Caution*. The fabric of the universe was entangled, if not corroding. Woven by some numinous archetype, some strange creature of sagacity, the resultant tapestry displayed various stages of destruction. The effort of global diplomacy was decidedly vain, as though the sovereign powers were at play before some construct of death. Like children fighting over marbles in a sandbox. As his thoughts took a dark turn, he gazed ahead at the circular light he was approaching, much as would a moribund soul face the realm of death only to discover eternity contained in an orbicular whiteness into which thought streamed unendingly, an admitted conclusion to life, the very of proof of which was left to the mystic to discern in some dream-like rapture where things concealed gain shape and definition only to remain undisclosed out of fear of ostracization.

Ben felt the weight of his rucksack on his back. With each step forward, Ben sensed the world at large pulsating to the rhythms of war. He recalled once more the carnage, the bloodletting, the heightened aggression, the display of violent discourse which like a contagion pervaded all those soldiers with whom he had been entrenched on his last assignment. He attempted to brush the thoughts away with a forceful cerebral hand, but to no avail. The memories were his to own. The memories were his within which to live. And as the light at the far end of the tunnel grew closer, he could not help but feel that he was peregrinating down the likeness of a birth canal, that he was an infant again, being pushed back into a world from which he desired a great distance.

The light expanded. He beheld a vista of broken land. The horizon was impeded by the nearness of utter desolation. He ceased his steps at the threshold separating the tunnel from the

ruined landscape. Only when he was about to step out from the tunnel did he notice a small man sitting in the lotus position on the ground to his right. The man was contained in billows of stained robes that concealed his emaciated frame. The man appeared to be sleeping. Then, with a voice that sounded unusually deep of timbre, he spoke, his eyes opening like orbs behind which was a vastness of secret knowledge.

“Ben Gottman, I presume,” the man said.

“Yes,” Ben responded, “yes, I’m Ben Gottman.”

“Do you feel the putrescent breeze blowing hither?”

Ben smelled the air reluctantly. He smelled the odors of war and exhaustion. “Yes...who are you?”

“I am a man,” the man said, grinning. His countenance was weathered yet becalmed by the winds of some inscrutable inner world. “I sit here, but few see me. I speak, but few listen. The path that you tread is no ordinary path, but one darkly colored by elements that reach beyond known consciousness. Know that there are worlds to which you will be exposed, for the friend you are in search of discovered something and is need of rescue. Alas, I have spoken too much. I must rest now. I must drink deeply from the waters in which the gods of the universe bathe, their place accessible to those who think and feel. Tread well and be of good cheer, for much knowledge you will acquire.”

Ben puzzled over these words, as they resonated with past disclosures, specifically from Victor, Rebecca, and Conrad. He observed the face of the man. He noted the slight smile. He noted the ease with which the eyes could be likened to two preternatural portals, enough so for Ben to be further swayed by a perplexity of feeling, a wonder of thought. Then the man’s eyes closed and he was silent.

Ben adjusted his rucksack. He sighed heavily, the weight of his journey acutely settling upon him, the realm of unknowns furthering its influence over his sense of self. He directed a slight nod of acknowledgment at the mysterious man. Then he proceeded out of the tunnel.

The sun, once so clear in the ether, was now obfuscated by a gray haze. The ground on which he was now treading was soft, malleable, and infused with industrial waste. Its very texture reminded him of the terrain he traversed while in the company of soldiers on the front. His last assignment emerged in his mind. The force of recollection contributed to the feeling of wanting to run, to avoid concussive bombardments in the form of descending shells. He recalled the barrage of enemy fire, bullets pressing through the air with life-sundering speed, while he sought a foxhole he had helped construct and from which he fell witness to men being blown to bits, the earth made to tremble by the thunderous ejaculations of warfare, like a language unto itself, like a morbid balletic spectacle pairing the workings of death with men made to communicate through the exaction of terrible violence. He paused in his movements and permitted this aphotic memory spillage to wash over him until the loud pulsation connecting it to life gradually settled and grew mute.

He moved on. The expanse across which he trudged yawned with sites of demolition, aggregately resembling a defunct industrial playground. Buildings caught in the haze emerged like spectral renderings of a forgotten age. They were gutted, misshapen, eviscerated by bombings. In the oppressive heat, a terrible stench surfaced, an odor clinging to war and death with an indestructible fixity. Ben saw that his surroundings beckoned as though gesticulating from the land of simulation. Eerie as this conceptual sensation was, Ben fought against it vainly. The brokenness of the structures, the way they stood motionless and disemboweled, their function forgotten, occasioned in Ben the feeling that he was walking in a cinematic locale. At

any moment, a camera would appear and a director would emphatically voice a need for some form of movement to complement the seeming necropolis through which Ben was moving.

Ben assumed the role of spectator involuntarily. Worlds seemed to meld with other worlds, reality splicing with unreality. His memories resurfaced and altered, collectively transforming into a film he was viewing internally, and which seemed to be projected onto the screen of his mind, while imagined viewers sat engrossed in the play of images, consuming popcorn in vast amounts. Ben stopped moving. The encompassing display of destruction shimmered with an artificiality. As though authored by some entity dedicated to the propagation of simulation, all for the purpose of advancing entertainment into a more evolved and detailed state. Ben then walked over to one of the contorted buildings. He reached out to touch a protrusion of damaged steel. He expected to feel something akin to plastic, or Styrofoam, some indication that he was positioned on a set, looking upon fabrications. His hand felt a roughness of texture. This confirmed the reality of war. Still the sense of walking amongst shadows cast upon the wall of creation, the light of truth thoroughly obscured, was enough to convince Ben that the air had changed, mutated, altered. Unsettled, he saw himself walking the thoroughfares of the City of Terra, passing droves of pedestrians, and finally arriving at a cinema complex where the marquee shown like a luminous beacon, the title of the feature displayed thereon in fiery letters: *War*.

Ben backed away from the dead building and walked on, deeper into the industrial endarkenment. Encircled by this bombed wasteland, Ben felt his presence miniaturize to a speck of dust. He passed through this broken world as a recipient of multiple forces at once. Then he felt something, an intuitive pinch indicating that he was not alone. He turned and saw a figure approaching him. He squinted his eyes in hopes to penetrate the haze. The figure progressed

forward. With each step, its features became more discernible. Ben saw that the figure was a man dressed in disheveled fatigues, donning a helmet, with an assault rifle fixed to his back by way of a tattered bandolier holding no magazines. The man's movements were slow, each step performed with a subtle militaristic evenness. Nearing Ben, the man ceased his forward motion. He assumed a rigid stance, an erectness. His eyes were attached to some point before him. Ben was perplexed. A strange wonderment cast its line into his mind. Gazing at this stranger, Ben felt woven into the fabric of total silence, of total stillness. The encompassing wreckage stood stoic and unmoving. The bent concrete and metal like a museum exhibit illustrating the usurpation of order and function. Then the stranger met Ben's eyes and spoke.

“Hello, pilgrim, I'm Private Virgil Keystone.”

Ben, desirous of responding, but feeling rather circumspect, remained observing the stranger speculatively.

“Don't be afraid,” the stranger said. “What do you call yourself?”

Ben once more paused against the inclination to respond. He observed the face of the stranger. It exhibited a certain playful animation. The shape of the eyes, in contrast, bespoke some indelible fatigue. The helmet atop the stranger's head made him look almost absurd and puerile as though the item did not belong to him.

“My name is Ben Gottman. I'm a journalist.”

“With what outfit?”

“No outfit...freelance.” Ben felt himself dissembling, disinclined to explain the real reason behind his place on the exterior of Terra.

The stranger named Virgil seemed to relax. “Ok, Ben...Call me Virgil.”

Virgil took several strides forward and extended his hand. Ben executed a firm handshake, after which the encompassing atmosphere seemed to change, supplanted by an air of familiarity as though Ben knew this stranger, their meeting disrobing the cloth of total mystery, and weaving its way into the enigmatic workings of fate.

“Our paths have crossed, it seems,” Virgil said, as though reading the altered ambiance. “I’ve come from the deeper parts of the front. I’m what you call a deserter. Tell me pilgrim, I mean Ben, where are you from?”

“I’m from Terra.”

“Terra?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve heard of Terra. Supposedly, it’s a technological wonderland. I’ve heard that people there carry around machines that contain their identity, just short of the cerebral implants, which could be a possibility in the future, but who knows.”

“Yeah...who knows,” Ben said, broodingly.

The two began to walk forward, the space they shared strangely affable.

“The mere mention of Terra,” Virgil began, “makes me think of a total utopia, high business, where people walk the streets without worrying about being shot or blown up by mines. Terra...yes, the very sound of the name rings like a contradiction, whatever that means. I’ve become so uneasy that my thoughts seem out of sort. But it’s good to find somebody amidst all this destruction. I was awfully lonely for a time. Tell me, are you armed?”

“Just with the bare necessities,” Ben responded.

“Armed with pen and paper, no doubt?”

“Yes, sort of...keeper of the word.” A mere mutter, the statement echoed intensely in Ben’s mind. As though composed by something outside of himself. Some kind of push and pull actuated between the unconscious and awareness. As the statement’s echo became more pronounced and voluminous, it seemed to take on the shape of an aside, a private utterance.

“Ah, keeper of the word,” Virgil seemed to muse, “Is that some kind of title?”

“Yeah...in a way.”

“Speaking of which, the company I fought with had an anthem of sorts, ‘Kill or Die.’ Each time we got into a combat zone, we would chant it...‘Kill or Die’, ‘Kill or Die’. The flow of blood would change. The violence would take form. But I got tired of that. I got so tired that one day I decided to take a long walk. I stole away from the base at night. I realized that I had seen all there was to see about war. Not only that but I felt that my soul was in a questionable location, if you get my meaning.”

“Do you miss it?”

Virgil emitted a deep sigh, occasioning a momentary pause in which he seemed to be recollecting some unspoken event.

He evaded the question. Then he asked, “What about you? As a freelance journalist, you seem a bit...I don’t know...preoccupied. But I guess that’s the way writers are, in general terms. You must be searching for something, at least that’s what I’m feeling. A soldier’s intuition does grow after near visits with death, this I know well.”

“I’m not at liberty to talk---“

“Of course you are,” Virgil said cheerfully, “but I won’t press you for details. A man’s privacy should be respected. But I couldn’t help notice your rucksack. It seems...well...light. Even still, I won’t press you for details. Anyway, I have the strangest feeling that our meeting

was meant to happen. There are many mysteries in the world, I give you that, even when war is everywhere. I have my theories. Hey, maybe we can write a book together, or make a movie. I've heard that Terra has a huge cinema business. I bet you they've made a movie about the global war for the citizens to watch. Do you know anything about this?"

"Yeah, to an extent," Ben responded. "In Terra, movies are massively produced. What results is the making of a hyperspace, or overstimulation. Central Government...the superpower in Terra...works its way into these movies, in the form of propaganda. It promotes the wonders of technology, while causing a kind of blind consent in the audience. Thought is erased, and the cultural unconscious loses its definition."

"Cultural unconscious? That's sounds pretty strange."

"It's something I think about constantly. Like an obsession. With the mass appeal of the hyperspace, the more movies produced, the greater the distance is between points of awareness. The unconscious is out there. It's concealed. I feel it sometimes, vaguely."

"I'm getting you to talk. This is good. For a moment I thought I was talking to a ghost with too many secrets."

"I'm no ghost," Ben said emphatically, "though the loyal citizens of Terra would think otherwise. They would roll their eyes in annoyance. They would dismiss my words, call me a lunatic. Then they would continue to consume everything that Central Government feeds. Shit!"

"What?"

"I have to be careful," Ben looked down, feeling the desecrated terrain against the underside of his shoes. The process of walking with Virgil was contributing to a strange sense of disburdening. Melding with the words exchanged was the sound of their collective tread. The sun, approaching its zenith, remained obscured by a layer of haze. Looking up, Ben continued,

“The mere mention of Central Government, especially from someone who’s against it, is asking for trouble.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that the senses of Central Government are wide-reaching. They hear dissent, flowing in the air. Don’t ask me how. They belong to a powerful organizational body. The prophets from a previous age, many of them writers, knew about the capacity of those in power to terminate opposition.”

“I’m curious,” Virgil admitted, “what happened to these prophets?”

“They supposedly saw the light of truth, and it was painful. Then they returned to the cave where reality was only a shadow on the wall. They sought to change the world of the cave, taking creative measures to do so. They placed warnings and foreshadowing in their art. Then Central Government came to be through some kind of terrible evolution, and these prophets became nomads, but were found and destroyed.”

“What happened to what they created?”

“Lost,” Ben stated, his voice resonating with sadness.

“What do you mean, lost?”

“Their art was filled with a will for change, a will for awareness. Then, as the world of technology became more radical, such ways of expression became extinct. The past was then forgotten. History became a lost thought, replaced by mechanized change and societal automation. Again, Central Government took over in increments, in ways both visible and invisible. The people of Terra surrendered to oblivion. Alongside of this came the war.”

An elongate pause weaved its way into the conversation, into this developing rapport, like a caesura expressing a sense of finality. Now that they were both quiet, the sound of their

shoes against the ruinous ground seemed to amplify, the surroundings cavernous. It occurred to Ben that their forward motion had begun without any kind of preliminary, the direction into which they were heading vague and ill-defined. So absorbed had Ben been in the exchange of words, in the meeting of this soldier, that he neglected to wonder just what had propelled them into their steady gait. Ben sought the horizon, but saw only a continuum of destruction, an upended urbanization, with leveled buildings bordering the path, occupying the distance, and trembling in the heat.

“What’s your role in all of this?” Virgil inquired, breaking the quiet.

“I write.”

“Go on.”

“The act of writing is subversive. Central Government knows this. Its power lies in the way it cultivates indifference to any kind of global unrest. If you wrote about the war from a critical perspective, no one would read the report. It’s the general indifference towards such a form of writing. This I realized after getting involved in a rogue publication called *The Strain*. I was assigned to the war front. My reporting was meant to generate levels of awareness in the reader. It was meant to expose the corruption that is part of the world, especially in Terra. But it was met with apathy, and the underground intelligentsia that helped finance the effort disappeared.”

“I see. I’m happy that I could get you to talk. Our conversation has been very interesting.”

“Yeah, I guess it has. Better still, there’s a lot on my mind. Your being here has changed things. I feel a trust developing between us. At first I thought you were a simulacrum. I’ve felt

them before, not very pleasant. They are programmed machines that look human. They have their own mode of cognition. They evolve. They're a part of Central Government."

"Simulacrum...reminds me of commercials. I don't know why. It's like watching television for a long time without understanding the content you're watching. Consciousness seems to melt away. Odd. I must admit, though, my time in war changed everything for me. I saw fellow soldiers lose themselves in the heat of combat. I watched, and when I watched, feeling no fear of death, only a strange serenity, I felt something turn in my mind. An image appeared, an image of a great tree called Gaia, split in two, with the right side showing a utopia, while the other side showed images of total destruction. Shortly after I saw this image, I deserted, without fear, knowing, for some strange reason, that I was destined to do something. Now I'm here with you."

"Interesting...it's almost like you are a guide of some sort. That's the feeling I get from you. Tell me, have you ever committed an act of war against the enemy?"

"Act of war?"

"You know...have you ever killed anybody?"

"No. My gun tended to malfunction. The trigger got stuck. So I simply pretended."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Well, it happened, I give you my word."

"How did you survive?"

"How did *you* survive?"

This query, voiced by an openly perplexed Virgil, hung loaded in the air, inducing a suspension of quietude in the conversation, as though a disharmonious air of silence has been ignited and was now enveloping the two men. Ben avoided the question. The resultant lacuna in

the dialogue compelled him to survey his surroundings with greater attachment towards minute detail.

“There was a time when this destruction wasn’t here,” Ben mused, “when things were perhaps functional in a different way. Perhaps there were trees here once.”

“What can be next?” voiced Virgil.

“Utter extinction, maybe. Technological takeover. Columns of marching simulacra terminating human rule. Things that fell under the focus of subversive art before the audience stopped caring.”

Both men, having assumed an air of deep thoughtfulness, such that their progression forward had retarded, peregrinated with their eyes the totality of desolation by which they were surrounded.

“The war,” Virgil said, after a moment of strained quiet, “the war...it’s everywhere, I feel. We think and breathe it, with or without awareness. We can’t escape it. But our stroll around this sad location has raised my spirits, believe it or not, thanks to our conversation.”

As though summoned by Virgil’s encouraging words, a pensive silence descended upon the dead world across which the pair was traipsing. The walking surface was like some reckoning of immutable destruction. For all he knew, Ben, having grown suddenly quiet, divested of words to share with Virgil, the encompassing vicinity could very well have been another planet. It was so removed from attributes coloring the world of Terra, with the nation state’s steady stream of inhabitants offering no indication of its cessation, a world estranged from

the goings-on of war, yet a world that functioned according to some invisible machine, bent on sustaining a deeply-ingrained nescience.

Ben fell into his thoughts. His expression became one of pain, as though he was preoccupied by a new, disconcerting sensation, wordless, near to which was his distended mind. An immobilizing question arose out of the murk around which he proceeded to wrap words.

“Tell me, Virgil,” he said, “do you feel something?”

“I feel something all of the time...can you be more specific?”

“I’m afraid I can’t. All I can say is that a shadow has passed over my mind.”

Virgil looked around, trying to distract himself, feeling disinclined to pursue an inquiry into what Ben had hitherto expressed. He then observed Ben, noting the lines of deep fatigue impressed upon the other’s visage. Then he spoke:

“It’s in moments like these when recollection can bring comfort, at least for me. Sadly, all that I remember is the war.”

“No...,” Ben responded, seemingly crafting his words carefully, in tandem with the nameless weight occupying his mind. “I’m not feeling the war. I’m feeling something else, something separate yet connected.”

A presence, it having appeared as though through the agency of some unfathomable mystery or spontaneous animation. The two men looked to behold a figure in close proximity to the location at which their motions had stilled. A creature, an entity, a reality akin to something authored by an elusive world whose forces of operation go beyond immediate comprehension and accessibility. Sitting upon the ground in the lotus position was a hairless, sexless being with skin the color of ash, one hand raised to mark the moment when all motion must cease.

“You are feeling me,” the being uttered, its voice like some polyphonic conjuring from another universe. It penetrated Ben’s mind as would a rare, insalubrious parasitism.

“What are you?” Ben heard himself asking as though from a great distance. The overall sense of disembodiment he was feeling was compounded by a morbid wonder. The very air in which his body was encapsulated, however odorous of metallic waste, took on a thickened form of mass that was saturated with the being’s declarative utterance. A kind of dissonant pulsation then blocked out all other sounds. The surroundings consequently shrunk. Ben fell subject to a sensation of having walked into another dimension whose exact characteristics could not be elucidated through the convention of language. It was not elevated transcendence penetrating his interiority, but something lower, something tainted and imbued with sinister import. It was like a shapeless nadir with a capacity to disseminate into perception a form of dread. He observed the being, it resembling both a vision and a hallucination, a cold manifestation of some evil genius.

“What am I, you ask,” the being forcibly etched the words into the air. “I am Darkspeak.”

As Ben felt completely transfixed by this being so named, the presence of Virgil had undergone a recession, leaving the periphery of Ben’s sight. Yet words came to him, flowing swiftly from the mouth of Virgil, articulated with quiet conviction.

“I know this force you are seeing,” Virgil announced whisperingly in the ear of Ben. “Listen to what it says and much will be revealed.”

Ben felt his mouth grow slack as he stared into the lidless eyes of this being called Darkspeak. The color of its skin reminded him of depressions in the ground wrought by the activation of a landmine, the showering explosion causing immediate dismemberment if not complete and bloody disintegration. Darkspeak’s mouth curved into a sneer, the lips thereof like two contorted slugs. Then it spoke. In the depths of its disharmonious, minatory voice, Ben felt

something invasive enter his mind, a verbal dimension so suffused with terrible discordance that he forgot his thoughts. He felt his mouth cringe. He desired to swear voluminously, to yell obstreperously into the air violent words that would seemingly threaten the preservation of his sense of togetherness, his sense of self.

“Much that needs telling I will disclose to you, Ben Gottman,” Darkspeak began, “I having sensed your impending presence for many an hour, me, sitting alone, conjuring up ways to pollute the world, even the universe, with my linguistic creations. For you see, I am the eternal imprecation, I am the volume of a curse voiced in pain or ridicule. Take for example the word “Fuck”, my invention, and I daresay my favorite, commonly used in many contexts, especially that of sexuality, from which you, Ben Gottman, are quite removed. Why am I telling you this? For you see, Ben Gottman, your name I know quite extensively. I have felt you burrowing into my consciousness, facilitated by the way you project thought onto perception, in quiet ways, but ways that threaten me to no end, to the extent of me losing my ability to curse, and this is a most insufferable circumstance. Fuck! There...I said it, and you flinched, which tells me that your personal lexicon does not contain such a sordid voicing. Oh, but how I love the word, its wonderful contours, said in the heat of anger or sex or derision or terrible pain. It is a most treasured word. Please, be my most kindly of guests and speak using my diction. Won’t you please, you fucking piece of shit?”

Ben desired to turn away in fear, but his eyes remained riveted to Darkspeak, who seemed to swell, grow, fluctuate, with waves of sound becoming intensely visible. Not wanting to speak so as to eschew the force to curse that was flooding through him, Ben fought this alien pressure and unhinged his mouth from its rigid grimace and spoke, “No...I don’t think I will.”

Then there was Virgil, a sheltering presence, a walking representative of pacificity, the voice of whom cut through the quivering excess of dissonance, and filtered into the ears of Ben: “Attend to its force. Know that I am here with you.”

“Say it,” Darkspeak insisted, emphatically. “Ignore that pathetic guide of yours, and say that wonderful word: fuck. Feel how it rolls off the tongue with exclamatory ease. Say it when you know that the raging inferno encasing the soul allows for it to be voiced in profusion.”

Ben felt the pressure increase. He felt a tempestuous churning in his body, something akin to a deluge of anxiety, only for an image to form in his beset mind, a hand, at the center of which was an iridescent eye whose benevolent energy seemed to lessen the force of Darkspeak, to such an extent that he found strength to speak: “I will not say that which is most sacred to you. I will not say it.”

“You fuck!” Darkspeak shouted. “You have come to destroy me, to end my rule over the ways in which frustration is voiced, the way physical delight is accentuated, the way the wondrous nature of a curse can define troublesome conditions of reality. What liberty I gave the world to articulate its many modes of discomfort and pleasure, a liberty that has now expired through your arrival, he that does not curse, he that is in search of a lost soul. What more do you fucking want from me? I have no recourse. I have no way of avoiding my own obsolescence, occasioned by your fucking agency. Fuck you! With each curse word said, the soul of the world becomes contaminated, the very air breathed containing a toxicity that swearing generates, hence the fucking state of the world, it being engrossed in total war, where I assure you the words that you have rendered mute are employed quite extensively and without reluctance or conscience. Fuck! Little does the martial apparatus know that by using the word fuck, the war is extended--- such is the power of language to unconsciously function through a mode of realizing the

destruction of the world. By obliterating the words I so treasure, the air will clear, people will feel no need to voice their discontent in ways that work in accordance with my methodology. Fuck you! And I say this with all of the fucking force I have left, as I am fading, fading, fucking fading, fucking depleted...”

The shadowy luminescence animating Darkspeak’s lidless eyes became a void. Like the way in which a television is deactivated by a fatigued viewer, the once colored screen now removed from the capacity to deaden and desensitize, to generate propaganda through adhesive messages seen but not ingested critically, invitations into the insidious, mechanized network of Central Government, a construct that afflicts those beleaguered by paranoia before they are found and incarcerated for being too sane to articulate the madness inherent in general existence.

Looking once more upon Darkspeak, whose movements had completely stilled, Ben collapsed to his knees, overwhelmed with exhaustion. The surroundings now calm, the antecedent dissonance having desisted its noisome pulsations. He engulfed immense drafts of air, as though he had moments before been submerged in some strange suffocating opacity. He felt a comforting hand on his shoulder. He looked up to behold Virgil, a figure now appearing to be more imposing, more definitive. The very emanation coloring his comportment was at once enigmatic, clear, and coruscating to Ben’s strained eyes.

“The creature called Darkspeak is gone now,” Virgil stated, his voice reverberating enough for Ben to hear something aberrant attached to its auditory shape. As though some other language was affixed to the words voiced, an otherworldliness that immediately energized him and moved his thoughts with a cascade of wonder. Virgil pointed to the motionless Darkspeak and said, “Look in its mouth.”

Ben looked up at Virgil questioningly: “What? I don’t understand.”

“Don’t worry,” Virgil said. “Just look in its mouth, there’s a message there.”

Ben inhaled and stood up laboriously. He approached Darkspeak with caution. Once before Darkspeak, Ben saw the ashen skin, the sexless attributes, the frigid stillness of the body, as though they were still capable of reanimation, some swift reversal from total deadness. He extended his hands and saw that they were trembling. Then he pried the mouth of Darkspeak open, whereupon a piece of paper protruded outwards. He retrieved the piece of paper and examined it, seeing the following words scrawled thereon: “HELP ME BEN.” He looked up and turned to Virgil.

“It’s a message from Andrew Gardner,” Virgil stated solemnly.

“Wait...” Ben struggled to speak, then he measured his breathing, attempting to achieve some sort of composure, as he became awash with a sharp commingling of emotion and uncertainty. “How did you know? Who are you? What are you?”

Virgil stepped forward. There was a sudden break in the layer of clouds, whereupon a shaft of pure sunlight illuminated the pacific soldier where he stood. Ben discerned, with a surge of awe, the regality and solemnity of his glowing features.

“I am what’s called, an embodiment,” Virgil began, “an animated symbol, given physical form. Within me I have all those peaceful in nature who have died in the war. Some may call me a ghost, but I’m beyond such a state. I’m located in a place where death is ever-present, a vast realm of despair and torment, a violent place created by the nefarious powers whose sovereignty the earth knows by way of the perpetual death they have conceived. It is my hope that I may be of service to you and your search. I know of Andrew Gardner, your fellow journalist, keeper of the word. With me by your side, I will do my best to help guide you through the impending obstacle.”

“I see now, or I believe I see now,” Ben said. He looked down at the slip paper on which Andrew’s call sounded. “There are forces at play here, forces I have yet to know. The war, the universe, they seem so present now. But why didn’t you disclose to me your full identity at the time of our meeting?”

“I felt I had to wait, to wait for the most opportune moment. Now that you know Darkspeak, now that you have conquered it, I can speak freely now. I’m bound to you, for it is through you that I may release those I represent from the darkness of their imprisonment, a soul world of complete devastation.”

Hearing this admission, Ben could not muster a response, contained as he was in a space of new realization. His hands were trembling. It was then that the voice emerged in his mind and spoke to him:

So your present location leaves you confused...this is only natural as the elements at play here, the elements that are intertwined, are, as of now, beyond your grasp of comprehension, but you will learn, as you contain my presence within you. Like Virgil Keystone, I am something larger than a mere entity; I have properties that transcend understanding. I am, by consequence a power involved in the world as a result of this war that ravages all the known lands, that disseminates its wrath and perpetuity into consciousness. Like Virgil who feels the pain of those lost, those disinclined to engage the art of war, I, too, feel something, a rare profundity, something so immense yet so obscure that it defies words. Oh, the spoils of war belong to me, the lives lost my sustenance. Peril awaits you.

The voice once more receded into the vacuum whence it came. Ben’s trembling was like a life force working through him. It seemed to envelop his entire body. He took several deep

breaths, forced into pondering the words that were echoing in his mind, like a sinister revelation, like a purveyor of dread. Attempting to calm himself, he looked to Virgil.

“What’s next?” he asked.

“We must continue moving forward,” Virgil responded.

“Ok.”

Ben placed the slip of paper in his pocket. He readjusted his rucksack. His head depended, he approached Virgil. Then they proceeded once more through the wasteland, the shadows of decomposition accentuated by a sky in which the sun now hung poised amidst vaporous clouds. Ben looked back at the figure of Darkspeak. It appeared frozen, lifeless, sundered from existence, a strange demonic totality extinguished.

A contemplative silence descended upon Ben and Virgil as they moved forward. Ben reflected on all that had occurred up to his meeting with Virgil. A sense of mystery inhabited his thoughts with a force that was at once intriguing and removed from complete clarity. He cycled through his memories, as though by doing so he might find something that would explain the aberrant nature of his circumstance. He thought of Central Government. He envisioned it as a power that intermixed evasiveness and immediacy of access, so that he could feel it and not feel it simultaneously. It lurked as a monolithic indestructability, functioning through the populace, perpetuating its influence through the various ways stimulation filtered into the mind. Ben’s thoughts gravitated towards awareness as a concept, such that, without turning around, he saw the towering walls of the nation-state of Terra, situated beyond which was a self-sufficient layout

of some strange rendering of civilization. He sensed a form of existence that was within and without the embodiment of power, watching as it worked while positioned in its domain, in its reach. He realized that there was no such thing as a united solidarity with the capacity to displace the power of Central Government. The power it possessed reached not only into the reality of war, but also into virtual realities, as in the cinema, as in the overloaded forms technology assumed. To perceive these items of manipulation, to locate oneself on the exterior of their influence, was to acquire a cognizance, the very nature of which would be classified as a sickness or a disorder by the representatives of Central Government, who, in whatever guise or stature they adopted, would feel no threat. Their goal was to create a world of simulation that would subvert any knowledge of the antecedent reality, and through its mass implementation, render mute and estranged all those who have procured that external sight. This minority was represented in the prophets of yore, who infused their multiform creations with an anticipatory depiction of futurity, albeit with dread and trepidation. Things like constant war, ultra-processed food, sleepless inequity, were considered by these prophets as they prepared for various paradigm shifts to alter consciousness. But in Central Government's inchoate state, these prophets were silenced, extinguished, until they were generally forgotten.

"You're thinking about Central Government?" Virgil asked.

"Yes," Ben responded. "How did you know?"

"You're in my mind as I am in yours."

"This seems all so strange to me," Ben admitted, after a thoughtful pause. "I don't know what to think. I don't know what to believe. I can't trust what I'm seeing."

"I hear you quite clearly, Ben. But there is something I need to show you. Stop for a second and listen."

Virgil put a finger to his lips to signal the institution of silence. Ben waited, ensconced in a mode of concentration, attuning his ears to the surrounding waste, the overall stillness deeply palpable. Ben then felt a gentle gust of wind, air perfumed by a fecund garden. And paired with this fragrant movement of air was a sound, a strange sound, waves of ethereal song very faint and wondrous to the ears. Ben heard it and his eyes widened.

“Now close your eyes, Ben,” Virgil said.

Ben closed his eyes. Swooned as he was by the song permeating the air, he was overcome by a sudden sense of relaxation. The convoluted meanderings of his thoughts settled. His worry dripped away. His doubt desisted. His mind was clear of all inimical encroachments.

“Now open them,” Virgil said.

Ben opened his eyes and beheld an arboreal wonderland. All manner of trees donning their spring raiment, the blooming colors illuminated by a kind sun resting poised in an inviolate blue. His eyes settled upon a larger tree at the center of the sylvan scene. This tree was shimmering with a preternatural light. Its boughs, tipped with floral intricacies, seemed to coruscate as they beckoned in all different directions. Small winged creatures, their plumage iridescent and glowing, flitted here and there, their song permeating the air. Ben felt the cushion of green grass beneath his shoes.

“Have you ever seen such a wondrous display of trees, Ben?” Virgil asked, smiling.

“No, I haven’t,” Ben responded, his eyes thoroughly arrested by the tranquil locale.

“What is this place?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. Walk with me.”

The pair moved down a slight slope, into the vicinity of the central tree.

“Behold Gaia,” Virgil said.

A woman emerged, materializing out of the scintillating trunk of the central tree. She had long flowing hair, the color of which seemed to mysteriously shift in the light filtering down through the tree canopy. She was dressed in garments that melded flora and tree. Her figure was possessed of a resplendent perfection, at which Ben gazed, recalling Beatrice. The woman resembled a forest spirit, a kind of mythological being. She skipped and frolicked over to Ben and Virgil, her countenance exhibiting an expression that blended felicity with melancholy, yielding a strange oscillation in mood, yet doing little to detract from her harmony of features, the way her hazel eyes bespoke knowledge at once vast and secreted away, the way her skin displayed a hue that intimated a connectivity to all that the surroundings presented. She was a garden given corporal form. She stopped before Ben who was attempting to manage this shift in locality, the marvel he was experiencing reaching deeply into his being. He stood helpless against the trance by which he was occupied. This woman named Gaia sought his eyes, whereupon he turned away, feeling something akin to the sublime.

“You must be Ben Gottman,” Gaia said. Her voice flowed into his ears like a gesture from some realm of profound musicality, occasioning him to think of the sweet, playful song of birds, a kind wind against trees, or an orchestral manifestation of all the wonders of nature. But there was something else there, something he could not name, an underlying disturbance, a tumult pulsating just beneath the surface.

“Yes,” he managed to say, his eyes still averted.

“Do not fear me,” she said. She reached out and touched his face gently. Then she drew closer and kissed him delicately on the lips. Ben closed his eyes, feeling an inflow of serenity in contention with an ephemeral feeling of darkness. When this sensation passed, he opened his eyes, and this new reality surrounding him was glowing with a more vigorous light.

“Take my hand,” she said.

Ben took her proffered hand. His eyes stretched open. An exuberant grin formed upon his countenance, only for it to widen into an expression of sudden ebullient joy, his mouth forming into the shape of a circle. Then, as if unbidden, the circle collapsed, and his expression transformed, now displaying a deep sorrow. His eyes were now downcast. An inarticulate weight descended upon his shoulders. Gaia let go of his hand. Ben looked up, and was once more engrossed by her beauty, by her force of presence, yet he lacked words to elucidate the feelings he was experiencing, this mixture of opposing worlds, those of happiness and those of sadness.

“You now know my plight, Ben Gottman,” Gaia said. “Please, sit with me upon this ocean of grass and we will converse and things will become clearer.” Turning to Virgil, she said, “Mind your firearm; I’d rather not see it.”

Virgil smiled playfully. Then he approached the trunk of the central tree and sat down. He pulled an apple from a pocket and bit into it.

Ben and Gaia proceeded to sit on the grass, facing each other, both in the lotus position. Gaia extended her right hand slightly upward, while her other hand pointed to her heart.

“You have entered my world, Ben Gottman,” Gaia began. “I am a spirit. I feel the reality you feel. What is in your soul is also in mine. The forces of the universe have accrued around you. You have felt both the light and the dark, as do I. Your search for Andrew Gardner I do know. Long have I been contained in an opaque condition, where war and violent death have colored my sight, and the light I so cherish and wish to preserve grows increasingly dim. In order for the light to be sustained, the wars of this world must end.”

Ben felt these words at his very core. Then a gush of words flowed from his mouth as though externalized by a force he could not name.

“But war is necessary and never ends. It is an extreme form of interaction between opposing forces.”

“That maybe so, and I say this with great sadness. What do you think compelled you to define war as such? Certainly not me.”

Ben paused. He attempted to gather his swirling thoughts, eddying around a profusion of internal forces. Once more he was pressed to speak. “There is something growing inside of me. I feel it with every step forward. Terra is behind me, yet I feel its reach.”

“You are walking the path of a sacred dyad, where opposites wed. You are experiencing a duality, similar to how I think and feel, bound as I am to both tranquility and tumult and anguish. The reality of war only intensifies this state of being. Please, direct your eyes to the tree.”

Ben looked to the tree. It overwhelmed his sight. He saw with greater clarity an environment characterized by a peaceful symbiosis. He saw images utopic in nature. He saw the walls of Terra, once so menacing, vined by a profuse outgrowth of flowering vegetation, above which a kind sun hovered in the pure blue. The multitudes of Terra had evolved into a collectivity that directed its eyes to the sky, finding there a force so formidable, so benevolent, that it was overcome by the sudden realization of harmony and oneness. All deleterious aspects of existence were lost in a vacuum, extinguished by a far-reaching overlay of peace, achieving sovereignty over consciousness. Ben felt these images and smiled. Then something changed. The tree suddenly was engulfed by flame. Grimacing, Ben saw vast fields of minatory machines. He saw the factory chimneys excreting toxic gas that overwhelmed the sky, concealing sun, moon, and stars. He saw plains the color of spilled blood, intimating interminable warfare. He saw piles of mutilated bodies. He heard the lugubrious cries of the moribund, at which point he tore his

eyes away from the tree. He worriedly sought Gaia who, with a wave of the hand, dissolved the images of horror, and exacted the restoration of the surrounding order and beauty. Then she spoke:

“You see, Ben Gottman, that is my condition. I am the Gaia Tree. The polarized visions you saw impressed upon the tree are what bifurcate me, giving me happiness and sadness simultaneously.”

Ben was speechless. He was overwhelmed with a sense of connectivity to what he had seen in the tree, to what he had heard spoken by Gaia. He turned away from her, and observed Virgil eating his apple. Virgil’s countenance exhibited a deep solemnity, contributing to the laconic tension of the atmosphere, however broken by the wondrous sound of bird song.

“Now that you know the nature of my plight,” Gaia said, “you must leave my world, and venture forth to acquire further understanding of what reality is made of. You will suffer confusion. Remember, like me, you have the dark and light within you, in constant contention. Fear not, you will prevail.”

Ben inhaled deeply the air of this strange, dreamlike location. The air was a conduit for myriad different scents, all of which bespoke the fragrant wonders of an eternal garden being encroached upon by the malodorous taint of blood flowing from a constant war. He squinted, as though a point of focus before him was profoundly obfuscated. He rubbed his eyes, suffering a deep incredulity over what had transpired in the realm of Gaia. As if encountering another state of wakefulness, he removed his hands from his eyes to be greeted by that cold expanse of industrial desolation. The tree of Gaia was gone, the transcendent realm disintegrated. He was immediately beleaguered by a feeling of having exited an illusory dimension of existence. The murk of doubt surfaced with force. He stood up, turning around in search of Virgil, only to feel

an entanglement of deepening solitude, as he was the only source of animation in the darkly luminous landscape. He looked towards the walls of Terra, but descried only an opaque haze.

A heavy sigh escapes him. “What’s next?” He questioned the very air in which he was contained. “I’m facing my own extinction.”

He stood alone, situated in a mode of incomprehension. His every thought, his every perception, was being challenged. As a greater fatigue thrust itself upon him, he felt his mind turn and the voice emerged from some sequestered corner of his interior.

You are very close now, very close indeed. Look in front of you. What do you see? Two objects protruding from the broken ground. One is a technological device, the other a symbol of your termination. Go ahead. Study them, touch them, feel them in your hands. Resign yourself to their use and uncover the secret behind their function.

Ben looked towards the ground several feet in front of him. He saw a handheld communication console, next to which was a handgun, its black metal contrasting with the grayness of the debris besmirched ground. Both objects beckoned to him, as though sentient. He walked forward and crouched down, and extended his hand. His memories reached back into a past that was losing clarity, overlaid by a forceful cloudiness. The fixed areas of temporality seemed to shatter and fragment, inducing in him a feeling that time no longer existed. At which moment, as his hand hovered above the handgun and the console, the only thing he could think about was death, how quick it would be. His mouth dry, his visage grimacing, he sought once more some means of making sense of his condition.

Then the console rang, startling Ben. He cautiously picked up the console and placed it against his ear.

“Hello?” he heard himself speak.

“Hi, Ben, it’s Andrew.”

“Andrew who?”

“What do you mean, ‘who’? It’s Andrew Gardner, you silly fool. How about you and Carol join Rebecca and me for dinner tonight?”

“I thought you were...” Ben’s voice trembling, his expression a mixture of trepidation and perplexity.

“What? Ben? Has Victor been hounding you for another story? How about dinner tonight?”

Ben could not respond.

“Ben?”

Ben dropped the console and backed up. His breathing had accelerated, his mouth fixed in a shape suggestive of a noiseless panic. He looked around, painfully flabbergasted, only to feel the encroachment of the dead surroundings, that what he had been traversing was a manifestation of some violent dreamscape, a projection of some darksome corner of his mind. He slowly turned his head until his sight fell upon the console once more, it bespeaking a function he could only conclude was deeply insidious. Then the voice spoke in his mind:

You just touched that which has its own power source. It is an entity unto itself, a universe, a world known as the machine. Consider this query: why do you oppose its place in reality? Why do you not accept its hold on consciousness? Embrace it, they say, embrace it...embrace it...embrace it...

The words “embrace it” drifted way in a line of repetition, like a resounding echo slowly diminishing. Ben’s confusion had reached an acme of effect, as though it was a kind of parasite breaking upon his equanimity with a ferocity against which he was helpless. Some deeper recess

of his being was propelled into pained contortions that seemed to emanate outward until his whole body ached.

“Something isn’t right,” Ben called out, desperate, confounded, shaking his head, his voice possessed of a voluminous strain. “Something isn’t right. I’m a writer. I’m a writer. What do you want from me? The voice...I’m talking to you. What do you want from me?”

The ground began to tremble. He turned in the direction of the walls of Terra. Then he looked skyward and saw a fleet of military machines flying forward, slicing through the air, passing over him, the great and powerful air cavalry. In that moment where disparate elements collide, he was reminded of his time at the front. He was reminded of the great military base of Terra, located just beyond the business district, a rendering of an imposing, multi-tiered ziggurat, where floods of volunteers surged forward to join the war effort, spurred on by propaganda and a need for adventure. He had managed the crowd, identifying himself as a freelance journalist, and once processed by the bureaucracy, had boarded one of the flying machines, and off he went to the front.

He watched as the airborne machines flew into the distance, the cacophonous sound of their passage receding. The ground gradually ceased trembling, at which moment an eerie stillness settled upon this broken world in which Ben was the only one present, so amplified was his sense of aloneness. His exhaustion having superseded any attempt at managing his quaking thoughts, he sought a nearby fragment of a brick wall, against which he proceeded to sit, removing his rucksack and breathing heavily. His head depended, a sense of defeat, of purposelessness, descending upon him, he felt alienated from the very air he was breathing. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the slip of paper that he had pried from the mouth of

Darkspeak. He saw the soul of Andrew Gardner impressed upon the slip of paper. Yet, he could not glean from it any reality of Andrew's existence.

“Where are you, Andrew?” Ben whispered to himself. “Where are you?”

In the loaded silence, no answers were forthcoming. He groaned with replete frustration. Then, as though supplicating before a maddened god, Ben began to claw at the ground in a vain attempt at mitigating the strife by which he was beset. Then, his exhaustion amplified, he righted himself and leaned his back against the wall, and fell into an uneasy half-wakefulness, an image of the ziggurat, at the acme of which was an all-seeing eye, displayed upon the screen of his closed eyelids.

Delicate footsteps on the gravelly terrain, breaking the silence. A tranquil susurration of wind. Two women, preternatural in aspect, donned in billowing white robes, materialized as if out of nothing. Their movements were deliberately slow, characterized by a tangible grace and majesty. Holding hands, they approached Ben who sat positioned in a disquieting repose, not quite sleeping, not quite awake. The two women bent down, each bestowing a gentle kiss on Ben's lips, before picking him up, his body somewhat recalcitrant to movement.

A dimly lit corridor. The two women guided Ben towards a door that was slightly ajar. Then the women receded into the dimness, as though ingested, their support no longer necessary. Ben looked up. He rubbed his eyes. At threshold of the door, he peered into the room, noting a shadowy saturation, and a bed on which an elderly man was recumbent, wrapped thickly in blankets, his visage marked by pallid wrinkles, his mouth agape as though witness to a succession of nightmares that disabled his ability to achieve wakefulness. Ben entered the room tentatively, Books were everywhere, stacked upon a near table, organized haphazardly on a desk

by a window that exhibited the darkness of night. The room was redolent of dust. Ben found a chair near the table, positioned it near the bed, sat down, and waited. Several seconds passed, after which the elderly man came awake with a start, his tired eyes strained and bulging, his breathing deep and rapid, his head shaking vigorously.

“What...what person do I feel?” the man questioned the air, a slight tremor affecting his voice. His seemingly sightless eyes searched the room before resting upon Ben. “Ben Gottman...is that...is that you?”

“Yes,” Ben responded. “Ben is right here, Dr. Eliot.”

“Ah, you being here brings me great comfort. I have slept too long in the place of nightmares. Now that I’m awake, I feel better.”

Ben reached for Dr. Eliot’s hand and clasped it gently. “I am here now, Dr. Eliot.”

“He was a man of a distant time,” Dr. Eliot began. “He walked, hand in hand with peril. He sought the land of the unconscious. Little did he know that once there, nothing would remain the same. And so he died. The nature of existence he desired to know was channeled into his death. You see, Ben, what we repress, the thoughts and feelings that exist beneath the surface, evolve into a strain that pollutes reality. An apple can exist independent of man. Yet when touched by the hand of repression, it mutates. It surrenders to the corrupting powers contained in this hand. The apple ceases to be an apple, and is more a representation of a mind moved by turmoil. You know this. You’ve seen the hand of war. I see it marked on your face.”

“I have an idea, yes.”

“But suppose this war does not exist. Suppose it is evidence of the endless wanderings of your own imagination. How, then, can you explain your reality, how it shifts, and changes? What if there is no ‘I’ or ‘me’? What if all stable facets of the self are terminated by the very

space of consciousness that functions as an unreality? The strain...I feel it, as do you. Look at me, Ben, look into my face. The lines you see are not illustrations of age...they are illustrations of pain, the pain of knowing..."

Ben was silent, pensive.

"She is beyond your reach. The very space she occupies possesses a text you cannot read. Why else would she copulate with the simulations? You trudge through the valley of sexual potentials. Yet these potentials cannot be accessed. You are burdened by a sense of contamination. Where others act, you think. The tireless engagement with thought detaches you from direct experience. You are positioned in your interior. The voice that haunts you...the voice that haunts you...the voice that haunts you something you've yet to know."

"How did you know about Carol?"

"I know much. I read your face. I take note of the lines of exhaustion. You breathe uncertainty."

"What else can you tell me, Dr. Eliot?" Ben asked, shifting restively in the chair, feeling overwhelmed by what he was hearing. "I need to know more. I need to know the nature of reality."

"Yes, I know," Dr. Eliot exhaled, loudly. "The moment when words are spoken is the moment when reality alters. There exists a kind of sleepless engine working against all movements of a mind predisposed to wonder. Networks of thought and feeling in conflict with each other. Picture a clear horizon. It is there, in the distance. Everything leading up to its straightness can be seen. There is nothing impeding this image. Now imagine a word spoken. Imagine that this word is tainted. It obstructs the horizon. Ben, you know that this word is reality. The war. The fixed state of Terra's citizens. The horizon that can't be seen. The

horizon that therefore doesn't exist. To you, it does, yet it cannot be reached. You need only terminate the word, then the horizon will show itself, bit by bit, moment by moment. But what is this word I'm speaking about? It is a terrible thing, an entity so insidious, so blinding, so seductive, its power so vast and yawning, that...that..., you know it in your heart, Ben. I cannot speak further. I am...tired."

Dr. Eliot turned away from Ben, emitting a groan of discomfort. Above the subsequent quiet, the bedridden man, his volubility exhausted, breathed irregularly, laboriously, the sound almost like a wheeze.

"Dr Eliot...you must tell me more," Ben said, insistently. "I'm in a bad location. I feel caught between opposites."

"I am tired, Ben. My thoughts are scrambled. Take what I have told you. It is all I have to give. Now, I must sleep. Now I must return to the place of nightmares."

A silence descended upon the room. Ben looked at the recumbent Dr. Eliot, suffering the incursion of utter confusion. As though what had been disclosed had yielded no clarity, only a problematic binding to what could be called real and unreal, what could be expressed by wakefulness or some aberrant dream state. So, positioned thus, Ben looked down at the floor as an indication of some evolving irresoluteness. It then occurred to Ben, with greater force, that Dr. Eliot was the representative of all those prophets of a past epoch who had challenged the world with their creations. Still, Ben's confusion was not allayed by this understanding. He felt positioned in a place colored by indescribable hues. He felt caught in a painted rendering of constant motion, chameleonic, characterized by continuous alterations of color, knowing no stasis or inertia, a kind of ever-shifting Rorschach. He fought against the wish to shake the shoulder of Dr. Eliot, to rouse him from his uneasy repose. Ben raised his hands and rubbed his

eyes, whereupon the room disintegrated and he was back in the desolation. He felt his heart sink into some bottomless region of torment.

Ben stood up and secured his rucksack to his back. He felt bereft of purpose. Andrew Gardner had receded to the back of his mind. He looked to the spot where the hand held console and the gun had been positioned, seeking the latter as he was feeling the circulation of a death wish in his thoughts. These items were still there, like strange protrusions hovering above broken ground, more symbolic abstractions than they were concrete objects. He walked forward, tremulous of step, at which moment the voice emerged, only this time it was louder, more forceful:

Why listen to the maniacal Dr. Eliot? His thoughts, all that induced him to speak, are unhinged and lacking in truth. You listened devotedly, yet now you, too, are walking the threshold situated between reality and unreality, challenging your mode of thought and feeling. What is truth could be a complete falsity, moreover, it could signal the end of your so called charge, you returning to the confines of Terra, to find Carol involved in bodily congress with those wondrous and confounding machines. I need not speak more on the subject. Tread well, Ben. Venturing further will only strengthen the confusion you're feeling, leading to some ultimate ruination, your soul usurped, your own private universe dislodged from accessibility.

As the voice dematerialized, Ben erupted with an obstreperous groan, intimating the depth of his confusion. He removed his rucksack and dashed it against the ground and proceeded to kick it. Exhaustion overtook him. He contained his wish to weep. He suppressed his desire to

voice loud lamentations into the encompassing ruination. Then he approached the handheld console on the ground, near to which was the beckoning gun. He kneeled down, and directed his hand over the console. He looked at it as though it was a foreign body. Then he slowly descended his hand until it was inches away from the console, whereupon an image filled his mind, an image of total violence. The image formed quickly before melting way, expiring. Ben pulled his hand away from the console. He felt something he could not name. Then an ineffable realization dawned upon him. He stood up and walked forward. He entered the near vicinity of a derelict edifice. The light was tainted as the sun was occluded by a morbid grayness, yet all aspects of decomposition shown as though scintillating with a darksome luminosity. He stopped moving. He saw, positioned before him, a large television. Albert, the humanized simulacra, stood to the left of the television, while Isaac stood to right. Both were motionless, standing like sentinels. They resembled guardians of technology. Ben fought back a developing trepidation. But something within him, a pregnant mystery, compelled him to move forward and face this strange tableau of elements. Thoughts of Andrew resurfaced. Once before the television, Ben placed both of his hands on the screen.

A succession of images moved through his mind with a great rapidity. He saw the towering cinematic complexes, long lines of people waiting to enter to see the newest simulation of reality diffused through with all manner of propaganda, the thrilling phantasmagoria displayed on the mammoth screen hypnotic, engrossing, possessed of the capacity to deconstruct thought into a mode of nonexistence. He saw all things technological containing the power of Central Government. He saw such an exemplification of power based not in visibility, but in a state of concealment, integrating itself into collective consciousness, allowing it to propagate and control and perpetuate the war and coerce an unknowing population into doing its bidding. He saw the

metropolis corridors down which traveled the multitudes, bound to some perpetual function, some perpetual will. He saw all of these images as if positioned on a sidereal promontory, watching the flood of a society as it occupied a space of oblivion, ignorant of the manifold destruction towards which it was heading.

The force of these images assailed him overwhelmingly, and he pulled away from the screen as though having been burned. Albert and Isaac stood by, motionless, expressionless, the shine of artificiality coloring their faces readily apparent. Ben took several steps backwards. His eyes were fixed on the screen, his expression supplanting confusion with realization. He approached the screen again, only this time, he positioned himself in the lotus position on the ground. He looked up into the haze occupying the sky. Then he looked down at the broken ground. He took several deep breaths, attempting to settle the discordant thoughts that were careening in his tired mind. He knew he had to penetrate the screen. So he raised his hands and slowly pressed them into the dark expanse.

He fell into recollection. He saw Rebecca gently, lovingly massaging her womb, waiting patiently for news of Andrew. He saw Victor Proto torturously suspended in incertitude, sleepless, hyper-vigilant, and awash in knowing and unknowing. He saw the man in the tunnel, Gaia, near to whom was Virgil eating an apple. He saw Beatrice, and when he did, she broke away from his recollection and approached him as if in his mind. And as she neared, she held out her hand, at the center of which was a colorful eye. He felt himself reaching for the hand. When he clasped it, he felt a surge of consonant energy, an inflow of what he took to be love. His heart swelled. The screen began to tremor. Ben observed his hands, each now contained in an orb of blue and white light. Feeling something beyond the screen, he spoke:

“Andrew, come out. I’m right here. I’m with you now. Come out.”

Ben's breathing accelerated. His face exhibited a grimace of pain. Gradually, his mouth formed into a circle, and his eyes grew distended. The domains of thought and feeling were coalescing. Ben channeled his whole being into the screen, with all the energy that remained within him, despite the pain, despite the monolithic quality of what stood before him, the world of technology through which Central Government channeled its pernicious influence. The screen began to fissure, at which moment Ben backed away. Where there was once the television, where there was once the stolid simulacra, there was now Andrew Gardner, positioned on the ground, his head cast down, his hands at rest beside him. Andrew Gardner looked up tiredly, his face spectral and thin. Upon seeing Ben, his expression lost its pained shape and he spoke:

“Ben...you came, you've brought me out of the machine. Let me adjust.”

Ben, feeling relief beyond measure, approached Andrew and said, “Take your time, Andrew, take your time.”

“Ben, I am free now, thanks to you,” Andrew began. “The machine...the machine, it penetrated my soul, put me in a paralysis that is too terrifying to describe. I felt no movement...no, only a stillness, a dreaded stillness...my thoughts were the only part of me that was alive, and these thoughts screamed for freedom. The color...the color of dread, a kind of colorlessness that was so terrible, I couldn't speak, only think and feel the near doom of my soul. The machine...the machine.”

Ben placed a hand on Andrew's shoulder. “I'm here now, Andrew. Don't worry.”

“Yes, yes, you are here,” Andrew stated emphatically, looking up into the eyes of Ben.. “You have saved me. You pulled me from the grasp of the machine. I was frozen. I was imprisoned by the machine. Like I said, I had only my thoughts...only my thoughts, and in them I called out for you. I felt your movements and I was filled with hope.”

Hearing these words, Ben squeezed Andrew's shoulder. "Rest now, Andrew."

"No, no rest for me, I must speak, I must speak, I must give you information. The horizon...the horizon is clearing. Soon thought will change. Soon things will change. Perceptions, thought, everything will change, whatever structures reality now will be subverted...I speak yet I feel not connected to words, but feelings and certainties. We are the word, Ben, you and I and Victor, we are the word."

Andrew slumped over, clearly exhausted. Ben heard his fellow writer's words, but the surroundings had grown pregnant with tension. He felt the presence of some other element, growing, growing, about to render itself visible. Ben felt his own exhaustion ebbing away, replaced by heightened senses, all of his faculties brimming with perspicacity, as though made so in preparation for a revelation to be exhumed from the still surroundings. Ben looked around. The haze had lifted. He gazed into the distance and saw the horizon, the world's edge. All that upon which his eyes found purchase was shimmering with newfound refulgence, reminding him of the tree of Gaia, only there was no flame or images of destruction and technological subversion. The death by which he had been encompassed was now possessed of another facet he could only discern as life. He saw his shadow impressed upon the ground and looked up to discover the afternoon sun pulling away from a gray collective of clouds, a deep blue gaining in clarity. The puzzle of existence was gradually approaching completion. Then the voice returned, only instead of it being located in his mind, it was now on the exterior, an amplified outward projection.

"Ben Gottman. I am calling to you, Ben Gottman."

"Yes, I am Ben Gottman."

“You had to keep going, didn’t you?” the voice said. “You had to keep pushing onward, usurping one obstacle after another, in order to find and save your fellow writer. I cannot begin to express my rage; any attempt at its elucidation is fruitless. You see, Ben Gottman, I am the voice of the unconscious. You have found me, through whatever acumen you possess, but mostly through your resolve and persistence. Damn you! I am Central Government. I am the source of your torment. My intention, which you’ve thwarted, was to fill you up with truths and deception and blatant falsities, to hound your every movement as you traversed the wake of war. It was my hope that, overcome with immense confusion, you would seek death. But you circumvented this fate. Yes, it is hard to believe, but I am Central Government, I am the great power that watches over civilization, clouding minds, invading them with my will to perpetuate the war, to implement simulacra and simulation and technological wonders with which to command the tumultuous goings-on of the world and, by extension, the universe. I am a power like no other, a power that is now looking upon its own destruction, realized by your pathetic doings. You had to come along, and steal from me the flame of my power, how I ignite a conflagration in the heart of earth’s equilibrium, maker as I am of strife, inequity, and ongoing societal disorder. I love war, I love thanatos, I love working above consciousness, felt only by those who venture into the world of thought with moronic audacity, the stuff that you possess. Had I destroyed you, then my power would be absolute and indestructible. And again, you had to keep going, and this will haunt me for all of eternity as I disintegrate. Andrew Gardner was bate. I ingested him and placed him into a lifeless vacuum. You were not supposed to find him, but you did, you did, and now I am facing my own extinction.”

Ben’s expression was one of ebullient joy, now that he knew the source of the voice by which he was so haunted. The unconscious had been revealed, and all that Central Government

represented, all of the corruption of which it was composed was approaching the cusp of its termination. This, Ben felt this all too keenly. His thoughts felt unencumbered with uncertainty. His perceptions had achieved a vivid clarity. Death was no longer hounding his soul. A new life was pulsating within him.

“Ben Gottman, the same vacuum into which I imprisoned Andrew Gardner, will now be my residence for eternity. I say this while concealing the depths of my apprehension, for such a fate is torment for an entity such as myself, an entity that depends upon controlling large swaths of people, to extend destruction into the near and far corners of the planet, to pervade the world with ignorance...these modes of being I relish quite extensively. No, no longer will I have these capacities, thanks to you, and your understanding of what constitutes reality, the dark and the light, the countless polarities, the ongoing dialectic. I always knew of *The Strain*, but the absence of mind in Terra, an absence that I generated and sustained, would have nothing of that outlet of insight. So I waited, and devised a plan that you foiled.

“Now, I, the unconscious, am fading now, fading into the dreaded realm of nonexistence, no longer possessed of the power I had wielded over the earthly inhabitants, much to their collective unawareness. Soon the machine’s influence will dissolve. The trees will grow anew, flowering wondrously, a delicate promise for the certainty of tranquil change. Men and women will wake to find their minds empty of hostility and antipathy, supplanted by pacificity. Gaia will break from the darkness that has bifurcated her. The tools of war will cease to function. I am fading, fading, fading...losing substance...losing substance...”

And as the voice ceased, Ben felt an ineffable power seethe through him, as though he had ingested the unconscious, and was now imbued with something transcendent, some greater feeling, an expansiveness of mind that was transformative. He looked up into the sky and sought

clarity, finding that the afternoon sun was perched on a cushion of clouds into which he gazed to find an immense face poised therein. The face's dimensions exuded a wondrous power, and at the center of its forehead was a luminous third eye, out of which channeled a shaft of ethereal light that illuminated Ben's face. He felt a warmth flow through him, a kind of affable electricity enlivening his inner world. And when the shaft of light dissolved, Ben sought the face once more to discover it smiling and nodding before the clouds in which it was positioned dispersed, and the sun shown through with an ameliorative resplendence, and all was well.

Ben sought Andrew, who remained at rest upon the ground. Ben pried him awake, and helped him stand up.

"Are you ok?" Ben asked, smiling widely.

"Yes, Ben, thanks to you."

Ben shouldered Andrew. Then the two of them proceeded across the broken terrain, in the direction of the tunnel, the strain gone.

Victor Proto sat before his console in his cellar office, positioned in a torturous stasis of movement, his thoughts revolving around Ben and Andrew. The console screen was blank. He felt it less so as a machine and more so as a menace with capacity to alter consciousness, despite knowing that he had had to use it for *The Strain*. He depended his head, a bodily gesture intimating a protracted anguish. Then something changed. He corrected his posture. His eyes widened, a surge of insight and realization coursing through him. He saw before his mind's eye an image of Ben and Andrew peregrinating the desolation. Then he spoke as though something

was speaking through him: “Ben has done it. Ben has saved Andrew. Ben has dissolved the machinations of the unconscious. The world will change now.” Where there was once an expression of deep-seated chagrin awash upon Victor’s face, there was now an illuminating smile ever widening with elation. He lowered the screen of his console. Then he recalled his time in the church, the strangeness of the event, the visions descried upon the ceiling. He recalled the sculpture suspended above the altar. It seemed to transform in his mind, exhibiting features that were similar to those of Ben Gottman, at which moment a clarity achieved sovereignty over his thoughts, and he leaned back in his chair and laughed joyously, while on the ceiling appeared an orb of light to which he directed his focus. It floated there, composed of a blue and white hue. It represented something absolute, something definitive, something free of suffering, and it was his to behold, free of impediments, free of uncertainty, a mystery gradually shedding its manacles.

Gaia energetically began skipping around the tree which was the center of her universe. She was laughing happily, her sorrow becalmed by a sense of newness felt in the air, permeating her movements. Virgil was sleeping the sleep of the perpetually burdened, his back resting against the trunk of the tree. He left his slumber abruptly upon hearing Gaia’s exuberant chortling. She skipped towards him and bent down, taking his hands, so that he, too, could enjoy the sudden rush of feeling, the sudden realization that Ben and had found Andrew, that the world was going to change. The central tree was enveloped by luminous channels of unimpeded sunlight. The melody of the winged creatures flitting from bough to bough was possessed of a heavenly tone, richer, more intricate. Every blade of grass shown with a wondrous light. Virgil

felt the darkness leave him, as did Gaia, her mouth forming into a circle out of which gushed a song of victory and triumph, the dark half of her eradicated.

Dr. Eliot shifted in his bed, a quick intake of breath. His restive slumber, having been contaminated with ongoing nightmares, was supplanted by a bountiful wakefulness he had not felt for ages. Adjusting to this new sensation, feeling almost weightless, he regarded the room and noticed the myriad stacks of books, written by those like himself, prophets who predicted the disastrous malformation of order in the world through their creations. And all of these prophets were within him, trapped in a realm of torment. But something had changed, something immense, something he had long felt was improbable, illusory, a delusion of hope. Light was seeping through the room's one shuttered window. He got up from the bed and approached the window. He opened the shutters, and inviolate sunlight spilled through, illuminating his tired countenance. He sought the horizon and there it was, a pristine line unencumbered with haze or any other obfuscatory element. He smiled and said, "Ben did it. Ben found the unconscious."

Rebecca Gardner sat cradling her womb. The house felt empty, bereft of Andrew's presence. Then she felt a kick, movement within her. She sat up quickly, feeling something she could not immediately name, a wordless profundity, a surge of realization. Her eyes widened and she inhaled a deep channel of air. Andrew was alive. Andrew had been rescued by Ben. The

mystery behind Andrew's disappearance had been solved, all of this in confluence with an undeniable feeling of connectivity with all parties involved, thereby confirming what she had divulged to Ben before his departure, however deep had been her melancholy and sense of prolonged endarkenment. She stood up and approached the window, eased the shutters open, and sure enough, there was Ben leading Andrew up the walkway to the house's entrance. She rushed to the door, overwhelmed with inarticulate gladness. Opening the door, Rebecca fell into Andrew's tired arms, while Ben looked on in quiet elation. There would be no more sorrow, no more abysmal uncertainty. Victorious, Ben gave a nod and walked away, leaving Andrew and Rebecca contained in their loving embrace.

Ben walked the suburban street, in the direction of his residence. The speed at which he and Andrew had navigated the desolation induced in him a feeling that all had been a blur, ever since his defeat of the unconscious, the unraveling of the world's antagonist, its power gone, the vacuum in which it was placed divested of any form of escape. Ben was thrilled beyond words, and the smile he donned seemed possessed of a permanence, especially now that the secrets of reality had been disclosed to him, the struggle no longer weighing down his soul. He felt a connection to a power he could only equate to being the divine, and such a feeling propelled his steps forward with a happy celerity he had never felt before. Then he wondered about the woman whose breasts he had treasured in their moment of intimacy. Beatrice. She once more appeared before his mind's eye, clear and resplendent in her wondrous beauty. She pointed to her heart then she pointed skyward, before waving, her image dissolving. Ben knew thereupon that she

and he would meet again, on another plane of existence, as she, in her otherworldliness, was not of this earth, but was a divinity in whose company Ben had found himself that one wonderful night. He approached his residence and opened the door. Carol was sitting on the couch.

Detecting Ben's entrance, she got up and spoke:

“Well, speak of the devil,”

“Let's not,” Ben said.

Ben walked past Carol, and sat down at the dining room table. He fell into a posture of meditation. Then he raised a hand and waved it back and forth, at which moment, he felt Carol become suddenly tense.

“I just felt something,” she said, a hand raised to her mouth.

Ben placed his hands at his side and said, “I know, Carol. I am here now. The strain is gone. The world will change.”

Epilogue

Clayton Dunbar was eighteen years old, living in the settlement called Ender's Bend, working at his father's general store. The shelves were stacked with various items, necessities pluralistic in nature. Motes of dust could be seen circulating in the air. Without the general store, the inhabitants of the settlement went about their business with a certain law abiding conviction and consistency. Clayton's father, somewhat stooped and thoughtful of expression, emerged from the back of the general store and approached Clayton.

"Clayton, my dear boy," he said. "Are you as compelled by the mysteries of the universe as I am?"

"I suppose so."

"I remember when I was your age, living back east, subject to a multiplicity of curiosities, such that everything conveyed a profound strangeness. I would manage my perceptions according to the sway and pull of my moods. Thought would burgeon and transfix. I would want to read anything I could get my hands on, feeling that such a medium was more preferable a stimulus than conversing with others. My aloneness was not insufferable, but revelatory. I would immerse myself in the poetry of pariahs, and after reading the verse, all things would scintillate with a promise of epiphany. Then, one day, feeling somewhat restless, I encountered a book at a junk shop. The book was called *The Fate of the Mind*, and was written by Emanuel Perdu, a largely unknown author. I have it in the back of the store. You see me reading it from time to time. It is the most interesting book I have ever read, for it works according to the imagination of the reader. It is interactive. Here come to the back and let me show it to you."

The father and son crossed the partition into the back of the general store where there was a desk on which a formidable tome rested. Its binding was somewhat tattered and frayed. It had about it a certain senescence while still emitting a palpable force.

“Go ahead,” Clayton’s father said. “Open it up.”

Clayton picked up the book. He felt its weight. He was contending with his own sense of unknowing. When he opened the book, all he discerned was blank page after blank page, an inviolable whiteness, the smell of dust.

“What do you see?” his father asked.

“I see nothing.”

“Of course. You have within your hands a literary talisman. Everything that you see in the book reflects the content of your own philosophical leanings, your ideologies. You are young yet, inexperienced in the ways of thought, but your world, the portion of the universe that belongs to you, will alter in years to come, and no longer will you see the blank whiteness of each page but whole worlds to be read and embraced. You see, this wondrous book is largely unknown. There are few in circulation Here, let me read you a passage.”

Clayton’s father picked up the book somewhat guardedly, opened it and began to read:

“Only upon finding oneself in the intimate proximity of something wholly removed from normativity does one feel the presence of the transcendent, a state that subjects one to an otherness of sensation for which there are no adequate words of description. We will call this state, with its potentiality for personal transformation, a form of immersion that inundates one with unavoidable force, often upending one’s antecedent ideological stance with a new thought that pulsates in the mind with indefatigable clarity.”

Clayton was silent. His father closed the book and returned it to its place on the desk.

“This may read beyond the scope of your comprehension,” his father said, “but it may come to pass, that sometime in the future, you will encounter something not easily understood, and you will recall what I just read to you from this mysterious book. Only then will the profound dawn on you. And you will be compelled into knowing how this book works, how it melds to the soul, and reveals much that is hidden.”

Fort Mound. Morning was advancing. The sun was clear in the sky. The men of the fort went about their duties. Clayton was recumbent upon his cot in the barracks, restive, pensive, recalling the moment when his father had read the passage from *The Fate of the Mind*. He was recalling the moment with a certain newfound wonder. The memory was luminous in his mind, the passage, although difficult to comprehend at the time of its disclosure, was now seemingly possessed of a clarity that Clayton connected to the event of the stranger. “Got, got, got,” the man had said, clearly contained in a state of vast discomposure. Then he was gone.

Clayton felt a sudden calm fall over him, like a counterpane providing assuaging warmth for a body afflicted by a deep cold. His thoughts became vivid in their circulation. He gazed into his mind whereupon an image materialized. He saw a robed figure, somewhat statuesque, sitting in the lotus position surrounded by a lambent whiteness. The figure’s countenance displayed an expression of deep concentration, eyes partially closed, lips moving without the emission of sound. Then figure’s eyes opened and Clayton saw that they were a preternatural iridescence, piercing and terribly alive.

“Hello, Clayton Dunbar,” the figure said. “You are in a deep meditative state, allowing me to converge with your soul. I am Emanuel Perdu, the entity that composed *The Fate of the Mind* which your father devotedly appreciates, and within which exist the mysteries of the universe, privy to those who have a mind to search for meaning above the inherent chaos of the world. What you call the stranger, that man who happened upon the fort, saying ‘got, got, got’, is what I call a representative of the grandest of all enigmas. He was speaking a dead language. What he was actually saying was, ‘God, God, God,’ for that is his reality, an extra-dimensional being that knows of God’s existence. There are others like him, roaming that which is unexplored, seeking to bring their knowledge to those with strong propensities for thought and feeling. Your father knows. And now you know. The blank pages of my book will now be filled with words that you, too, can read. But for now, bathe in the running currents of enlightenment.”

Clayton felt the image disintegrate in his mind. He inhaled sharply, feeling an incursion of insight. As though waking from a strange dream, Clayton rubbed his eyes vigorously. His surroundings seemed contained in an aura of clarity. He thought of his father, managing the general store, continuously involved in *The Fate of the Mind*, like a pilgrim peregrinating cerebral terrain that was inaccessible to most.

The sense of change within Clayton was immense. Were others of the fort experiencing something similar? What of Chief and Officer Richman?

Clayton detached himself from his cot. He looked to his carbine leaning against the wall. An implement of potential violence. Yet the power it emanated, when juxtaposed to the vision of Emanuel Perdu, seemed to diminish considerably. Nevertheless, he grabbed it and proceeded to the exterior of the barracks. Fellow officers were going about their business, attending to the regularity and rhythm of orders and duties. The mid-morning sun was perched in the sky,

encompassed by a brush of listlessly passing clouds, their lambency radiant and aglow. Clayton crossed the yard, noting the ground and the way it was impressed upon by myriad boot-prints. He felt at once removed from and connected to the surrounding goings-on. All things upon which his powers of discernment found placement seemed to coruscate with a new element. Yet he could not put the effect into words, so far reaching was its presence, so possessed of the capacity to saturate perception.

Here on out, Clayton knew, with a sudden momentous movement of certainty, that the world in which he lived would pulsate anew with an otherness to which he could attribute the internal vision of Emanuel Perdu, the event of the stranger, and the influence of his father.

Vita

Jonathan Maltz holds a B.A. in English from the University of Michigan-Dearborn. While pursuing academic priorities there, he involved himself in the exploration of various creative mediums, among which included poetry and short fiction, some of the projects of which were published in the student run literary and fine arts journal called Lyceum. He is a consummate drummer, familiar with such styles as jazz, funk, and rock n' roll. Over the years, he has embraced a number of musical projects in the metropolitan Detroit area, among which include Woodward Smoke, Black Tie Circus, Zozette and the Groove, The Do-Rites, and The Dirty Elizabeths. He is currently playing drums in band called Noah and the Arc-men. He has worked as a harbor attendant at a local yacht club, a basketball referee, a circulation aid at a library, and a delivery driver for Panera.