

*The sky is bright and smiling. Clouds drift lazily through a gentle breeze and trees rustle their leaves in the shine of the noon sun. Birds flit about joyfully and chirrup little cries of glee to each other as they ride the warm drafts. The sidewalks outside are lightly trafficked, as are the darkly striped roads that vanish in the distance. The time for commute has temporarily passed, and the relative peace will remain for several hours more. I see all this from my windowed perch, up from the city streets by several stories, not enough to be dizzying but just enough to give a respectable view. I smile at the beautiful day and decide to relish the weather with a light stroll.*

*I step down from the large sill below my window onto shining hardwood. A carpet blankets the center of the floor with vibrant colorations and seemingly-random spiraling patterns. I waltz, still smiling, to an open door on the other side of the room, and the hallway opens to my vision, carpeted and decorated with grandiose paintings. Nothing to go awry...*

And then I wake, eyes still shut tight, just trying to hold the screams of frustration inside. I lift my lids, slowly, regretfully, and gaze up again at the same blank ceiling. Flowers and faded emblems criss-cross like dancers on the walls. A gaping hole in the wall that once held a window is now not even a frame, blown open savagely by explosives, pebbles of rubble scattered below. Garbage of all sorts litters the scarred and gouged wood floor.

My cot sits in a corner, old, hard, of no comfort. I huddle upon it, the greasy, thin sheets ineffectually draped across my pallid frame, trying to come to terms with the facts, that what I had seen was a mere dream, a ghost of times long past, and that this painfully familiar barren room is all that I have left now...

Outside, the city is still. If it has risen as I have, then it won't show. The bloodied streets are clogged with abandoned cars and military roadblocks. Lifeless monoliths of buildings stand tall in all directions, peppered by square holes and collapsing wings, massive and foreboding and empty. Evacuated by war. Like mine.

I stand up on two unsteady feet and hobble to the makeshift window. I've not taken a look outside in some time, long enough to warrant a quick check. I glance out and frown. Just the same depressing, disappointing nothing that I've grown accustomed to. Nothing but the vile afterburner of a war-torn city.

It was out of nowhere, I recall, that they swept through and attacked. We fought. If one could call the meaningless slaughter of untrained citizens--women and children included--armed with baseball bats and hockey sticks a "fight", then yes, we fought. And then, bloodlust apparently satiated, they just up and left, likely to repeat the malicious cycle on the next town they came to, leaving us—well, me, as far as I know—with nothing at all. No one survived—after all, no one can breathe death...and this dead city reeks of it.

So how did I live, I ask myself? How could I have survived the slaughter, the poison, the corruption, the orgy of greedy destruction? I don't know, not really. Flashes, explosions, screams of the innocent, that's all I know about what happened...

But I've changed, I can tell you that.

Less feeling, less sleep, less appetite, and far, far more thought. All thoughts, all ideas, come to me in multiple dimensions. A filth-ridden rat scuttles by and I see a potential food source, a threat of disease, an instrument of amusement, a weapon, a tool, even a scrap of cloth with which to cleanse myself.

Everything I see, everything I hear, everything I smell...it's all sharper, brighter, honed, as though some odd omnipresent workshop finds everything natural and cleans it, polishes it, before the sensation finds its way to me.

But it's not just me—even the city that I once so relished seems changed...

It's lost its familiarity. Once I could navigate the winding alleys and despairing ghettos as a sewer rat would, weaving through the city like a vigilante with an obsession, but now even the open streets confound me with their emptiness. Their emptiness...the death, all around me...it strangles me, a ghastly shroud of blank non-existence constricting my airways as it does my heartstrings. I can barely stand it...

*So leave.*

Maybe I will...

The streets below me disappear as I turn to the door. Then I turn again before finishing a step, on a realization, and gaze out the window one last time. I don't know where I'm going, but there's green in the distance, something green and foreign, I can see it. As the familiar scent of death floats to my nostrils as it does nearly every day, I realize that I've never been there before ...

My mind made up, I find the ground floor and tentatively open the double doors, try not to recall the last time I had to tread across these foreboding grounds, and look out on the human world from a slightly lower perspective. Innumerable days have passed since I last vacated my single room. As I glance about, nothing seemed even vaguely familiar, despite my window vigil. A stench floats to my nostrils. I cringe. Step back...then see what I'm standing in. Blood...a pool of death, and in it, a wavering, shimmering illusion of myself, of my past, of everything I've come to fear...

I leap back, shrieking, and shake my bare, callused feet. Thick and sticky, the blood flies from my soles in fat drops, spawning dark patterns across the bleach-burned pavement. Once nothing remains but faintly reddish smears, I notice something else: I'm panting. Heavily.

*Scared?*

"Sh...shut up..."

I cough lightly, lift my head high, and look around like nothing happened. My throat clears itself, closing to an unexpected smell, to something hiding, masking itself in the overwhelming stench raw, unclotted bloodshed resting all around me. I gaze again towards my distant query and begin anew towards the green, far more wary of the red everywhere around me.

Cars surround me as I travel, cars of all sorts, all colors, and all levels of destruction—some near perfection, some merely battered, and some protruding trunk-up from the stained pavement, windows shattered, doors ripped to pieces, and nose smashed across the street. It's not just cars, either; an enflamed hull of what used to be a tank, heavily marked with faded emblems of political preference and several naked women, is blown open. Black smoke billows out of it, escaping into the serene red sky like a liberated bird hailing from some dark abyss.

However, as I travel farther from my building, I cannot help but notice that all the lanes and alleys and inner workings of the city are less and less crowded by remnants of the pasts' transportation, the congestion decreasing as the distance increases in a trend utterly new to me. Slowly, gradually, the scattered cars and military paraphernalia disappear.

The roads break off, the buildings grow tiny, and everything in the once-towering necropolis of a city seems to hunch down, forsaken to silence, as I leave my home of so many years. I pass the final building...the road ends.

Or rather, it dies, replaced abruptly by reddish, lumpy dirt. An odd stench, that of something dying, emanates from the muck, blocking off near everything else. I glance forward again, and as the wondrous greenery of the countryside swallows the previously gray and menacing horizon, the newfound road snakes off into the distance like a worm on cocaine, following the curves and bumps like a skilled goat. I stare down at the red dirt again...

*No, the dirt isn't red...it's stained.*

Stained...right, isn't that what I said? Stained red by something...something ominous.

I inhale the foul stink, exhale it, inhale what seems to be purer air this time, and then step cautiously. The dirt compresses, spongy, under my weight. I steal back my foot and shiver once the sensation hits me and look down, tremors still coursing down my spine. A footprint, half an inch or so sunken into this new substance. I shudder. Bubbles rise around the awkward shape, biting at the cracked edges as air is released from some chamber somewhere out of sight.

I return my gaze up and look around. A hill, very high, somewhere off in the distance. Massive. Probably a local landmark. At least, back when there would've been people around to use it. I glance down again.

"The road leads to it..."

I think, then close my eyes for a moment, two, and then breathe in deeply. From everywhere at once, images inundate my mind as smells and sounds from miles around flood my scent glands. Death still lurks on the wind like a foul emissary, as before, but there's something else, something warm and rank and decisively inhuman. If ...whatever it is... is still skulking around here, it must be avoided. I get a distinct vibe that this new survivor is the final thing I wish to rendezvous with...

*You're scared again, aren't you?*

I mumble at myself to shut up, eyes still closed. When nothing more than a foreign smell (which I take to be that of the rotting animal dirt) comes, I realize the conversation is over. I shake myself, expel such thoughts as had raised the subject, and step into the red filth again, resolute, tenacious, confident, ignoring the lifeless sponge that is compressing around my bare foot like some demented mud creature.

But as I trek on, I soon see that the countryside...it is the same deathless emptiness, just not so...well, not so barren, in a sense. The dirt roads, the lone trees...they've always been like this, almost. The only difference...well, it's the same as that in the city. No intelligent life anywhere. Grassy fields still coat the rolling hills, but there's a distinct lack of stinky animals eating and shitting all over the place. And the grass is caked red in places, dotting the natural flow of the wind in the grass with a sick defamation...

It appears, unfortunately, that a rather familiar fate has befallen my country brethren. All of the crop fields, speckled about the numerous pastures like sprinkles on some twisted cake and once laden with a generous burden of agricultural surplus, have been maliciously burned to the ground, the fertile mud mixed with dark ashes in a sickening stew of the aftermath. The few houses have been razed to the ground as well, the outdated wooden frames as susceptible to the flames of war as the life-giving plants that surrounded them.

I turn and find myself standing, forlorn and forgone, before a great pile of thoroughly destructed rubble, the blackened remains of a once noble life all gathered here and defamed like trash for all the world to see. Or all that's left of the world, anyways. In small numbers, scarce figures of familiarity are present, the scorched head of a child's doll here, an eiderdown coated in thick ash there.

I shake my head, slow, despondent, and move on.

Society, it seems, in trying to hold itself together with precious few strings it can find, never really succeeds in anything more than furthering its own depressingly inevitable destruction. Politics, corruption, treaties...they are nothing but the same fatal loins that their destroyer hails from. He will always come, and not a single person will ever succeed in even slowing His tedious march of an advancement, let alone halting its progress altogether. Such thoughts plague my mind, throwing bombshells back and forth across a mental battlefield as I trudge down my path again, eyes down and body numb.

I soon find myself on the hill I had scouted out prior, and halt, glancing at the view, dejected.

"What was the point?" I think aloud, "Did it ever really matter?"

*Depends; who are you asking?*

I jump. "Who...who are you?"

*Whoever you want me to be.*

"What's that supposed to mean?"

No response. Whoever...whatever it is, it's gone now. I look around, nervous. Had they really always been talking to me? It all seems so vague...I think this as a torrent of wind whistles through the wheat germ and grasses at my feet, that same rank smell rising to wrinkle my nostrils as it continuously had earlier. The connection is made and my panic doubles. I whip my head around again. Who is this thing?

Reluctantly, and with a feeling of forgone sadness, I ignore the painful knot in my stomach and tread on, ever searching in the horizon for the answers to questions I didn't even ask.

Then, out of near-nowhere, the country vanishes like a wraith into the distance behind me and the foul dirt road opens into a large highway, looping in and around itself and peppered with houses on all sides of it, settled through years of gradually migrating further and further outwards, taking up more and more space on the roads till there was no more. I grasp with startling realization that I have been here to before, lived here even, at least in a sense.

I have found the suburbs.

Once, as a small child, I had journeyed out with my parents...we were on some trivial quest to promote my father for something; he was seeking some position in something, and we went about telling people about him and shaking important peoples' hands and giving out various trinkets that bore his resemblance. We often traveled to peaceful little neighborhoods -- not unlike what stood before me now-- for just those reasons.

But as I halfheartedly see, this place is as nothing, nothing more than a miniature city. The houses are barren and wrecked, and the streets are littered with the remnants of a small-town society. The filthy bunches of leaves around the sewers are stained with the bloodshed of innocents, just as in the city I left. Windows are smashed in by surviving looters and forlorn, makeshift graves are abound in the dirt yards.

Looking back, I remember the apparently necessary travels as trifling, an annoyance, even; we were out for several days at a time, just walking around and making speeches and sitting around in stuffy conferences, and in the night, we would stay in crummy

hotels, usually with no television and only one bed. Then we'd get up and do the same silly thing all over again. This went on for some time, I recall; months, in fact, unending and repetitive.

And then...then they attacked. Everything fell to pieces. My home, my people, my family...

Now, high on the rooftops of the city I have come to so resent, my perch laying bare to my eyes each of the three worlds around me, tears well in my eyes as I regret, regret, and regret. I barely even knew this world before it was held to a fire and roasted, before everything I knew was stolen from me, and as the banshees and wraiths of the past unbridled screamed at their restraints and at their all-too-early demise, the tormentors did nothing but laugh in their faces and spit at their feet.

Really, everything in this destroyed nation is the same. The raging hurricane of invasive "liberation" has left my entire world acrid, empty, dead.

War really does something to a country...when the victors see those that they trampled, they only see one less thing to worry about, one less factor in the equation of modern day stress. But not our side. No, the only people who see our side of this...this *genocide* are the few who pretend to care and then actually see the state of affairs here and run off screaming, clutching their fat wallets close.

Tears flow freely from my eyes, falling down miles to dissolve in the polluted city air. Wind swirls up around me, ruffling my clothing, and as it does, a scent, rancid, one that has grown familiar, seizes control of my attention. I know what it is. I whip my head around to face my adversary—

--a second too late. A foreign, bitter cough of a laugh echoes through my head, and I realize that now it is me who rushing through the wind, flying downwards at speeds too great for a logical guess. The air shrieking in my ears tells me that it is far too late, that I don't stand a chance falling from this height. I laugh whole-heartedly, glad that someone decided to make the decision for me. The wind steals my laughter, but it still rings in my ears, something I haven't heard in far too long. I turn to face downwards, hurtling towards my final destination, staring it in the face...

And, for once, I am totally and utterly fine with breathing death.