

Franco “Bifo” Berardi and
Massimiliano Geraci
**Killing Swarm,
Part 2**

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e-flux journal #104 — november 2019 Franco “Bifo” Berardi and Massimiliano Geraci
Killing Swarm, Part 2

We would like to present some excerpts from our novel KS, translated from the Italian Morte ai Vecchi (Baldini & Castoldi, 2016), that will soon be published in a full English translation.

Why are frantic swarms of teenagers killing old women and men all around the territory of the Union? Do the mega techno-delic corporations (Maya Unlimited, Happiness Inside Corporation) have something to do with the explosions of slaughters?

What is the role of Lucifer, the young genius of intimate software? And what is the responsibility of Federica, the expert in psychomorphogenesis who has sold her soul to the ambiguous Mister Mehta? Her old father, obsessed by her inexplicable death, is in search of an answer to these questions, together with the young journalist Alex Turri, whose mind-boggling interpretation you can read in the following excerpt from the novel.

– FB & MG

(See also “Killing Swarm, Part 1.”)

Tom and Lola

Tom dragged himself out of the unmade bed. He wasn’t exactly sure how old he was. Or rather, he knew he was sixteen, but he could have just as well been fifteen, or worse, seventeen. It took him a few seconds to be sure. He had spent the day, another day, shoveling anxiety. He threw it over the fence of his existence, into the yard of his fellow persons, who were doing the same with *their* fellow persons in a perpetual motion of foolishness in which each one found themselves buried, just like the day before and just like the one to come ... and each day, just a little more worn out.

The controller hanging from his neck tapped his hairless chest. He decided, after looking at the amber display of the decoder, that it was time for some sex. The device contained pirated keys to decrypt transmissions bouncing across the ether illegally from one satellite to the next. After calling Lola he went into the bathroom. He hesitated for a moment in front of the shower and pirouetted ninety degrees towards the medicine cabinet above the sink. Forced to confront his reflection in the mirror, he couldn’t help but notice that his eyebrows were already starting to grow back in. He stretched the skin out with his left thumb and shaved off the hated hairs with the first razor in the world that had six implacable blades. For the hair on his head, the depilatory shampoo had worked so egregiously well that it didn’t need any further upkeep. He loved it. He threw away the razor cartridge (even though it promised ten impeccable shaves, he knew that the second one was always less smooth than the first). Then he opened the cabinet and took out the box of Viagra. In truth, it



Image: Istubalz

was illegally produced sildenafil citrate from China, sold on the internet at an unbeatable price. On the box was a tiger with a thick coat revealing its four curved canines, but its feral majesty was inadvertently made clumsy and ridiculous by a pair of fake dark-brown horns just behind its ears. Tiger's teeth, and their horns, are symbols of virility in China, as well as ingredients found in ancient medicines.

Back in his bedroom, he realized he didn't have enough time to swallow the two 100 mg pills. He hated the forty-five minutes it took for their blue promise of pleasure to inundate his corpora cavernosa, constricting the blood vessels to hold back that bit of anemic excitement which made the generally flat line of his penogram jump. He placed the rhomboid pills on a piece of paper that he folded in half, and with the bottom of a beer bottle, he crushed them. He put the powder on a burnt spoon, added 2 ml of saline, and diluted it with the flame of his trusty lighter. He sucked the bluish liquid up in a hypodermic syringe, removed the needle, spat on it, and slipped it into his anus. It was an infallible system, suitable for almost all drugs (except coke, because the burning was unbearable), and helped the heart pump the desired effects through the body in ten minutes or less. In her usual timely way, his friend rang the bell before Tom had time to roll a joint and smoke it alone to avoid the hassle of swapping saliva with her.

They almost never spoke, yet he knew he loved her. They had known each other since middle school, when he was still able to stand hugs. Now, he had learned to inflate a bubble of impermeability around himself, which he could expand or contract depending on the circumstances, varying his distance from the rest of the animate world and trying, as much as possible, never to have any part of it touch his skin. He hated any form of contact. He worried that some particle of himself might escape his control, or slip onto a body that didn't belong to him – or worse, that a heat particle from a strange body might infiltrate his pores or his mucous membranes, like an insidious and allergy-inducing grain of pollen.

She knew him well, so without being asked, she sat on the other end of the couch where Tom was sprawled.

"How are you?" she asked, not expecting a reply. She would have liked to hold out her hand, but it was useless to take that risk: it would have unleashed an angry tirade on how depressing it was for him to mix his body's scents with those of whomever, or to change the pH of his own skin and risk an itching attack.

Tom got up and put the key in the decoder. He switched on the monitor and the room started

trembling with the votive cathode light. Two bleeding figures kneeling, one gripping the other, forehead to forehead, in a singular, supreme defeat. Frenzied cries of exhortation. The bars raised up in the air. The sky an X-ray, scratched by uncertain stars, with a rip down the middle. And an otherworldly night, blacker than the night outside, boiling pitch pouring over the frozen dance, quilted with red flashes and the sparking heat of eyes. The Erostek ET232 droned quietly, unleashing its electric gallop on the tensed-relaxed-tensed body of the boy who had, in the meantime, unzipped his fly. "Clear! Again! 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... Clear!" That image had never left him, nor the sizzling sound of the defibrillator, the crazed hands, the tense body in an arch of hysteria. It suffocated him, fascinated him, excited him. Electrodes connected, one at the base of his member, around the scrotum, the other just under his gland, and an anal plug that jumped with every involuntary muscle contraction.

Lola was motionless, fixated on Tom's pleasure, which flew out in liquefied aquamarine sparks, edged with crackling Antarctic blue and sprays of magenta, like a Kirlian photograph.

He started touching his chest. He lay his head back, clenched his teeth, squeezed his eyes shut. Until he felt himself flowing out of himself in a dense lake of unconsciousness.

At that point, on his right cheekbone, a sideways eight began to glow – the infinity symbol.

With his pants around his ankles, he turned to look at Lola, stretching out to her an index finger dripping with tepid mother-of-pearl. Lola stretched out her arm and her hand, pleased at the organic contact. It seemed to her that Tom's sperm, like a conductive paste, was transmitting everything he was feeling to her. They smiled at each other for a few interminable seconds, index finger against index finger, until the seed thickened and on Lola's left cheekbone, the same infinity sign appeared, but red like a Mogok ruby, and preceded by a minus sign.

The Turri Hypothesis

Something happened that Alex Turri couldn't have expected. After the massacre at the bookstore, the editor in chief sent for him. He seemed shaken. He had spiked the article on the beer warehouse, because it was too fanciful. But now he wanted to get back to the subject.

As soon as Alex sat in the armchair in front of his desk, Biagetti said to him in a menacing yet tender way, "Look, Turri. I don't subscribe to your bullshit. But our readers deserve to hear all the sides of this story. I'll tell you, this whole business is weird. It's not your usual crime reporting. You know well that there is pressure on us, on all the papers, not to shine too much of

a spotlight on these reports of old people getting killed in the street. The fact is, the police don't know what's going on, and they actually don't care too much. They can't find the head of this, they don't understand what group is behind it. And the few arrests they've made didn't help solve the mystery: it was just kids, glassy-eyed kids who didn't even know what they were doing there. So, I want to ask you to rewrite the story you gave me yesterday. Try to be less fanciful. Leave out all those stories about the birds and the bees. Get right to the point."

So Turri wrote something like this:

For the past few months, in many places on the planet, groups of young people have been murdering old people without any apparent motive, and in widely different circumstances.

Generally, these are actions committed by a group that forms on the spot. After the atrocities are committed, the group disbands in a matter of seconds.

To explain these crimes, authorities have been formulating a hypothesis of an international conspiracy that aims to eliminate the elderly. No declaration has accompanied these actions, and no group has offered any explanation, but officials say the wave of violence may be connected to a demographic shift in recent

decades, which has led to a sharp increase in the elderly population.

Those born in the middle of the twentieth century do not seem to have any intention of giving in. They are physically strong, well-nourished, and vaccinated against maladies that at one time eliminated humans. They are clever and competent, and they don't give up their work, their salaries, or their power.

To be sure, there are many reasons to hate this unwieldy generation: the senile disillusionment of those who once were rebellious hippies has now become a stone around the neck of all humanity. Their ravenous will to live has consumed everything that was consumable. Nothing new seems possible any longer, because they have already done it.

It seems as though the stage has been set for an intergenerational war.

A new form of terrorism? A spreading civil war to claim space in the job market and on the social scene? From the moment this phenomenon gained attention, this has been the only explanation put forth. It seems easy to understand – obvious, even.

Authorities have questioned hundreds of people, especially militants from Uncertainty International, the organization founded in the last

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Image: Flavio Marziano.

century by fanatical Marxist anarchists. But this line of questioning has yet to bear fruit. There has been no evidence of a terrorist organization, there are no heads or militants or claims of responsibility. And now the investigation has stalled.

Try to imagine, for a moment, that the demographic question has nothing to do with this. That there is no conscious plot, no intent to commit organized geronticide. Let's try to hypothesize that the phenomenon exists for other reasons – deeper and more mysterious ones.

As a reporter, I can attest that I witnessed one of these executions. I happened to be casually strolling in an area on the outskirts of town that was mostly deserted, when I heard a noise behind me. I took cover and watched a dance. There was a group of about twenty young men and women. Their movements were coordinated and very elaborate, and they seemed to be in a sort of hyper-lucid trance-like state. They attacked a dusty old man who was dozing at the entrance of an abandoned warehouse. They reduced him to a bleeding pulp. In less than a minute, the action was over, and the assassins flew off, still dancing, in a luminous witches' sabbath.

I had the impression that the participants in this macabre ritual were not conscious of what they were doing, although they were wide awake. This was how it seemed to me, but I couldn't swear to it. Their dance was accompanied by music I had never heard before. What I saw does not at all resemble the political vendettas of the past, nor terrorist violence. It looked more like a religious ritual of purification.

Like the vibration of a many-bodied organism in search of harmony.

Just Another Ordinary Day

It would happen to her in the street, in the hustle and bustle of the crowd, or else in her bedroom or at school. It always ended with a restorative shower to recover everything she had screamed out without anyone turning to look at her or offer an opinion as to what was happening to her.

A bag slung across her body was embroidered with the logo of Happiness Inside Corporation. Not one hiss escaped her screaming fits, not one resonant wind gust. She spat out all her rage and disgust, her hatred and her love for Tom, and entrusted it to that discrete and bottomless bag. Then, every evening, she literally emptied the bag. She connected a fiber optic cable to her laptop and transferred all the data, all the breath she had squeezed out of her chest – with tensed neck, lips almost at the point of shredding, and eyes red – and she could listen to her screams again and catalogue them, memorize the day and hour and location, the

reason for each one, and the thought that had slipped under her skin when she had started screaming at the top of her lungs, without anyone hearing her.

Her father was only rarely around, so there was no danger of him asking where she had been all night and why her purple tights were ripped up. He wouldn't have even asked her about the drops of blood on her canvas shoes. He wouldn't have noticed them. He would have placed them in that anonymous spot in the backdrop across which his life slid.

A backdrop where blood is dry ink, a dead language.

No one would have ever asked her about the screams. What does it matter whether a scream is nearby or far away? If it rises from the ground or slices like a razor? Defend his partner pissing himself from fear or from gulping down too much beer and now the foam fills his mouth it trickles out boils over consumes bit by bit the asphalt a primordial soup from which something is about to be born immersed in seething silence no scream the helicopters that tremble hung from the sky the white invades the night cracks it flays your back and makes you bleed and your skin screams no one can hear it no one can touch my skin no one can touch my orgasm the lightning the electronic magnesium that explodes and everything is white suddenly white. Hysterical fingertips tap the eyes. OPEN!!! The crazed phosphoresces hurt the brain that splatters everywhere keep your distance 1-2-3 clear! Again! 1-2-3 clear! His father's chest thick with disgustingly curled white hairs has stopped it has slipped just next to the manhole cover in front of its dusty hole yellowed stinking pages.

He would never forget the smell of his father. It was what he hated the most. Right as he was dying, while the doctors tried to resuscitate him – body arched and flogged by electric shocks – Tom locked himself in the bathroom and buried his father beneath the hot spurts of his hatred.

From that moment, Tom didn't let anyone touch him.

Daniel's room is sunk in a semi-darkness invaded from time to time by the shimmer of a plasma screen. Veronica just sent him a clip on her phone of the two of them at the rave the other night.

[...]

When Veronica, wearing her usual T-shirt that said "Narcotrafficking" on it, tried waking up that morning, a dizzy spell threw her back on the bed. A wash of thoughts in her head. Aside from perhaps the remains of some landscape to keep her afloat, her eyes lacked anything to latch onto and were drowning in themselves. A sense of estrangement rolled through her body,

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clamping shut her teeth and her fingers. Now that she was no longer seven years old, now that she was more than twice that age, she used to put a Rembrandt tablet under her tongue and those memories that she recognized as hers burst forth before her, they collapsed ruinously and were scattered in a disordered mess on the floor.

She didn't recognize them, yet they agitated her muscles, tendons, and synapses, which all resonated with the celluloid unspooling in freefall: gloomy days spent hiding under the bed; turning impromptu somersaults, so full of joy you had to yell to keep from bursting; very hot baths; water overflowing the edge of the tub, her face dappled with quivering suds when resurfing from underwater explorations; and above all, the room for hugs, where you could throw your arms around the neck of whomever, whenever you felt like it, without a moment's hesitation.

It had been years since she'd hugged anyone, since anyone had really hugged her. She was weighed down by a heap of question marks, commas, and parentheses, by merciless punctuation that kept her words and actions from flowing freely.

She was flattened at the bottom of an aquarium, in a constant free dive that made her

ears explode, and she saw life going on around her as though it were deformed. It lengthened and contracted with every ripple she made. She couldn't move, and this quickly distorted every perspective, collapsing the vanishing points. She transmitted her instability to the surroundings, a fluctuation that made it impossible for her to grab on to something. To grab on to anything. All her memories had dissolved into that uncontrollable fluctuation. This was why she took Rembrandt, so she could see them scroll by as though on a roll of celluloid. She knew they were hers, those memories, but she didn't recognize them. Her memories from ten years earlier when she threw her arms around her mother's neck, and her memories from two nights ago – which she felt in her muscles and tendons, but didn't recognize – when she had come across the two old corpses, like buoys tossed around by a stormy sea, by a storm which had its origin in herself. She had bludgeoned them repeatedly in order to finally attain a bit of calm.

[...]

Veronica slips off her T-shirt and turns to Lola, who doesn't take her eyes off the texts that seem to appear on the reflective surface of water. Tom is curled up in a ball. Cocooned. His

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Image: Barbara Gaddi

arms around his knees, which touch his hairless chest and chin. He keeps his eyes down and looks up from time to time to make sure no one is approaching his sphere of safety. Daniele stares at Veronica's tits, which are pointed, in spite of all the rumors circulating in class. Veronica slides over to his feet, a big cat swinging her haunches. She grips Daniele's knees to climb up and with her eyes on his, she stretches her legs. With her hand she unbuttons him without their eyes breaking contact. Not a blink. Their irises overlap like incandescent circles of twin planets.

[...]

"We should get going," Tom mumbles, throwing his cigarette butt in an empty bottle. Daniele looks at him as he strokes Veronica's head in his lap. On her lips, warm glassy filaments reflect the changing colors of his T-shirt.

Lola hasn't opened her mouth. She's the first to get up to go to school.

Our Lady of Forgetfulness

It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. I just need to stay calm.

I'm restrained in this hospital bed, and I can't feel my body anymore. My feet are many leagues away, they are beyond the range of the most powerful telescope. Everything blurs together. I am the crazed center, the unstable nucleus of an imminent catastrophe. The subject falls far from the verb and the object lands somewhere in the void.

Matter is an aggregate of syllables. Exploding phonemes. I am forced to speak. So I won't vanish. So I won't die. Or keep dying. And I can't finish. I'll keep leaving a trail of verbal dust behind me. A deadly wake. The spoken word becomes essential when life stops happening to you. Loghost. The ghost word that lingers around us even after death. But I am not dead.

Time runs backwards before the mattress the white sheets and the echo of the drops through the IV and then the accident that scrambled your memory in an explosion of glass glistening in the sun. *Back to the stars. Running in circles.* It's not easy to go back to what we are.

A river is all of its molecules, with no beginning and no end, no descending, no rising, every moment conscious of its entire self. You swallow air and someone else suffocates.

Sitting up, knees against chest, wrapped in a wool blanket that covers your head like a hood.

Isolated and lost in thought, heart hidden in darkness.

Calm and strong as a mountain.

I take refuge in you.

A blue quiet warms my body. It nestles by my side, slides down my legs.

All the magic of that first time in a tepee.

The rhythm of the drum – the secure breath of the universe – and the great fire at the center.

I am the smoke that rises to the sky. We are anywhere.

I smell the flesh loosen and fall off the bones towards you, a suffocating red tide that pulls me forward. I press my lips to your hand. I hit the road, immobile: a wind-foal on the grass. I could trace a map of your scent.

A violet tension stirs in my groin, burns my forehead with infinite golden flames.

I know the pain of an oar that dare not row.

My life as a pulp. Spread everywhere. In the inescapable ocean of suspended interrogations. From the non-answers. Present and past indistinguishable. Nothing unfolds. For me everything is significant, I never throw anything away. Everything can be used to hold things together.

It was their last summer sitting around a fire under the most incredible blue sky that they had ever seen. Beyond the forest. Three young people in a tent, under a cold rain. That morning the sun had disappeared, swallowed by three thousand *oms* resounding in unison across the valley. The young people embraced, jumped, yelled, rolled on the ground with their dogs. It had gotten cold. Suddenly, in the sky a cobalt ring appeared that illuminated the leaves in an emerald light, that ignited erections in coral. The smell was still that of stars crumbled under ash. Dancing in the nude to the djembe rhythms, sitting in concentric circles, putting your hands on the shoulders of the brother in front of you ... converging in the exact center, where a boy whom you saw a few days earlier is thrashing around (with a book in his hand and a whirlwind of words in his head that shot out at random), while drums roll under hundreds of fingers projecting out from the minds of all the brothers who are focused on healing.

Luca squirms on the bed.

Worried, the nurses murmur in unison:

Our Lady of Forgetfulness

Scatter a handful of forgetting

Over the eyes of this young man.

Milena calls Doctor Sibelius to hurry to the aid of the fallen young angel.

Wrists and ankles bound to the bed, he wanders the corridors of his mind.

Valérie stretched out on the grass, or floating on her back, aquatic confusion in the sea her nose her chin her breasts imitate the profile of the mountain. Federica also has green eyes deeply encrusted with exhaustion and her heart is a soft pulsing emerald. Valérie, cigarette in hand, leans on the blue wooden table in the kitchen and smiles at Mel, her eleven-year-old son, who stands nude with his back towards the window warmed by the sun. In the enchanted

light of evening, Valérie and Mel hug and there is something maternal and something dark, something poised to strike, and calm breathes slowly in their embrace. And there is a polestar behind Valérie's closed eyes and a delirious grace in the hand that cradles her son's shoulder blade and a shiver in the hand that slides to his hip and Mel gives himself over to it with only a towel slung just below his waist that lets us see the pale swell of a buttock.

The light is waning and a cold wind presses its lips against Luca's back, rolling a thought down his spine with a shiver.

Gilles's skinny arm is stretched between the aluminum bars of the bed. His skin is translucent and withered, suddenly devoid of the muscles it was wrapped around. The needle is fixed in place with adhesive tape. Life precipitates drop by drop with a terrible rumble from the glass bottle that hangs from a hook like a sad animal. A skinned one.

There is no horizon here. There is no continuity of action, there's no path, no model, no past and no future. Only a desperate fragmented present taking over.

A turquoise towel on your head. Body semi-clothed in a red tunic with black embroidered edging. The knurled black plastic recording

device with a red record button is on the floor, to record the throngs of voices escaping your head the notebooks the dirty mattress, the crumpled Kleenex with all the numbers that surface in your head scribbled frantically in lipstick before it's too late, before they are lost. The little bottles of dried-out nail polish on the nightstand, a plywood board nailed to a worn-out chair, the aluminum hospital bed. Everything in your entropic room infinitely expands and inexorably slides and you try to keep it on a magnetic track, to stop the galaxies that fray before your limitless eyes that hang in the void.

I remember those years always changing to red; a shot of amphetamine right to the brain; a sun blocked at the edge of sunset; the forehead beaded with cold sweat and the tattoo needle that injects tigers at the base of the spine, and for God's sake these were the years of Op art, the years without a center, the years of gravity gone mad, it crushed us, reducing us to immobility or to indecorous creeping and a moment later sent us up in the air to float with a feeling of nausea under our feet and Luca next to Federica's body, asleep with his head in his hands lost in the few dark stains on the bloody bedspread after a ceremony of psychic dismemberment, his brain is numb and it smashes in his hands with a

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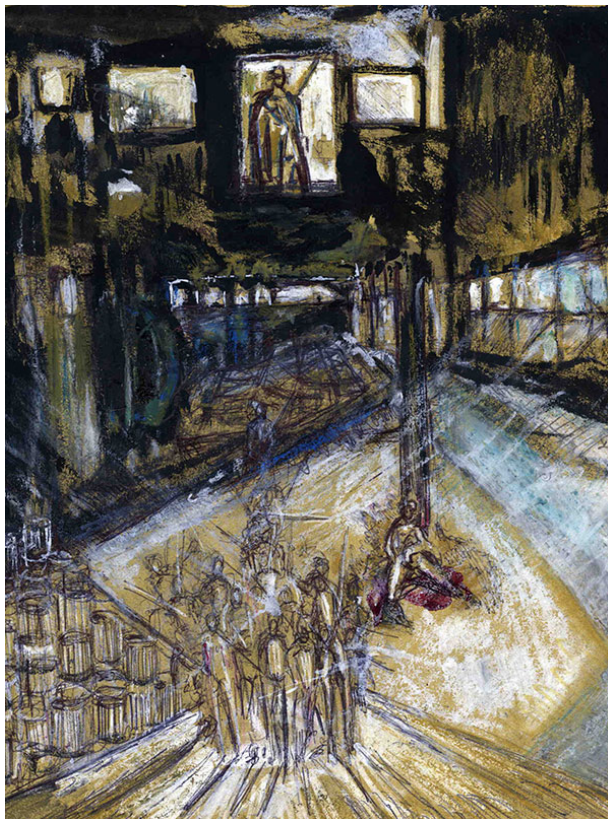


Image: Barbara Gaddi

gelatinous sound while he positions it on his cock as on a warm nest.

And the boy finally stopped thrashing while that crazy woman outside the tepee kept spitting and cursing the moon making herself a mask of spit and dirt. His heart is at the point of bursting, his back stretches out and words rest at the bottom of his head, finally at peace, while Luca loses himself with thousands of fingers that rap on the taut skin of his conscience. This was how the boy died, a blue smoke that exhales to the mouth of the sky crammed with masticated stars.

It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. I just need to stay calm.

Pico Della Mirandola

The headmaster swallowed and then continued: "In the Oration on the Dignity of Man, written in 1492, Pico della Mirandola proclaimed that our Heavenly Father, when He created Adam, realized He was running short of archetypes. Don't you see?! He didn't have any more ontological essences available to Him, and He could no longer essentialistically define the creations he had before him. Problem? No problem. For God, no problem is a problem, you see? And sure enough, how was the matter settled? Simple. Adam was defined by no essence, no archetype, by no motherfucking definition. He was not – he simply existed, so he was free to define himself. This, for Pico, was Man: a free existence with no predetermined objectives and no intrinsic ontological determinations – the undisputed author of his own adventure. This is Pico's Man. And this is the man who put the 'human' in 'Humanism,' Lorenzo Valla. The man who truly deserves to be called Man."

The headmaster slumped forward at that point. For a few moments, perhaps even a minute, he kept his head bowed forwards. Then he sat back up, as though someone had given an invisible metal key behind his back a few turns, and looked Alex straight in the eye. He looked gloomy, agitated, shaken.

He continued, enunciating every syllable: "But God returned to set things straight. Perhaps the liberty of humankind no longer suited Him. He decided to complete the work He had left half-undone with Adam. Man needs to be defined, completed, concluded. The freedom of man had become a mortal danger to God. He realized, the old Fool, that the freedom of man was erasing Him. So, He returned to take control of the situation. Don't you get it?! God has decided to complete His work by blocking synaptic pathways that had been left undefined and malleable, and introducing deterministic automatisms where before there had been only

free will. And this adjustment does not take place on the level of the archetypal ideal, but that of the neural-telematic one. Don't you get it?!"

While the small device in his jacket pocket recorded everything, Alex listened to the speech, fascinated.

"The interconnected system of digital teletransmission is already penetrating the biological heritage of the current generation. There is a widespread process that is wiring young minds. Can you understand what the problem is with these people? The problem is that we can no longer decode the signals. And they have the same problem. They can no longer read signals that are transparent to us. They see through a totally different cognitive grid. Their grid has deterministic aspects to it: a sign is a stimulus which excites preset neural pathways and predicts prewired responses. Their first objective is to get rid of the unwired. That's why they're killing us."

The headmaster interrupted his train of thought and looked at Alex, furrowing his brow, as though he had all of a sudden been assailed by a doubt. "Exactly how old are you?" he asked.

blueFitness

The day arrived for Isidoro's departure for the blueFitness Residence, a thermal resort and spa run by Happiness Inside Corporation, in the bluest scenic setting of the Gulf. Martina had packed his suitcase. Isidoro had let her pull him along and his resistance had finally crumbled. The residence was part of a chain of spa resorts conceived for the senior market – a market that Inside was looking at with increasing interest.

Though Inside still dominated the sectors of Entertainment and Collective Mind Time Management, it fell short of a total monopoly.

A threatening new competitor had emerged on the horizon, Maya Unlimited, a mysterious company headed by Sri Radhakrishnan that had established itself in the market with the launch of an anti-panic bracelet that could erase the feeling of agoraphobic anxiety that was growing among adolescents.

Maya had unleashed its legal department on Inside's monopolistic tendencies, and had even funded an aggressive media campaign against the leading company, accusing Inside of encouraging addiction and dependency in the minds of its customers. Sri Radhakrishnan had publicly denounced Inside. According to his claims, the world's first psychoengineering company was trying to control the minds of its users. Maya's philosophy ran in the opposite direction: it supported mental decontamination, care rather than control, relaxation in place of excitement.

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In spite of this offensive, which had culminated in a hearing in front of the Union Parliament, Inside had maintained its supremacy on the market. Thanks to the tight protective web of clientelism that it had woven over the years, Inside still held 58 percent of the youth market in the Entertainment and Happiness sectors. It was now poised to invade the Senior segment, which was steadily becoming the most populous and well-to-do. With this in mind, Inside had launched a new campaign, centered on a single word: LIMITLESS.

Happiness should never end, screamed the new advertising philosophy, which aimed at erasing all awareness of human decay. There would be no trace of anything that hinted at the intrinsic perishability of the organic matter that bodies and minds are made of.

Sri Radhakrishnan refused to speak to the press, and had painstakingly avoided being photographed for twenty years – from the moment he had abandoned a glittering film career to become a reclusive guru to a community of mystical bioengineers. He interrupted his media blackout to appear in a two-minute spot in which he warned humanity against the totalitarianism of happiness. This legendary appearance across all global media led to a 12 percent increase in Maya Unlimited's stock price. The old actor with a marvelous face that could still seduce female audiences worldwide revealed that at age sixty he could be even more charming and handsome than his admirers remembered. He shook his long silvery hair and, smiling with his green-violet eyes, he proclaimed that the beauty of a face depends on the soul that it expresses, not on chemicals that are injected subcutaneously.

But Inside reacted to this with nonchalance. Unnamed officials from the company read a brief statement in front of television cameras, which stated that the ravings of fanatics nostalgic for the past would not stop the progress of the human race.

Having tamped down the political outcry and the media attention, Boundless Inside, the spinoff that focused on senior products, had opened a number of blueFitness centers with the slogan "Happiness has no age limit." And crowds of oldsters with scaly skin and large beige liver spots on their necks had hurried to sign up for electrofitness classes to rejuvenate themselves, while thousands of rich pre-corpses, who yearned to be revitalized, reserved rooms in one of the thermal spas where high-tech therapies hid behind a completely natural façade.

Isidoro left in the morning, after turning in his grades to the school office. He didn't even want to think about what the headmaster had said to him the day before. Retaliation against

the students seemed like such an absurd idea to him that he didn't take it seriously. Forza often tried to impress others by making highly combative proposals. He took pleasure in provocation. Isidoro had no time to concern himself with that folly. He needed to escape, heal, and forget. He needed to steer clear of the ravings of the unbalanced old man.

Babylonia Is Sad

The Valla Institute was buzzing with police officers and journalists in the days following the incident. The discovery of their classmate hanged in the john summoned the students back, even though classes were over. Alex tried to slip into their lives. He transcribed stolen interviews, monitored their chat rooms, and sent questions to their smartphones. "School of Horrors," it had come to be called. "Babylonia is sad" was written on a wall behind the school. He reread his notes.

"Laroxyl, Anafranil, Tofranil, Vividyl, Surmontil. I know the tricyclics well. I could write a book about them. I also know their generic names: amitriptyline, clomipramine, imipramine, nortriptyline, desipramine. And I know how they work. My father is a psychiatrist. He explained to me what neurotransmitters are and that deficiencies in them can cause mood swings. 'It can make you lose your sparkle,' Mom says. I know that Tofranil or Vividyl mostly act on the noradrenergic neurons, while Laroxyl and Anafranil work on the serotonergic system. Not all tricyclics are the same. I can tell you because I know about them. Some of them calm you down so you don't feel fear roiling in your belly, churning like the centrifuge in a washer. Others don't calm you down at all, they give you a need to do things, to pace around in the house, bedroom-kitchen-living room-kitchen-bedroom. You don't feel like doing anything in particular – it's enough to just roam around the house. But tricyclics do have one thing in common. They dry out your mouth and leave your tongue feeling like a rough piece of cardboard, like if you smoked ten joints in a row. I went around with my little bottle of Xerotin mouth spray, and that jerk Claudio, my youngest brother, would always say, 'If you want I can spit in your mouth.' He's a moron, like all twelve-year-olds. And then your hands shake. And your legs, but it's hard to explain about the legs. If you stretch out your arm and you're holding something, everyone can see you shaking. But your legs, even if you stretch them out, it's not like they're shaking a lot. It's more of an internal tremor, like a deep tingling feeling, like when your leg falls asleep and it hurts. It has nothing to do with circulation. Sometimes the tingling feels good, maybe too good. It's a pleasant feeling that you can't stand,

you want it to stop. My dad said this is an important lesson to learn. Can too much pleasure hurt you? I dunno. I'm not sure I understand. You?"

"But with Seroxat you can't come. You feel a melting feeling in the pit of your stomach, you move faster and you feel yourself throbbing, you give it your all and you break out in sweat. You lose your senses a little and you feel like you're about to shoot your load ... and then nothing. You're still inside Veronica, the redhead with the 'Narcotrafficking' T-shirt, but you can't come. It feels like you'll never come again, at least not this time. But not even the next time. And then, after a few fucks like that, or a few non-fucks like that, you stop thinking about sex. You stop seeing sex scenes in your head. You can always watch them on the internet but it's not the same. In place of sex there is nothing, just a sort of luminous darkness, a half-darkness, a contradiction stuck inside your eyes. And you don't think about sex even if you force yourself to, when before you thought about it at least 1500 times a day. That's what Seroxat does."

"I was five years old the first time I wanted to die with all my might. Then again at age eight. The only way to do it was to jump off the balcony. I wasn't sure life would end once I was shattered on the ground. I would look down and think maybe a gate would swing out and get in the way. My body might be stopped, but something else would have kept falling forever. That terrorized me to the point that I am still here. The most I've done is go up on tiptoe and swing a leg over the other side to get a little taste of the void."

"I'm beautiful. Everyone says so. I let people touch me hoping that someone will find me ..."

A moment. Alex had to stop to catch his breath. Then he got a grip on himself and said, Poor me! What kind of mess did I burrow into? Elusive young people, persistence of vision, human stains, traces of breath on a mirror, fragments, leftovers, a vitreous dust that sparkles as it swirls. I hear them talking all at the same time, a tangle of chatter. They are talking alone, for the most part, near others who also talk alone. I never stop writing to them. Writing at this point means dirtying a few more pages, nothing more, writing that veers off course but cannot be stopped.

In the City of Judges

The city on the hill was perfectly tidy. This guaranteed the existence of legal order. They investigated, they evaluated, justice was served. The aim of punishment was to bring offenders back to integrity, never succumbing to excess. There they knew, there they willed, and what was willed must be – it was not ours to ask what it might mean. This established the law. And that

city on the hill was the city of law. When Isidoro arrived there, he was dizzy from the trip, and sleepy. The weather was cooler at that altitude. He took a taxi and asked to go to the Hall of Investigations. He climbed the long white marble staircase that led to the atrium where Justice Marè was waiting. She had begun looking into the unstoppable slaughter of the elderly, the first of her colleagues to do so, back when it was still thought possible to trace it back to guilty parties.

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Excerpted from *Morte ai Vecchi* (Baldini & Castoldi, 2016).
This excerpt is translated from the Italian by Deborah Wassertzug.

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e-flux journal #104 — november 2019 Franco "Bifo" Berardi and Massimiliano Geraci
Killing Swarm, Part 2