

The Shadows and the Swarm

Andrés Vaccari



It comes with no warning, shadowing the earth like the wings of a predatory bird, at the limbo hour between darkness and dawn when the swarm lapses into a long moment of insect-sleep.

Workers, warriors, children, larvae – the newborn light reveals the bodies of hundreds strewn across the fields, squashed into mounds of black pulp where shattered limbs and occasional fragments of antennae can be seen. Of the once-proud wings of glowing greens and erotic yellows only a pale powder remains, like pulverised diamond on the soil.

The remaining members confer busily, filling the air with erratic circles and

the pained melody of wings. The sight of death is not a novelty. Often, as the swarm carries on its everyday business, they will notice that someone is flying low or lingering too long on a leaf or patch of shade. Next moment, they see their mate swept away by the currents, following its helpless spiral descent, the limbs twitching in robotic farewell. By the time they reach the body, the multifaceted eyes are silent and empty, nothing staring at nothing. The body remains intact and whole, just as in life. A distressing sight, the swarm thinks as the body is quickly dismembered and transformed into nourishment... Although death claims one or two of them at a time, this represents a minor gasp in the collective consciousness, a gasp soon forgotten in the tireless movement of the swarm.

Contemplating the devastation, sensing with hair-thin limbs the sticky signature of death in the air, the survivors realise that this is different. Nearly three-quarters of the group have been extinguished in one vast and surreptitious sweep. These are not the cryptic and gradual ways of nature.

What are we to do.

Now?

we can escape

(fear)

we cannot escape

We are safe.

Here.

We have been safe here.

For as long as we.

Can remember.

We must then.

Seek help.

Outside help.

There is a pause in which the scattered voices gather into one thought, and a decision is reached.

We will alert.

The authorities.

The Office.

The swarm huddles together, suspended, beating in synchrony. Although they have little hope in the insect bureaucracy, it seems the only thing they can do.

The task of lodging a report to the Office is allocated to one of the older members, an insect named 'white' on account of its albino colour. The emissary rides the currents, outwards into the fields surrounding the nests, then into the reaches beyond. As the day turns into night, white spots a rim of soil marked with faint but recognisable molecules of smell. It is an entrance into an underground maze.

Welcomed by the moist enclosure of the tunnels, white begins to follow one of the paths into the heart of the Office. As it advances, the air becomes humid and the concoction of smells sweeter and overpowering. It occasionally comes across a public servant on its way out or a group of peasants chattering among themselves, seemingly lost in the tunnels. Eventually, it arrives at a chamber illuminated by a dull luminescence from no apparent source. At the center of the chamber there is a reception desk, attended by a large praying mantis of unwavering eyes.

As it waits for its turn, white inspects the variety of species in the room, some

of which it has never seen before. There is a thin mosquito with emerald wings and a large sting which it carries with obvious pride. There is a silver bug with many eyes studying hostilely the surroundings while abstractedly weaving a cocoon of faintly shining threads. There are schools of baby flies moving in feverish patterns. There is a fat translucent worm picking nervously on the dirt and regurgitating clumps of it.

Some of the visitors are here to register unusual events or notify the higher authorities of migrations, Shadow movements and areas of benign weather. Others bring offerings to the mythical Tetzoacal, the Queen of the Office, or carry curious things to be stored in the Library. Others are here to settle disputes or to find jobs. All are welcome. All are equal before the Office.

They are called one by one and directed into different passages. The conferences are brief and conducted in low tones. When its turn comes, the emissary glides before the desk and is asked to state the reason for its visit.

A great catastrophe has befallen us, the old insect explains. Hundreds have died inexplicably.

White fashions a mental representation, trying to encapsulate the horror of what has happened. But despite the intensity of its thought, the receptionist's expression does not betray any interest or emotion.

No signs of Shadows?

I beg your pardon?

No sudden darkness? Sodden smell obscuring the air? Abrupt abyss in the sky?

No. One moment they were, the next they weren't.

Hmmm. It is a rather curious account. You will have to speak to the General

Secretary.

An antenna points towards the mouth of one of the passages. The emissary murmurs thanks and proceeds.

The Secretary's chamber is cozier and more pleasant than the reception area. Two globes of chemical light glow in the far corners. The Secretary is an old bug who is missing its rear legs. The remaining ones fidget constantly over a messy stack of papers.

Hello, the bureaucrat says, speaking rapidly. What can I do for you?

We emerged from sleep this morning to find most of our swarm killed in a most gruesome manner.

White sends another mental image, but this time it comes out faded and sketchy. The outrage is distant now, replaced by growing awe at the ancient ways of the Office.

I see, says the Secretary. I believe there have been similar occurrences throughout history, vast and seemingly absurd acts of...erm...Shadow intervention.

The emissary's wings flutter with excitement: *You mean, there is an explanation?*

The Secretary looks up from its papers and examines its interlocutor for a long moment. Unreadable thoughts flicker across the cells of its eyes.

Things are not that simple, it says dryly. Sensing the visitor's agitation, the bureaucrat rises a placating limb and laboriously shifts position behind the desk.

Let me explain. I foresee, in this case, four distinct possibilities:

The first possibility is that, indeed, there is an explanation for what has happened, an answer within the reaches of our understanding. If this is the case, it means that a routine investigation shall clear the matter to your satisfaction and determine the cause of so much

senseless death.

The second option is the diametrical opposite of the first: We shall never understand what has happened, since we have no insight beyond our insect condition. An explanation may exist at a higher level of understanding. But this explanation would seem to us absurd, unintelligible or maybe perhaps too cruel and terrifying. So our attitude must be one of resignation and humble reverence towards the greater forces which control our existence. Or maybe we can choose a stand of defiance and permanent revolt as a way of expressing some kind of individual or collective self-affirmation.

The General Secretary taps its limbs on the table: Are you following me?

Dangling atop the thin stem of its neck, white's head nods vigorously.

Third possibility: There is no explanation whatsoever, either within or beyond our understanding or any kind of understanding. In which case no course of action or thought would be more legitimate than any other.

Fourth option: We can fashion an explanation ourselves and all agree to uphold it. Regardless of its mythical or fictional character, this explanation might serve to dispel our terror and make our lives happier – insofar as we teach our progeny to preserve it throughout the generations, uphold it as an unchanging truth and not to question it too closely.

The Secretary stares at the blank expression of the visitor. The speech has finished, but a long time passes before the old emissary realizes this.

Well? the bureaucrat says finally.

Oh. The words have only filled white with unease. *So, is there an explanation or not?*

The Secretary sighs, rummages through a pile of papers and takes a fresh form.

I will send an Investigator to take a look. Routine procedure. Then, we'll see what we can do. Please take this and proceed to the waiting room.

The waiting room is smaller and less well-illuminated than the Secretary's chamber. The emissary fills out the form, marking the multiple-choice squares with chemical traces. Then it curls into a ball and rests on the earth, listening to the soothing murmurs of the ground. After a while of waiting, a voice comes from the doorway and breaks the reverie.

Good morning. My name is tzzt, Office Investigator.

The accent is muddy and slow. White realizes that the Investigator is too large to fit into the room. They meet at the doorway, and their antennas exchange friendly signals.

Tzzt leads the way through the tunnels and back towards the surface. The Investigator is a golden female blowfly of faded wings and a mean-looking sting, a talkative yet distant kind of fellow.

As they cruise through the insect maze, the Investigator questions the emissary about the swarm, about their way of life, their beliefs and social organization. From white's responses, tzzt can gather that they are a classless and harmonious society, yet superstitious, territorial and set in their ways.

After so many tunnels, the emissary finds itself yearning for the warmth of daylight and the embrace of the swarm.

The insects welcome the Investigator with a certain suspicion. But tzzt shows no sign of being offended, or even noticing. The sight of the massacre has immediately

absorbed her attention. The motionless eyes examine the scene, the forest of gnarled bodies in the cold light. Sometimes the universe can be so cruel, so indifferent to the fate of the insect kind.

Of all the many bad things tzzt has seen over the years, this is one of the worst. Could this be the work of the Shadows, those colossal and malignant deities who often delight in such genocide and destruction?

A part of the swarm is busy laying neat piles of excreta in circles around the dead, while humming a mournful hymn in remembrance. Another part is hatching in an attempt to build their numbers up – they lay circles of sperm under the shade of leaves and fill the wind with the frail electricity of coded calls. Atop the swaying stems of grass, the glistening pearls await the buzzing dance of the female carriers.

As the insects work, they cast occasional glances at the newcomer and talk among themselves:

A curious apparition.

From a distant.

Place.

So large and.

Clumsy.

A life so safely removed from the struggle of everyday existence.

Yes.

What can it do?

At best, all the Office can offer is explanations.

And what is the use of explanations now?

Yes.

Can explanations bring our loved ones back?

No!

Presently, following a tacit signal, they gather around tzzt.

Sensing the distrust lurking across the insect-mind the Investigator remains suspended in the air, facing the group, studying them one at a time, the same mind staring from dozens of eyes.

First of all, she says, I would like to convey in behalf of the Office our most sincere and felt condolences.

The swarm stares with indifference.

I know how it feels to have your loved ones killed like that. I know how it feels to live without explanations.

And thus, tzzt tells them the story of her life.

Long before I was recruited into the Office, I lived in a large colony in the tropics. I can still evoke the heat, the light and shadow dances of vegetation, the ripe atoms of perception. Over the seasons, our population expanded its dominion for miles, outgrowing all other species in the area. My first memories are of a dark and cold birth-chamber, where I wriggled blindly with a thousand others. The nurses inspected and cleaned me, then taught me about the body and the organisation of understanding. I remember the sheltering warmth of the nests, the first glimpse of the open sky and the streets of our kingdom.

My infancy was happy. I was born a worker, and every day I headed with my fellow labourers into the outskirts, where we toiled tirelessly, annexing ground and expanding the network of nests.

Then the trouble started. As I neared full adulthood, I felt the call of reproduction. It began with a series of strange dreams. Then my body began to swell and overflow with a thick milky liquid. The bureaucrats came to carry away the affected workers, gathering and leading them into the core area of nests, where we worked our way down through ancient systems of passages.

We alighted at the mouth of a round corridor. I remember standing in the queue, breathing in the collective fear and adding my own, as one by one my comrades were summoned into a wide entrance rimmed with stones. When my turn came, I was directed into a sumptuous room where the Queen waited, spreadlegged and glowing with insane desire. I was immediately transfixed by her beauty, the enthralling dance of her limbs and her eyes like viscous and precious stones.

The moment of insemination was brief, yet timeless. I was so much in love I could not drive her out of my mind. The Queen's terrifying beauty can nowadays only be compared to that of Tetzoacal, the Great Bureaucrat Queen, who is said to rule over the workings of the Office. I knew my fellow workers felt the same way and a murderous jealousy arose between us. Warriors kept watch over us night and day.

Meanwhile, time and time again, we were lead through the corridors and exposed to the Queen, who became more ferocious at each encounter. She claimed our seed till the last drop, often sinking her mandibles into our bellies to drink the pearly substance.

Some rumours began to circulate. They said that once the inseminations were finished we would all be put to death. The days grew long and filled with paranoia. But we never found out our fate, because, shortly after, the Shadows arrived.

At best, the Shadows had been the stuff of legend and folklore. Sure, we had heard of nearby populations being wiped out, but we never thought it could happen to us. Thus, when the ground began to tremble and the wind changed direction, everyone assumed freak weather was upon them, and they carried on their daily activities as if nothing was happening.

But then, a peculiar, heavy smell filled the air, so sickeningly powerful that many were instantly drawn to it and driven mad. Long bubbling insect streams rushed in all directions, some racing towards the Shadows, other scampering over buildings and the writhing bodies of fellow beings.

Then the sky blackened.

And suddenly, enormous shapes loomed over our city.

Soon I was too busy trying to keep alive, for the workers had taken advantage of the situation to allow free rein to their murderous impulses.

The earth cried, trembled open. Crowds broke into chaos and pushed at every side. The air burnt with panic as we saw our houses and canals, our streets and corridors, the whole of our glorious kingdom stomped out of existence by the advancing, stinking darkness, destroying in an instant what had taken many lifetimes, hazy ancestral aeons to build.

In the distance, in the midst of a dark sea of movement, I saw the Queen climbing out from the ruins, fearful and broken, staring pleadingly at the dark shapes as the sky closed in on the earth. The Queen suddenly was not beautiful anymore.

Those of us lucky enough to escape gathered together and wandered for many moons and many suns, until a contingent of bureaucrats intersected our path. I was offered work in the Office, and eventually became an Investigator. After a few months my body changed again into that of a female, an aborted Queen with a long sting and this shell of gold.

Hence, for me, the advent of the Shadows was a blessing in disguise.

The Investigator climbs up in the air and does a small pirouette, signalling the end of her story. The myriad melancholy facets of her eyes encompass the now enraptured attention of the swarm.

Now listen carefully, she says. I have a plan...

And so they went and got themselves a Shadow. Upwards into the rarefied heights of the air, then down in spirals, circumventing the trunks of trees, the uneven terrain, tzzt leading the way, catching with her spoonlike mandibles and tasting in her mouth the densities of space, the fluctuations of light and smell. Trailing the faint Shadow scent.

The swarm-mind glows with fear as they sporadically probe the surroundings with nervous twitches of limbs, not knowing what to look for. Their eyes flicker about, following the ghosts and streaks of light, the outlines of the new landscape.

Onwards through the unfamiliar space. Onwards as the soft morning gives way to the harsh geometries of noon.

There is movement now, newborn quiverings and unnatural darkenings. The appearance of the Shadow is like a sudden and disorienting blackout. The swarm mind freezes. Its atoms halt in the air, breaking formation. But the Investigator urges them on.

This is one of the things that killed your people, she says, struggling onwards, into the colossal presence. Heavy currents toss them about like dry leaves. The depths of the Shadow are teeming with life. Some members fall prey to the intoxicating atmosphere and drop away into the darkness, their rambling thoughts echoing away into silence.

And there are many more.

Of these...

(horror)

Roaming.

The earth.

The wind casts them into illogical orbits. And in the midst of chaos they see the Investigator plunging straight into the maelstrom of the Shadow, flying backwards, sting-first into It.

It seems like it is the end of the world. The currents of the ether grow more violent still. Their wings beat against the fury to no avail. The sky is a deafening mass.

But then, just as suddenly, all disturbance dies down. The air clears, and space settles into customary patterns of smell and dark. Tzzt emerges from the fallen Shadow, a golden beam rising from a vast continent of night.

Come on, she says weakly. *You must learn to live without fear.* Tzzt's sting has gone, leaving a long gash on her back. Two of her legs are twisted and broken, and her flight is unsteady.

Now, It's all yours.

Hesitation, then ripples of desire across the insect mind. The swarm descends, curious, hungry, afraid, on the defeated Shadow. They land on the open eyes and skate on the moist and glassy surface. They slip into the warm openings of mouth and nostrils and ear canals, crawling under layers of clothes, into caverns and folds and sliced slots of flesh. Bodies play entangled in the long strands of hair.

They dig wounds into which they lay fresh eggs. Others peck at the soft flesh and wash their limbs in lagoons of blood. Others drown and lie dead, belly up, happier to be that way.

As the mind rejoices, it grows dizzy, drunk and forgetful. The Investigator contemplates the spoils, the partial victory, without taking part. As she examines the contours of the Shadow from the heights, she begins to word in her mind the report to be later presented at the Office.

There are still no answers, Your Highness, no explanations. But the people are happy, at least for today. Small victories: it is possible that this is all we can claim.

Debilitated by the loss of her sting, the Investigator looks to land on a dark and cool patch of vegetation she has sensed from the air. But one of her wings fails; it does not respond.

She spirals upwards in the air. There is not much time, she knows. She has always hoped it would be different, that she would face this moment calmly and without terror. She remembers the birth-chamber, a vivid flashback of his male soft body packed against the hardening cocoon with timeless gaps of shadow and faint light caressing his eyelids. She sees childhood corridors, faces of old warriors and workers.

The swarm continues the feast, unaware, and she senses her strength ebbing, memory and world merging, an abyss. Helpless limbs flicker from her belly.

As she drifts downward, in a dying trajectory towards the ground, tzzt is overcome by the certainty that she is being observed.

