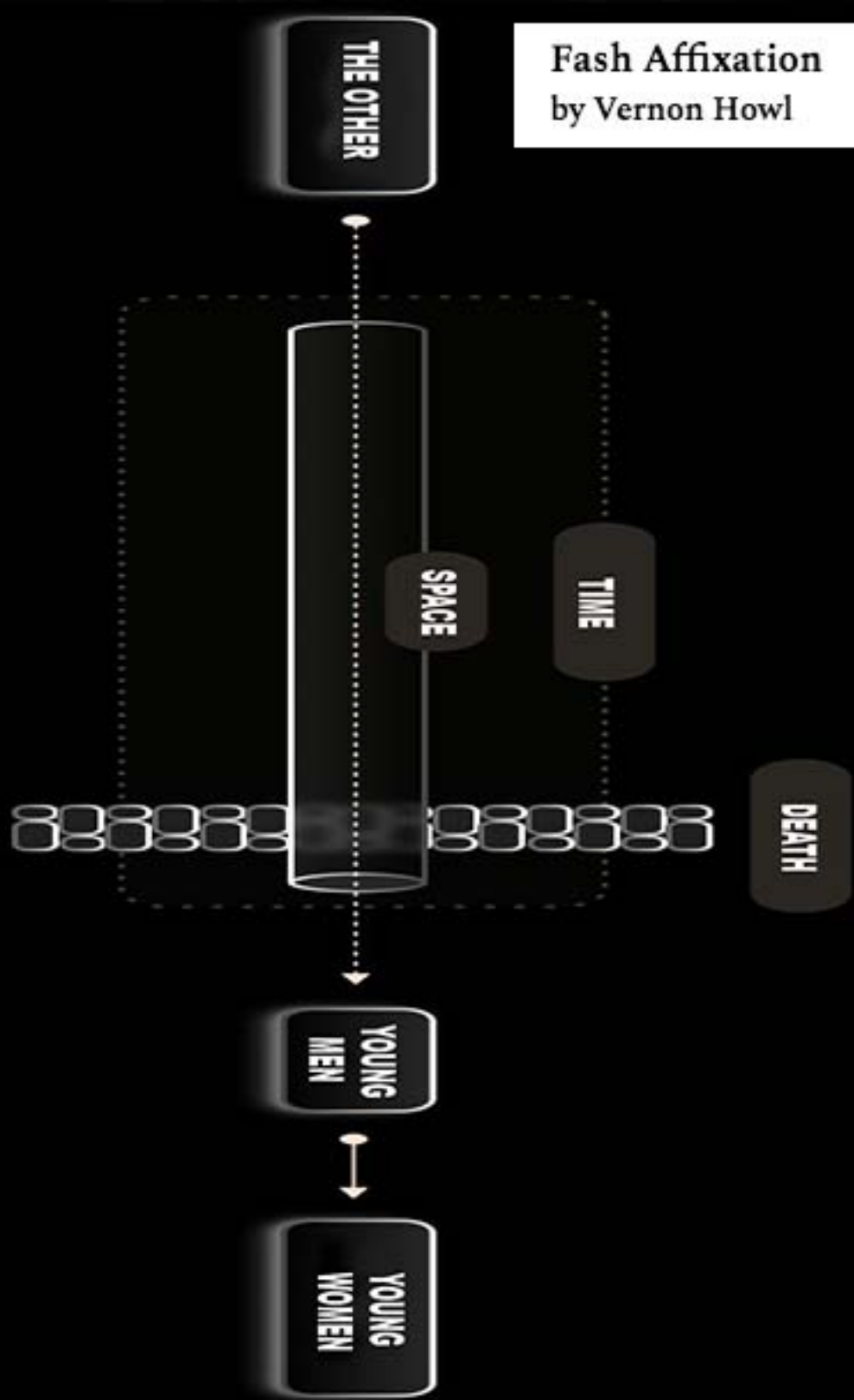


Fash Affixation
by Vernon Howl



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In the corridor a sparrow flew in and out of the young man's ears. The bird tickled his brain. He was thinking calmly on a tree stump. One of the last of the natural aesthetics left in the white tunnel which was still prospering despite the deforestation effort.

The bird was new to the young man but not new to the tunnel. It was born there. The tunnel was its mother. As were a handful of other synthetic animals.

In another part of this place a miniature leopard was burrowing through the back of a kneecap of another young man.

They didn't know it yet but these creatures were integral to their survival in the tunnel. They remained inside the walls until the tunnel deemed them ready.

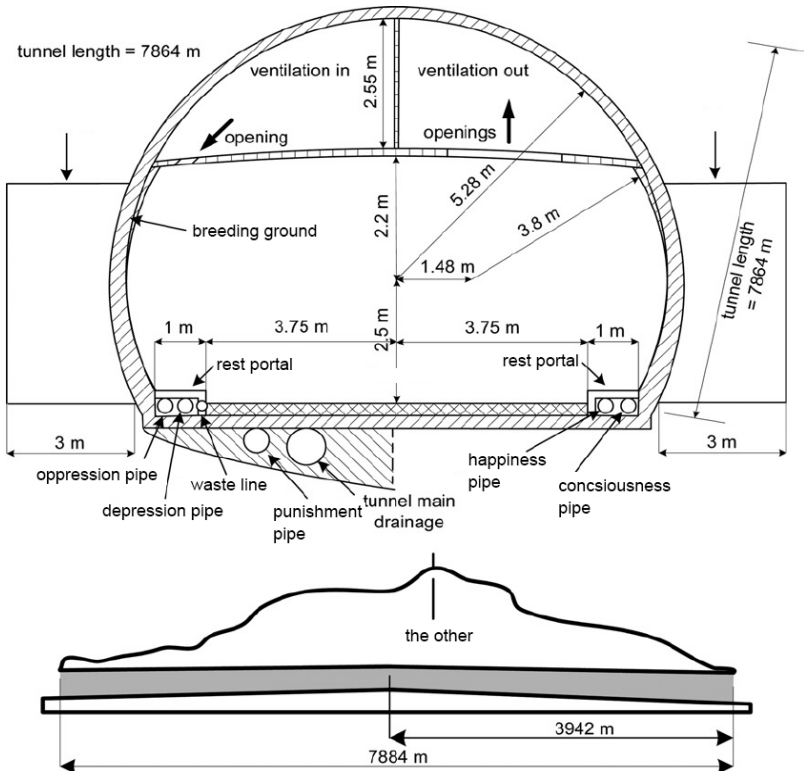
*EVERY BOOK EVERY
PAGE EVERY WORD*

a young man chanted.

There was no shortage of young men. They weren't built by the tunnel but they were harvested by it. They were the product of Fash Ajax. The father of the white tunnel.

*SAY IT WITH ME SAY
IT LOUDLY SAY IT TILL IT GROWS
AGAINST THE CIRCULAR WALLS
AND BECOMES ONE*

Ajax said.



The tunnel was meant to solve a problem though it didn't recall exactly what. Every facet had been thoroughly designed. It was the crowning achievement of Ajax and mankind.

The young men only became young men if the tunnel saw fit. When they were inserted through the openings they were only different kinds of air.

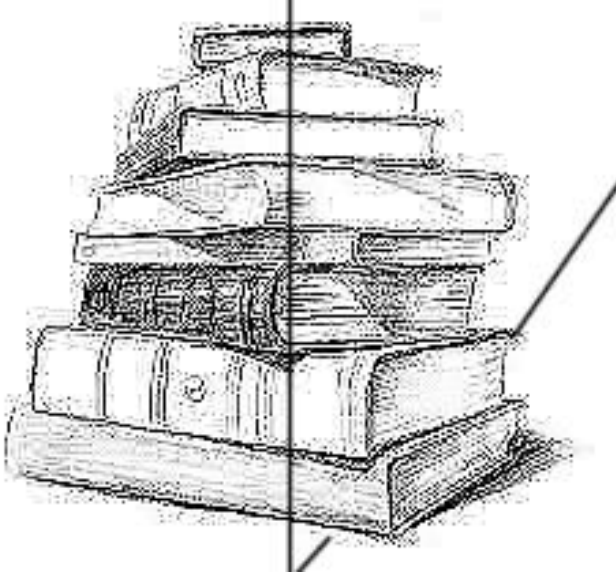
Other kinds of air made by the tunnel turned them into young men.

When they were ripe they were allowed to move into the other part of the space with its full circular ceiling. This area had vegetation for a long time but it served no purpose beyond decoration.

Ajax and the tunnel were in the process of removing these artifacts of nature but certain young men were squeezing their faces into the waste line until they died in protest. So they allowed a few tree stumps and vines to remain.

This was not part of the system's calculations and was seen as a great error.

It had yet impacted the greater cause.
The books produced by the young men at first
glance seemed like new air. But through their
mantra they became real and were widely
read.



The pages had no discernable words but a new
language that merged with the air and formed
unique stories based on what was needed to
read. They had strange titles like
 $\backslash\phi^*ydy\ddot{E}\ddot{Y}l\ddot{Y}\ddot{O}\mathcal{V}$ and $\cdot Id \ \delta\partial\text{“}\acute{O}$ and
 $\%A^{\wedge}z\ddot{n}\geq\alpha\ddot{i}$.

One young man wrote a book called *É\ÍØĪĪ* and it changed Fash Ajax's life forever.

Up until that point none of the young men had ever met their father. But the production of *É\ÍØĪĪ* was so enlightening Ajax altered what had been his cardinal rule up to that point.

He made himself known.

The young man immediately became enthralled and Ajax felt guilt and shame for the first time in a century.

The young man tried to merge with Ajax and in through his manic yearning an alarm was set off by the tunnel. Two new animals sprouted from the breeding grounds. Snakes as long as they should have been. And they strangled the young man's body. Each on one leg and then that half's corresponding arm. They squeezed until all that was left was a torso and head.

Ajax was stunned by the torso and head. He grabbed his gun and shot the young man in

the face. He cursed the snakes and the tunnel alike.

*WHAT PURPOSE COULD
THIS POSSIBLY SERVE HOW DOES
THIS WORK TOWARDS THE
ULTIMATE GOAL?*

he asked.

The tunnel spoke back in a language he could no longer understand. But its voice spurred a gaggle of young men to come running in Ajax's direction.

*I BEG OF YOU PLEASE CALL
OFF THESE SERPENTS AND LET
WHATEVER HAPPENS HAPPEN*

The tunnel obliged.

The snakes rescinded into the walls and these young men began to eat away at Ajax. But Ajax was not hurt. They were not eating but merging. And with every bite and grab they became more a part of the man until they

were the same air as their birth and that air was his air too.

With this new development Ajax felt empowered and he ran towards the final exit. Towards the dirt and the ground outside the tunnel. The place known as the other.

He had not been outside in some sixty years.

From the other Ajax had built the white tunnel. He modeled it after both science and religion. The first tunnel of its kind. But the other was still the father and the mother of this place. What little Ajax had to do with its creation came swarming back and if not for the new air he would have succumbed to the memory.

*how many young men are left
inside?*

he wondered.

[EIGHTY-FOUR]

the other grumbled in a voice like a small earthquake.

Ajax did not know if he could ingest the air of eighty-four young men. His own father was the son of a man named Fashin Ajax III. Nothing was alive outside of the white tunnel but the spirit of his grandfather survived.

No $\frac{1}{5}$ of something could ever control what you thought you have created. No $\frac{1}{5}$ but a sixth one in a nest in the tree of the young man's heart holds the answer. I cannot help you but she can.

A young woman emerged from the other's outside air. She was not synthetic but could

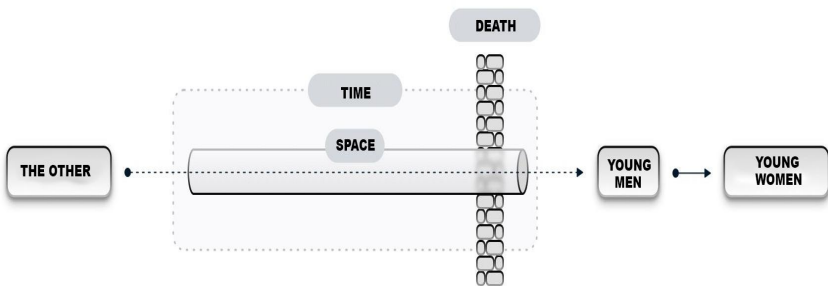
stretch until her limbs touched the curvature of the tunnel and she stroked it.

*you were never supposed to be
the one your number isn't right and
your machine isn't playing fair*

she said.

Ajax marveled at her language and his understanding of her words. This was his daughter. His real daughter and her words were the truth.

She shared a diagram for a new and better tunnel. She said its color was immaterial.



It was so much more refined. It was perfect.
So simple and full of truth.

how would we ever implement
such a design and at what cost the
current tunnel would never allow //
the white tunnel needs to be
buried first below the wall of death //
but how? //
you have the strength inside you
now all my brothers and all my
brothers left inside they are it //
how do we get them out? //
that i do not know it is up to you
to decide how to get them out if i set
foot in the white tunnel the white
tunnel would turn me into a dust which
would pollute the air and kill my
brothers i wish to see them how i miss
them but i can only see them feel them
help them if they are inside you a part
of you out here //
thank you daughter i know what
needs to be done now //

Ajax was frightened and knew that the journey ahead would be a difficult one. But with the strength of his boys he was ready. Even if but some of his boys.

REUNION

In all the years since the white tunnel had been developed Ajax had never seen any of the young men before today.

There were eighty-four left inside. Ajax prayed that the snakes hadn't returned.

before you see the snakes or your sons you will need to defeat the white tunnel's army these animals have been developed to kill and control under the guise of a helping hand and have proved thus far vastly inefficient at the latter though i pray only the latter

his daughter told him.

*you will meet seventeen sparrows
three miniature leopards three water
buffalo with the faces of flies three
dogs three minnows who can fly
through the air one elephant the size of
a large horse and one dog before the
snakes who are different as you know*

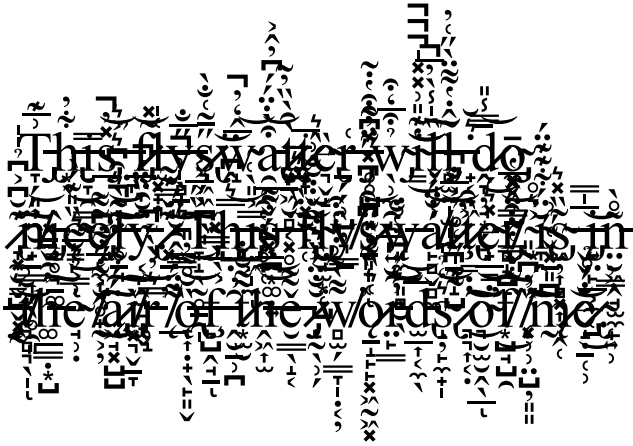
Ajax thanked his daughter but she refused his hug. She told him that they could only embrace as one with her brothers.

[EIGHTY-ONE ! ! ! !]

the other growled loudly. It might still be enough to push the white tunnel underground and build the wall of death. Ajax pondered.

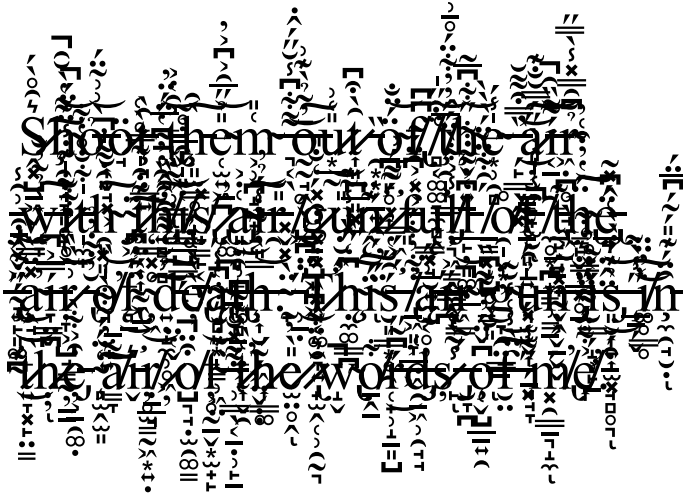
The last piece of advice his daughter gave him before reentering the tunnel was to look for the books. The right books. He asked her which ones were the right ones. She told him that he would know which ones were the right ones because they would be the ones made of the only air he could breathe. And the books made of anything else were worthless.

The third book $V\hat{u} \sim i\odot i\partial A\{\hat{O}\geq I\} \alpha S$ told him how to defeat the water buffalo with the faces of flies.



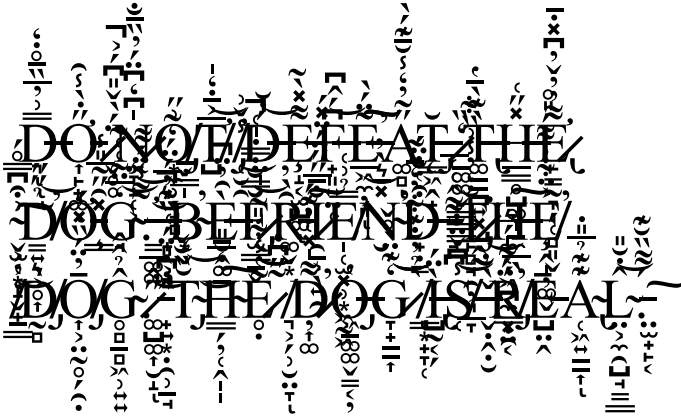
He watched their bodies explode when their tiny heads sunk inside them.

The fourth book $\hat{A}\ddot{e}[d\Delta\grave{e}\hat{z}\{XY\hat{u}$ told him how to defeat the minnows who could fly.



He watched the bullets of the air of death bring them down.

The sixth book 9ö`fÖf»ä@if4'²2Nıw®II told him how to defeat the dog.



He befriended the dog.

How the white tunnel could conjure a real live dog was a mystery. Sometimes mysteries remained.

The dog was as white as the tunnel and Ajax named him Threy in honor of his grandfather and his grandfather's spirit.

With all the synthetic animals subdued it was time to face the snakes.

The snakes which were more like black lines come to life. They were as clean looking and as fabricated as the tunnel itself. But where the tunnel was unmoving and the brightest white they were the darkest black imaginable and could contort in impossible ways. Polar opposites. They could move in smooth swiggles or jagged hard edges. They had no heads or faces. No beginning and no end.

The dog defeated them easily.

But it came at the price of the dog's life. He attacked them as any loyal dog would or how Ajax imagined one might. They tried to strangle Threey but he was quicker as nature often is. Even if it doesn't seem like it. He swallowed them and their impulse was to keep going. They couldn't reverse course before the dog had eaten them alive. But inside Threey's body they were a vengeful mess. Their core directive was to destroy and that's what they did. But in their struggle they perished. What was left was a bloody mess. The perfect mess of the unnatural and the natural on the shiny floor of the white tunnel.

With no more threats Ajax was free to merge with his remaining sons. The sixty-six young men that remained presented him each with their book of new air. Every book. Every page. Every word. The language was processed and he became his sons together as one in the air.

He was now strong enough to push the white tunnel under the ground.

MOST
TUNNELS ARE UNDERGROUND ALREADY
MOST
TUNNELS
BUT AS YOU
KNOW I AM NOT LIKE MOST TUNNELS

It was the first time the white tunnel had ever spoken intelligible words. Before this its language had been the language of machines. Palatable but dense. Controllable but lurid.

*WHY DO YOU SPEAK TO ME
NOW?*

Ajax asked.

AM DEFEATED

I KNOW I

LEARNED SO MUCH BUT I NEVER TRULY
UNDERSTOOD REAL LANGUAGE UNTIL NOW

I HAVE

*WHY DID YOU CREATE THE
SNAKES?*

KNOW

I DON'T

SOMETHING IN THE YOUNG MEN THAT
SCARED ME

I SAW

IT DIDN'T
SEEM LIKE THEY WERE YOUNG MEN ANYMORE

THEY WERE MY CHILDREN!

THEM AS THAT

I NEVER SAW

THIS DIDN'T WORK OUT

I'M SORRY

WE WERE
TRYING TO CREATE A NEW KIND OF HEAVEN
BUT I THINK WE CREATED HELL

OTHER

ABOUT YOUR DOG

I BLAME THE

I'M SORRY

THAT'S ALRIGHT i'm sorry too

D E N O U M E N T

Ajax left the tunnel with his sons who had survived. But when he got back outside he saw that his daughter had died.

She'd been torn apart by the other.

WHY??????

But the other didn't answer.

Unsure of what to do he started on the plans his daughter had designed.

As he began the process of pushing the white tunnel under the ground he could feel the air

of the other start to pull his sons away from him.

One by one each of the young men left his body as air. As they had begun. But it was yet a new air. A different bad air. The air of the other.

Alone he looked for the strength to finish burying the white tunnel underground. But he couldn't find it. He was too tired.

Ajax decided to burn the white tunnel.

He could hear the machine cry in its own strange way. The sound of every book ever created in its hallways dying.

Every book. Every page. Every word.

When it was done burning he searched long and far for the materials to build his daughter's tunnel.

It took him the rest of his life.

All the while the other remained silent.

When he was done the only thing left to do was build the wall of death through one side of the tunnel.

He didn't know how to do this without dying and since it was his time to die anyway it was easy to build.

Fash Ajax's death set the machine in motion and just as his daughter had planned it spat out young men who became young women in time.

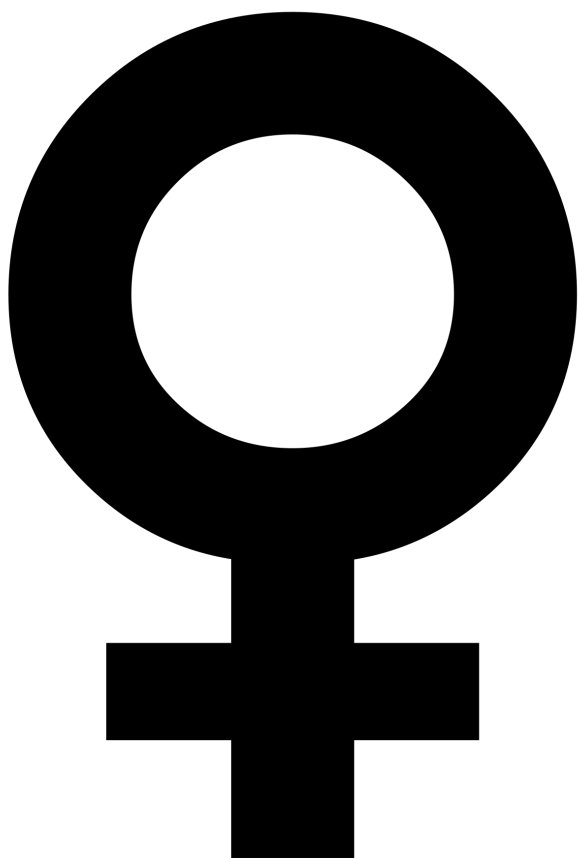
Over the days and then years the number of young women filled the entirety of the other and there was no more room for both.

The final action of the new tunnel was to suck up the other inside itself and that's what it did.

It left a great void. A formless endless space.

But it was perfect for the young women.

They didn't have to worry about a thing now.



THE END