

The timelessness of stones

A story from the Pompeii Project

Paul Koop

*I wasn't born in another world.
He remained in another world.
In another world, there is no choice.*

An answer to Don DeLillo's "Point Omega"
and Jaco Van Dormael's "Mr. Nobody"

*The stones are there.
They were always there.
They witness the disappearance.
But they do not bear witness to it.*

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Prologue: Slowed-down Time

The seminar room was on the third floor, where the air smelled of ozone, warmed plastic, and old paper. Outside, the September wind cut through the canyons of Boston's streets. Inside, light filtered through the slats of the blinds, narrow gray strips spaced at precise intervals across the desk and the floorboards. It looked like a barcode on the wood.

Luca sat in the third row, his forearms resting flat on the resin of the tabletop. The fabric of his grey sweater was rough at the elbows.

The projection flickered on the far wall. The scene on the platform, Jaco Van Dormaels, was playing on the screen. *Mr. Nobody* Cadence by cadence, the music slowed to an almost unbearable sluggishness. Nine-year-old Nemo stood at the geometric intersection of two gazes. His mother with her suitcase on the platform; his father beside the boy, his face etched with a silent, shattered despair, the corners of his eyes reddened. The camera kept both parents in frame simultaneously, while the focus shifted. Nemo looked from his mother to his father and back again, trapped in a spatial arrangement from which he could not look at either of them without sensing the other in the foreground.

"Do you want to come with me or stay with your father?" the mother's voice asked from the loudspeakers. The words sounded flat, almost artificial in the muffled room.

The train started moving. Time was running out for the decision. The image branched out in the cut: Nemo's inner paralysis transformed into outward frenzy. In one shot, the boy ran after the moving carriage, reaching his mother's hand. In the next shot, his shoelace came undone as he started to run. A completely contingent moment, the stumble, the shoe falling onto the concrete slabs, the breaking of contact. Chance determined the course of his existence before the choice had even been made. „*Daddy, is it my fault?*“, asked the child's voice in the static of the videotape audio, to which the father waved his hand: „*No, it's not your fault.*“

"We're not talking about a simple dramaturgy of choice here," the lecturer said. He stood to the side of the spotlight, so that the light bisected his face. His glasses reflected the shimmering of the platform. "Van Dormael is demonstrating the nexus. The decision isn't a sovereign act of will, but rather an interplay of momentum, elapsed time, and pure contingency, an untied shoelace. When the InSIM lab in Milan works with such matrices, they do precisely that. Via a quantum interface, they feed the system with probabilistic paths. The many-worlds interpretation becomes the computing architecture there: The boy doesn't simply choose A or B. He branches out into all states simultaneously."

He took a step to the side. The dust in the beam of light danced in micro-movements, tiny particles that collided silently and rolled off.

"Teilhard de Chardin saw the Omega Point as the ultimate condensation of consciousness," the man continued, turning the chalk between two fingers until white dust covered his knuckles. "A collapse of the time axis onto a single, all-encompassing center. But what happens when the computing power of a system, let's call it the ARS model, resolves this

singularity and keeps every possibility, every stumble on the platform, simultaneously real? Where does guilt go, where does will go, when every contingency creates a new world?"

Luca noticed the blurriness on the monitor. His gloves lay next to the notebook, which was open but blank. The page displayed the grid of a linear line system.

"For the next session," the lecturer said, stepping up to the table to close his laptop. The hinge creaked softly. "Read the work of Michael Phillips on the empirical determination of dialogue grammars. And compare his formalization of non-speaking with the narrative framework of DeLillo's *Point Omega*. Observe the silence in the desert space. Observe the impossibility of recording a disappearance when the observer is himself trapped in the branching paths."

Around Luca, the mechanical whirring of departure began. Zippers zipped, heavy fabrics rubbed against each other, chair legs scraped across the linoleum. The others moved in the familiar rhythm of the afternoon.

Luca remained seated.

The lecturer tucked the leather folder under his arm. He glanced briefly down at Luca without taking his hand off the edge of the desk.

"You're looking for logic in the deviations, Luca," he said. His voice was quiet, devoid of academic posturing. "But language models and stochastic processes don't provide originators. They only provide coherences."

"He doesn't respond to the faculty's emails," said Luca.

"Phillips left the Jesuit institute in the spring," the lecturer replied, glancing towards the door. "He's beyond the reach of data. Physicists of his ilk tend towards a peculiar form of preservation in their old age. They want to see things solidify. Like the casts under the ash in Campania."

Luca didn't lift his head. "He's waiting."

The lecturer looked at him for another moment, his lips slightly pursed, then turned away. His leather soles produced a dry squeak on the corridor until the sound echoed off in the geometry of the stairwell.

Luca stood up. The room had become cool. He didn't push the chair back.

In the corridor, the afternoon sun lay low over the Boston skyline. Beneath the glass facades of the bank towers, the lines of vehicles crawled through the canyons in stop-and-go traffic, a sluggish river of metal and brake lights, its noise muffled by the double glazing to a dark, mechanical hum.

He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket. The paper of the unopened sheet of mirrors was rough. No postage stamp. No post office mark. Only the machine-set type on the

yellowed document paper, the ink of which had slightly bled at the edges, like the output of a thermal printer:

He stands in the experimental field. At the edge of the depression. If you're looking for him, don't talk about time. He's no longer calculating.

Luca let the paper slide back into his pocket. The air flowing through the crack in the emergency exit door tasted of dry soot and dust. He descended the stairs, step by step, in the steady rhythm of a process that had long since begun and could no longer be interrupted.

Chapter 1: The Letter

The fourth-floor apartment lay deep in the shadow of the brick facades opposite. Beneath the window ran the narrow Ashburton Place. The sound of the buses was a rhythmic escaping of compressed air, which from time to time made the panes vibrate. A cool, metallic tremor in the frame.

Luca sat at the kitchen table, which was made of layered chipboard. The paper lay between a bowl of faded dried fruit and the porcelain cup. It was folded twice, flattened by the door frame under which it had been slipped that morning. No postage. An uneven sheet from a dot-matrix printer, its edges finely jagged from torn continuous paper.

He stands in the experimental field. At the edge of the depression. If you're looking for him, don't talk about time. He's no longer calculating.

The writing showed no slant. It was the expression of an old terminal interface, cold matrices devoid of any personal touch. Luca ran the tip of his index finger along the line. The tiny dots of the ribbon were embedded deep in the paper fibers.

Outside, a police car grazed the curb at a snail's pace. A dog sniffed at a fire hydrant, stopped, then moved on. The sound of the engine faded away towards Cambridge Street.

In the kitchen, porcelain scraped against the imitation granite countertop. His mother filled the kettle. The kettle emitted a sharp, metallic hiss that stopped abruptly as soon as she flipped the switch. She stepped into the doorway, a minimalist tableau of faded cotton fabric and gray hairpins. She didn't carry the cups on a tray, but held them tightly by the handles, her knuckles white and showing through.

She set down the cups. The steam rose in a straight line before dissipating in the draft of the room air.

"The interface in Milan registered two queries," said Luca, without looking up. "At four o'clock in the morning. Data streams via the Gregorian University server."

She sat on the edge of the chair. Her elbows were not supported; she held her upper body at an unnatural, learned distance from the edge of the table.

"These are automated comparisons," she said. Her voice was thin, lacking in pitch. "InSIM tests the dialogue grammars. The system does this automatically if the nodes remain inactive."

"This isn't a dialogue grammar," said Luca, tapping the paper. "This is an address."

She didn't look at the arc. Her eyes were fixed on the pale pattern of light, refracted and reflected in the damp bottom of her cup. "Phillips no longer has an address. Whoever operated the prompter is using their old parameters. You don't leave algorithms to run unattended when they access quantum interfaces. They start inventing their own outputs."

"He is in the Sonoran Depression."

"There's nothing there but dust and the relics of a radio measuring station," she replied. "A preservation experiment from the seventies. Dryness that postpones decay. They used to store rock samples from Campania there to measure abrasion under simulated sunlight. The timeless substance."

Luca looked at her. The skin under her eyes was transparent, finely crisscrossed with bluish veins. She spoke of the desert as if it were a laboratory setup, an isolated experimental chamber for decay rates.

"He is not your father in the biological sense of a decision," she said quietly. "He was the experimental condition. The Jesuits called it an observer function."

Luca stood up. The linoleum floor was cold under his socks. He went into the narrow room next to the kitchen, pulling, grabbing, folding. The fabric of his travel jacket smelled of the musty lining of the closet. He shoved two shirts, a notebook without grids, and the spare batteries for the voice recorder into the synthetic bag. His movements followed a dry, functional sequence, like working through a checklist before starting a system.

When he stepped back into the kitchen, a faded color photograph lay next to the unopened mug. It was a 35mm print from the early nineties, the edges yellowed from exposure to light.

The picture showed a man in a dark collared shirt in front of a dusty brick wall in the Campo Santo Teutonico. His face was narrow, his temples sunken, his eyes restlessly withdrawn into the shadows of their sockets, the gaze of a man who had learned to read series of measurements instead of decoding faces.

"He believed in entanglement," his mother said from the window. She looked down at the roadway of Ashburton Place. "He always said that if two states remain coupled long enough, there is no longer any separation. Not even when one of them ceases to exist. You don't look for a person then. You look for the echo of decay."

Luca tucked the photo between the pages of the notebook. The sheet of paper with the printout went into the inside pocket of his jacket, right against his ribcage.

"I'm taking the Red Line at 2:10 p.m.," he said. "At South Station, I'll change to the Silver Line to Logan Airport."

She didn't turn around. Her hand lay flat on the cold windowpane, behind which the blue flashing light of a distant police car silently glided across the facades of the buildings opposite. "When you get there, you won't find any answers, Luca. Just the remnants of the data that ARS hasn't yet cleaned up."

He zipped up the bag. The sound of the plastic teeth was the only sound in the room. He opened the door to the stairwell. The smell of damp concrete and old wood hit him.

"Turn off the terminal," he said.

“It runs on the InSIM network,” she answered quietly into the empty space. “You can’t turn off a quantum system by pulling the plug. It remains in a superposition state.”

The door slammed shut. The bolt snapped into place with a dry, metallic click.

Luca didn't slow his pace on the stairs. With each step he descended, the roar of the city outside became more pronounced , the muffled rumble of tire tracks on wet asphalt, the whistling of the wind in the ventilation shaft of the Park Street subway station.

In the Red Line carriage, he sat facing his own reflection in the blackened windowpane as the train cut through the tunnel under the Charles River. The face in the glass was blurred, overlaid by the signal lights in the tunnel, which rhythmically sliced into the darkness. Yellow. Red. Off. A strobe light of possibilities that continued to push him eastward, unchanged.

Chapter 2: The Journey

Six hours in the fuselage of a Boeing 777, isolated above the continental plate. The cabin air was cooled down to twenty-two degrees, dry, and saturated with the scent of artificial lemon, coffee, and a faint hint of kerosene.

Luca sat by the window in seat 14A. In front of him on the tray table was a plastic cup of filtered coffee. A paper-thin, dark film had formed on the surface, which, with every slight turn of the plane, touched the rim of the cup without any vibration. He didn't touch it.

Outside, the cloud cover lay flat and solid beneath the wing, an endless field of featureless white. It looked like the plaster surface of the terrain models in the InSIM lab, a smooth matrix not yet resolved by calculations.

He pulled the color photograph from his notebook. The man in front of the brick wall in the Campo Santo Teutonico. In the sharp light of the reading lamp, the edges of the print stood out even more clearly. Phillips' eyes weren't focused on the lens, but slightly to the side, as if he were waiting for a signal from a measuring device outside the frame. The laws of quantum mechanics: a state determined only by the act of observation. What happened to the wave function when the observer left the cell?

The flight attendant pushed the serving trolley down the aisle. The wheel bearings of the casters produced a high-pitched, mechanical hum on the carpet.

"Would you like some more water?" she asked. Her smile was perfectly calibrated, a practiced dialogue grammar for ten thousand meters altitude.

"No," he said.

"We will begin our descent to Los Angeles shortly."

He looked through the double layer of acrylic again. The dense layer dissolved. The clouds tore into flat, gray shreds that floated across the topography of California. Below, the land appeared: barren, earth-colored, crisscrossed by dry riverbeds that looked like faded circuit patterns etched into the crust.

Then there was the agglomeration. Los Angeles wasn't a cohesive place, but a grid of freeways, parking garages, and low-rise commercial buildings stretching to the haze of the Pacific Ocean. A virtually endless redundancy of concrete and asphalt, where millions of movements occurred simultaneously without ever touching each other.

LAX smelled of ozone, jet fuel, and the damp rubber of the baggage carousels. Transit passengers silently shuffled beneath the display boards, their pixelated screens flashing new arrival times every second.

At the car rental counter, Luca signed the standard contract. The pen was attached to a coiled black plastic cord.

"Compact class, grey sedan, deck 3, parking space 412," said the employee without taking her eyes off the monitor. Her fingers glided expertly across the keyboard.

The car was parked in the parking garage under the fluorescent lights. The metal roof was cold. The engine started immediately , a quiet, vibration-free hum from the four-cylinder engine.

He steered the car onto Interstate 10 East. Traffic on the six lanes flowed at sixty, seventy miles per hour, a dense column of chrome, paint, and tinted windows. Alongside him, the periphery rolled by: billboards for logistics companies, fast-food signs on steel poles, automated car washes. Everything seemed prefabricated, erected in a test field for functional architecture.

After two hours, the road's curves changed. The apartment blocks gave way to low warehouses, then came the turnoffs to the prefabricated housing developments of the desert suburbs. Finally, the fences ended.

The road became a gray ribbon, cutting into the Colorado Desert between the last foothills of the mountains. The sun was low in the rearview mirror, casting the sedan's narrow shadow far in front of the vehicle. The landscape withered into burnt bushes, pale limestone, and fine red dust blown across the asphalt by the wind.

He switched on the radio. Static on all frequencies, interrupted by fragments of a preacher on medium wave, whose voice was lost in the static crackling.....*the point where time ceases to measure...*“He turned the volume control to the left until the switch clicked.

The silence in the vehicle interior was absolute, broken only by the steady rolling noise of the tires on the rough surface.

He left the interstate and followed the narrow road southeast. At a junction without traffic lights, the lone gas pump of an old gas station stood in front of a corrugated iron shack. The wind made a rusty advertising sign flap on two chains.

Luca stopped. As he opened the driver's door, the heat hit him , dry, sharp, tinged with the smell of burnt resin and dust. It was a heat that didn't warm, but dried out, much like the cold dryness in the climate-controlled storage facilities of Pompeii, where the organic remains were kept in the absence of air.

He let the fuel flow into the tank. The counter on the pump clicked mechanically.

A man sat behind a protective acrylic glass screen in the salesroom. His skin was deeply furrowed, his shirt faded at the shoulders. A yellowed folded map of San Bernardino County lay on the counter.

Luca placed two plastic bottles of still water and a sandwich wrapped in foil on the conveyor belt.

The man scanned the barcodes. The beeping was shrill in the confined space. "The side road further up is closed," he said. His voice sounded rough, as if he rarely used it. "Roadworks on the old bridge."

"I need to continue southeast," said Luca. "Into the valley."

The man looked at him through the lightly tinted acrylic glass. His eyes were narrow, clouded by cataracts. "There's nothing there anymore. They shut down the old measuring stations ten years ago. The Army doesn't even use the terrain for target practice anymore."

"The road goes right through it," said Luca.

"The road ends at the old salt pan," the man replied, sliding the change under the windshield. "After that, there are only tracks in the sand. If the engine stalls, the heat stays in the metal until it cools down. That's all there is."

Luca took the bottles. "That's enough."

He got back in. The door closed with a dull thud.

The sun sank behind the mountain ranges to the west, leaving a broad, violet stripe on the horizon that quickly faded into deep black. The sedan's headlights cut two white cones of light into the darkness, where billions of dust particles danced. No more oncoming traffic. No more masts. Only the yellow center line, disappearing beneath the radiator grille in time with the headlights.

He pulled over to the side of a gravel passing place. He switched off the ignition. The headlights went out.

The desert night descended upon the vehicle instantly. The engine crackled softly as it cooled, metal contracting as it shrank.

Luca got out of the car and leaned against the hood. The sky above him was clear, densely filled with cold, delicate points of light. No more lights of civilization at the edges. The air had cooled instantly.

He pulled the letter from his pocket. In the dim light of his mobile phone's display, no signal, no bars in the status bar, he no longer read the lines, he only felt the texture of the paper.

He's stopped calculating.

That was ARS's formulation: a state in which a quantum processor had stopped generating new iterations because all states had collapsed.

Around 10 p.m. he reached a motel on the edge of an abandoned mining settlement. Three neon tubes of the sign hummed in the cold. *M O T E L*.

The key was made of brass, attached to a diamond-shaped plastic tag with the number 7. The room smelled of linoleum, cleaning products, and dry wood. On the bedside table was a rotary phone, its cord pulled out of the wall.

Luca lay down naked on the blanket. The light from the single streetlamp outside the window cast the striped pattern of the blinds onto the ceiling , just like in the seminar room in Boston.

He didn't close his eyes. He listened to the sound of the wind blowing the fine desert dust against the windows. It sounded like the static of a data stream slowly fading into the background noise.

Chapter 3: The Arrival

The asphalt clung to the edge of the dip, crumbling into irregular pieces of limestone and finally giving way to a track of compacted, ochre-colored sediment. The sedan slowed down. The underbody once bottomed out hard on a washed-out ridge of rock, a dry, metallic thud that shot through the steering column and into Lucas's wrists.

The dust trailed behind the car in a thick, fine-grained plume. It settled on the rear window, crept through the seals of the air vents, and lay like a floury layer on the dashboard. It tasted of burnt lime and dried clay, a fine, alkaline film on the tongue reminiscent of the preservative powders in the archaeological depots of Campania.

The structure stood on the slope of the hill.

It was narrow, built on shallow concrete foundations, the wood burnt by ultraviolet radiation and weathered to a dull, silvery gray. The boards showed deep longitudinal cracks from which dry resin had oozed. No downpipe, no wire mesh. Just the rectangular geometry of a remote field station, its window frames worn smooth by the fine desert sand.

Phillips sat on the narrow veranda.

He wasn't lying in a deck chair, nor was he leaning against the facade. He was sitting on a simple wooden chair, his knees bent at a right angle, his feet flat on the floorboards. His hands rested on his thighs, long, bony fingers with calloused nails, their veins protruding like blue cables beneath the parchment-like skin. He wore a faded, dark collared shirt, missing its top button.

Luca switched off the engine. The sudden absence of cylinder movement created a physical emptiness in the room. The dust settled slowly onto the hood; the hot metal ticked in the second-by-second cycle of cooling.

Luca got out of the car. The sand crunched dryly under the rubber soles of his sneakers. The air down here was different from that at the gas pump, stagnant, heavier, permeated by the heat that the limestone had stored all day. It smelled of nothing, of thermally purified air.

He stepped onto the porch steps. Phillips didn't move his head. His gaze was fixed low across the hollow in the terrain, where the remains of the old measuring masts stood like rust-red needles shimmering against the horizon.

"The interface in Milan didn't delete your parameters, Dr. Phillips," Luca said. His own voice sounded surprisingly flat outdoors, as if the open desert were swallowing it instantly. "The InSIM system continues your dialogue grammars. It creates new loops."

Phillips remained silent. An insect moved in a sluggish circular path around the faded wood of the railing, silent and without buzzing.

"The faculty in Boston assumes you're in Rome," Luca continued. He reached into his jacket pocket and felt the sharp edges of the photo. "But the sheet from the dot-matrix printer came without an IP header. It was using the Gregorian University's old account."

Phillips closed his eyes for the duration of a single breath. His eyelids were dry, marked by the finest veins of dust. His face had become narrower than in the picture taken against the brick wall in the Campo Santo, the skeleton was visible beneath the tanned skin like an exposed artifact.

"Teilhard wrote about the escalation," said Luca, deliberately starting with the lowest level. "But the ARS model doesn't calculate towards an escalation. It branches out. It leaves the possibilities open without eliminating any of them. What kind of place is this, Phillips? An observer post?"

The light changed its angle. The shadows of the roof beams moved millimeter by millimeter across the softwood of the veranda, sharp, black bars that divided the deck into mathematical segments.

Luca didn't move. The fabric of his shirt clung to his back. The heat wasn't a sensation, but a pressure on his sternum, a physical restriction of his breathing. He stared at the old man's right hand. A small, light scar ran along the edge of his wrist, the cut mark of an old glass pipette from the physics labs.

After an hour, the sun had reached the crest of the western desert range and bathed the valley floor in a harsh, red light, Phillips stood up. His movements were mechanical, without the haste of old people. He reached for the tin jug on the table behind him, filled a thick-walled water glass, and pushed it to the edge of the railing.

The glass was fogged up; fine condensation beads formed on the outside and ran down through the desert dust.

Phillips looked at him for the first time. The eyes were not cloudy, but a pale, almost transparent gray, narrowed in the center to two tiny, black dots.

"The water is coming from the deep borehole," Phillips said. His voice wasn't a whisper, but a dry, sharp sound, like two pieces of limestone rubbing against each other. "Eighty meters. Bound before the eruption."

Luca took the glass. The water was cold, tasted metallic of iron and sodium, and burned slightly on his dry lips.

"They haven't turned off the quantum interface," Luca said.

Phillips turned his head away again. His profile cut sharply against the glowing horizon. "If you're looking for sentences, you're in the wrong experimental field. The dialogues are finished. We're only documenting the freezing here."

"The book of the system is not empty," said Luca.

“The system calculates the remainders,” Phillips replied quietly. “It creates states because there’s no one there to end the measurement. If you want to stay, leave the questions in the car. Dust doesn’t need grammar.”

He turned around and stepped through the screen door. The screen clicked against the frame with a soft, double clack.

Luca remained seated on the steps. The wood beneath his thighs cooled instantly as daylight faded. Out in the hollow, the shadows of the measuring masts faded to thin, gray lines until darkness filled the basin like liquid ink. Not a sound of civilization. No airplane nets in the night sky. Only the soft, mechanical hum of the wind driving the sand against the foundations.

Later, Luca entered the interior.

The cabin smelled of paraffin, old paper, and dry cedarwood. A single kerosene lamp burned on the wooden table, casting a narrow, yellow circle of light onto the floorboards.

There were no popular paperbacks on the shelf at the back. Instead, English and Italian research volumes in worn linen bindings stood in rows: treatises on stochastic processes, manuscripts on the phenomenology of time, old reports from the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Interspersed among them were faded index cards, densely covered with mathematical formulas and fragments of ancient Greek text, Phillips' own preliminary work on the dialogue grammars from the 1990s.

On the wall above the cot-like frame hung not a polished wooden crucifix, but a simple, cast-iron cross without a corpus, its surface corroded. The arms of the iron cross were slightly asymmetrical, like an abandoned measuring tape.

Phillips lay on the sleeping bag, his arms crossed over his chest, his eyes closed. His breathing was so shallow that the fabric of his shirt barely lifted.

Luca sat down on the empty cot against the opposite wall. He pulled out the notebook, placed it unopened on the wooden stand next to his head, and stared at the ceiling, where the light from the dim lamp illuminated the branching structure of the beams.

The desert outside was no longer a place. It was a resonating chamber for a system that had forgotten how to collapse. Luca closed his eyes and listened to the dry ticking of the ceiling beams, which, as they cooled, released the sun's warmth.

Chapter 4: The Silence

The deceleration didn't occur as a sudden break, but as a gradual withdrawal of impulses. The rhythms of the days shrank to a few, rigidly recurring sequences, a series of measurements without outliers.

The morning light filtered through the gaps in the wooden paneling like a gray ruler. Phillips was already sitting on the porch, his forearms flat on his knees, his shoulders slightly hunched forward. He was wearing the same faded cotton trousers, their hems encrusted white with chalky dust.

Luca stepped onto the deck behind him. The planks remained silent. He sat down on the top step, his back against the post.

At the mouth of the depression, the haze lay flat over the basalt blocks. The light appeared unfiltered, cold, and refractantly harsh.

"The interface didn't clean up the old queries from InSIM," Luca said after an hour. His voice sounded rougher than the previous evening, coated with the fine dust of the night. "In Milan, the simulations continue to run without loop monitoring. They're generating agents that no longer expect any input."

Phillips didn't look up. His gaze remained fixed on the line of measuring masts on the horizon. A vein in his right temple pulsed slowly, with the stubborn regularity of a clock tick.

"You can't maintain a superposition indefinitely," Luca added. "Someone has to end the measurement."

Phillips reached for the tin cup beside his chair. The rim of the cup clinked softly against his teeth. He took two sips of the lukewarm water, placed the cup back exactly where the damp imprint had been left in the wood, and stroked his forehead with the palm of his hand.

"The phenomenology of annihilation," the old man said. It wasn't a contribution to the conversation, more like the loud reciting of an archived footnote. "We spent months in Rome discussing the invariance of silence. But the Gregorian University is a space of stone and acoustics. Even renunciation reverberates there."

He stood up without letting the wood of the chair creak and walked into the shadows of the interior.

Around midday they headed east. There was no path. The ground consisted of solid sediment, interrupted by flat scree slopes whose pebbles seemed to be covered by a fine layer of ash, the remnant of ancient volcanic eruptions, preserved under the desert sun.

Phillips walked with a steady, long stride, his arms swinging loosely at his sides. He didn't avoid the stones; he stepped on them. The crunching of the rocks under his soles was the only sound in the hollow.

The old man stopped at a depression of lighter clay. He didn't bend down with the hesitancy of old age, but with a quick, functional bend of the hip. His fingers grasped a fist-sized piece of gray basalt. The surface of the stone was rough, covered with tiny pores in which the light-colored sand had become trapped.

He held the fragment on the flat of his palm without turning or examining it. He held it like a measurement result that required no interpretation.

"Teilhard saw rock as the first stage of compression," said Luca, who stood two steps behind him. "The accumulation of mass prior to consciousness."

Phillips held his hand steady. The sun cast the harsh shadow of his fingers onto the stone.

"The stones are not a step," Phillips said quietly. He dropped the basalt. The impact on the dry clay was silent, a short, heavy pressure pulse in the dust. "They are the state after the collapse. They bear witness to nothing because there are no alternatives for them. No branching. No layering."

He continued walking without looking back.

The days lost their names. They were divided into the wandering of shadow segments on the veranda planks, the thermal expansion of the corrugated iron roof, and the short meals of hard bread and sheep's cheese that they ate silently on the parapet.

By the fourth day, the fine layer of dust had settled deep into the pores of Lucas's hands. The skin on his knuckles had become cracked, brittle like old paper.

He observed the flight path of two military jets as they traversed the stratosphere at high altitude. The aircraft themselves were invisible; only two razor-sharp, white contrails cut the deep blue sky into precise parallel lines. No sound reached the ground. The engines remained silent at that altitude.

"Martina has deregistered from the park," Luca said into the silence. He sat on the warm wood and watched as the contrails slowly dissipated, widening and fading away as a gray veil. "Her mother said she went to Milan. To InSIM."

Phillips moved the fingers of his right hand as if playing a silent chord on an invisible keyboard.

"They are all looking for the closure of the model," the old Jesuit replied after a long pause. His eyes followed the edges of the faded streaks in the sky. "But the ARS system doesn't close it. It only expands the peripheral aspects. Martina knows this. She has read the excavation reports from Campania. She knows the difference between preservation and petrification."

"And you?" asked Luca. "Why did you come here?"

Phillips didn't turn his head. The skin on his neck lay in deep, dry creases above his collar.

"You can't be in the experimental field and taking measurements at the same time, Luca," he said, his voice losing all academic tone, becoming flat like the fading light over the pool. "I spent years calculating dialogues. I taught algorithms how to structure the unspoken. Out here, there's no structure anymore. Just the background noise."

He stood up and stepped to the edge of the deck, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Tomorrow," Luca whispered to the old man's shadow. "Tomorrow I'll break off the series."

Phillips did not answer. He stood on the threshold of the dust, while the horizon lost its red color and faded into the monotonous violet of the desert night.

Chapter 5: The first question

On the seventh day, the silence was not broken in a long conversation, but in short, incomplete sentences that were immediately blown away by the wind.

The sun was blazing brightly over the ridge at eleven o'clock. The air above the basalt blocks shimmered so intensely that the contours of the old measuring masts on the horizon seemed to soften into gray lines. It looked like a calculation error on an oscilloscope monitor.

Luca sat on the lowest step of the veranda, his knees drawn up to his chest. He carried his notebook on his thigh, but the pen lay untouched in the fold of the binding. The floorboards beneath his feet had stored the morning's warmth and released it upwards in even, dry waves.

Phillips sat three steps above him. His hands lay flat on his thighs, unchanged, the veins blue and clearly defined.

"Why did you leave the Gregorian University?" Luca asked. He didn't look up. His gaze was fixed on a bleached lizard skull, half-buried in the red sand beside the stairs.

Phillips didn't move his head. The skin on his neck was taut as he held his breath.

"Because the dialogues became corrupt," he finally said. His voice sounded cooler than on previous days, free of any harshness, almost mechanically articulated. "When you teach a system to calculate probabilities for the next words, you forget how to be silent. You only produce redundancy."

"The InSIM lab needs the parameters for the software agents," said Luca. "Mertens wants to use the prototypes in Pompeii. A simulation of consciousness that doesn't know it's stuck in a loop."

Phillips didn't draw a conclusion. He looked over Lucas's head into the stark white of the hollow.

"Teilhard thought the Omega Point was the goal of evolution," the old Jesuit said quietly. "The ultimate condensation. A state in which matter is packed so densely that it becomes pure spirit. But that was twentieth-century theology. A geometric error."

"And what is reality?" asked Luca, turning the unused pen in his fingers.

"The ARS system doesn't anticipate compression," Phillips replied. His fingers clenched slightly around the fabric of his trousers, then relaxed again. "It expands. Every decision creates a new field. The Omega Point isn't a singularity, Luca. It's the state where no alternative needs to be calculated anymore. Not because a world is left. But because all questions that still demand a calculation have disappeared."

With a minimal movement of his chin, he pointed to the pile of rubble in front of the veranda.

"These are the stones," he said. "Not a monument. Just what's left when all calculations are stopped."

Luca looked at the grey blocks of solidified basalt. The heat reflected off the smooth, fractured edges like broken glass.

"They're talking about a dead end," said Luca.

"I'm talking about measurement," Phillips replied. "The quantum interface doesn't collapse on its own. You have to stop looking. You have to leave the lab."

"And Martina?" asked Luca. The question fell suddenly into the room, unprepared, like an object sliding off the table. "She didn't go to Milan."

Phillips didn't react immediately. The shadow of the porch roof slowly moved across his forehead, plunging his eye sockets into deep darkness.

"Martina knows the difference between a ruin and a simulation," he said quietly. "She's searching for the layers beneath the ash. But down there, there are no worlds left. Only the sediment."

He stood up. The joints of his knees gave a dry crack that immediately vanished in the shimmering air. He didn't go into the hut to get food. He stepped to the railing, braced himself with both hands, and watched as the sun bathed the horizon in a hard, metallic, pale yellow.

"You remained silent for seven days, Luca," he said without turning around. "But you didn't listen. You just waited for the moment when you could ask your questions."

"I need an answer for work," said Luca.

"There is no work," Phillips replied. "There is only the experimental setup. And we are the variables that were forgotten to be deleted."

He turned away and stepped through the screen door into the dimly lit interior.

On the eighth day, the light changed.

A dry north wind had arisen during the night, carrying fine, reddish dust from the higher valleys. The sky was no longer blue, but a pale, opaque yellow that made the sun appear as a dull disc. The heat was no longer felt as radiation, but as a dry, oppressive layer on the skin, like armor.

They sat side by side on the steps. Neither of them had touched their breakfast. The plastic bowl of dried dates sat untouched between their feet, covered by a thin veil of the finest sand.

Luca held the color photograph of young Phillips in his hand. The edges of the paper had curled slightly upwards in the extreme dryness of the desert.

"He looks like he knows what's coming," said Luca, handing over the picture.

Phillips didn't take the photo. He only glanced briefly at the paper print, as if it were the data sheet of a long-discarded device.

"That was before the simulation," the old man said. His voice was barely more than a cool rustle in the wind. "Before we uploaded the dialogue grammars to the servers. Back then, we still believed that language was a means of sharing reality."

"And today?"

"Today we know that language is merely an attempt to mask the noise of the system. Every word is a reduction, a poor collapse."

He reached for his water cup, didn't drink, but let the liquid slowly spill over the edge onto the top step. The damp wood instantly darkened, and after only a few seconds the stain began to fade again as the dust absorbed the water.

"You want to know what to do, Luca?" Phillips asked, looking sideways at him. His eyes seemed almost transparent in the yellowish light.

"Yes," said Luca.

"Nothing," replied the old Jesuit. He turned his gaze back to the dusty hollow. "Sit down. Observe the cooling. That is the only movement that does not create new worlds."

They sat on the steps as the dust wind swept across the sediment in long, dense plumes, slowly refilling the car's tracks on the piste, line by line.

Chapter 6: The Stones

On the ninth day, the old man wore sturdy shoes made of heavy, cracked leather and a lined work jacket, which seemed completely anachronistic in the heat.

When Luca stepped out of the doorway shortly after seven, Phillips was already standing thirty meters east of the porch in the sand, his hands in his jacket pockets, his gaze fixed on the edge of the depression. He wasn't moving to wait for Luca; he simply existed at a point outside the cabin, as if a shift in the terrain had deposited him there.

Luca reached for the boots that stood beside the threshold. The leather was brittle, covered in the finest basalt dust. He laced them up without unfolding his stockings.

They went east. Not along the washed-out track that led back to the main road, but straight through the free sediment.

The ground wasn't a sandy beach. It was a solidified field of crushed, porous volcanic rock, interspersed with sharp quartzite fragments that created a dry, rhythmic crunching sound underfoot. The air tasted of sulfur and cooled iron, the same smell Luca knew from the air-conditioned basements of the InSIM lab in Naples when the high-performance cooling systems of the quantum servers were switched off after twenty hours of continuous operation.

Phillips walked with a steady, mechanical stride. He didn't shy away from the larger boulders, but stepped over them with a rigid hip. His silhouette stood out sharply against the flat, yellowish morning light, thin as a line on a diagram.

After two and a half hours, the geometry of the landscape changed.

The shallow depression narrowed into a wide, treeless basin. Here there was no more vegetation, no withered thorn bushes, no lizards lurking in the shadows of the crevices. Before them lay a collection of basalt blocks, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of dull, dark bodies lying flat on the light layer of dust. It didn't look like natural weathering. It resembled the remains of an urban structure whose walls and roofs had been shattered into molecular fragments in a single instant and flattened to the ground.

Phillips stopped at the edge of the cauldron. He took his hands out of his pockets and let them hang limply at his sides.

"This is not a cemetery," he said. His voice was quiet, but in the absolute silence of the cauldron, each word sounded like a precisely placed impulse. "A cemetery preserves memory. This is the absence of signal."

Luca stepped to his side. The heat rose from the dark rock, shimmering restlessly, so that the distant edges of the cauldron seemed to sway.

"We were looking for organic matter in Pompeii," Luca said. His throat was rough with dust. "For imprints in the hollow of the ash. But the ARS sensors only measured the density of the

stones. The system didn't reconstruct the dead, Phillips. It replaced them with mathematical shapes."

Phillips didn't look at him. His eye sockets were deep in the shadow of the hat brim.

"If you simulate an event down to the smallest detail," said the old Jesuit, "eventually you no longer need witnesses. The measurement consumes the subject. What remains is the stone. A body that asks no questions and changes no parameters."

Luca bent down. He reached for a fist-sized piece of basalt, half-buried in the dust. The surface was rough, porous, and interspersed with tiny greenish olivine crystals. The rock felt heavy, surprisingly cold on the underside, which had been in contact with the sand, while the top glowed.

He turned the stone in his fingers, feeling along the sharp edges.

"Martina said that the stones in the desert have patience," said Luca.

"Martina was thinking in metaphors," Phillips replied in a cascading, unintelligible manner. "That was her mistake. The stones have no patience. Patience requires time. Stones are the state in which time has ceased to be a continuous variable. They are the final value of the equation."

"The Omega Point," said Luca, dropping the stone back into the dust. The impact produced a dull, ringing sound.

"Teilhard confused the point with God," Phillips said. He took a half step forward without descending into the cauldron. "He believed in a spiritual completion. But the Omega Point of the ARS project is purely physical. It's the moment when the computing capacity of the universe is exhausted. When all worlds have been calculated and no probability remains to generate another word, then the system freezes."

"And what about us?" asked Luca.

Phillips looked at him for the first time. His eyelids were heavy, his pupils constricted to the size of a pinhead.

"We are the noise that the system filters out before it shuts down. We are the intermediate values, the ash."

He didn't turn away to wait for an answer. He sat down directly on one of the flat basalt blocks at the edge of the basin, drew his knees up slightly, and rested his elbows on the fabric of his work jacket.

Luca sat down on a similar stone three meters away. The warmth of the volcanic rock slowly penetrated the thick fabric of his trousers.

They no longer spoke.

The sun rose higher until the cauldron cast no shadow. The stones lay there like an array of data points on a dark field, silent, absolute, unobserved by the world's cameras.

They headed back in the late afternoon. The return journey took longer. The shadows of the two men stretched across the reddish sand, long, fine lines running ahead of them, filling the fractured edges of the stones like black ink.

By the time they reached the hut, the light in the west had faded into a murky, more violet sediment.

They drank lukewarm water from tin cups on the porch. Neither of them turned on the lights inside.

On the tenth day, the texture of the silence changed.

When Luca went outside that morning, Phillips was sitting on the top step. He was no longer wearing his work jacket, but the simple, faded shirt from the first few days. In his right hand, he held a removed sensor from the first test series of the measuring masts, its cable connection neatly severed.

He rotated the component between his thumb and forefinger.

Luca sat down on the lowest step. He stopped asking questions. He watched as the sunlight refracted in the sensor's small glass window, a tiny, high-intensity point of light that moved across the wood of the step.

"You can't stop the experiment, Luca," Phillips said quietly. It didn't sound like a lecture, but rather like the statement of a physical constant.

"I know," Luca replied.

"The ARS continues to calculate whether we are sitting in Naples in front of monitors or out here in the dust. It generates billions of worlds in which Martina goes home, in which she gets off the train in Milan, in which she never existed."

He dropped the sensor into the sand beside the stairs. The component disappeared halfway into the red ash.

"So what are we doing here then?" asked Luca after a long pause.

Phillips leaned the back of his head against the rough wooden wall of the cabin and closed his eyes.

"We remain in the only world where we no longer have to answer."

They sat there as the heat of the tenth day rose over the depression, and the desert before them slowly melted into a single, reflective field of glaring white.

Chapter 7: The Reconstruction

On the fourteenth day, a mechanical noise changed the density of the air.

It wasn't a sudden noise, but a deep, slow frequency rising far to the south from the heat haze of the road surface. An old sedan, its faded paintwork the color of dried mud, pushed a shallow bow wave of gray dust ahead of it. The engine ran roughly, with the irregular ticking of a valve on the verge of seizing.

Phillips sat on the second wooden step of the porch. He didn't move his head. His hands lay flat on his thighs, rigid, as if he could already feel the vibrations of the axles through the volcanic foundation.

The car stopped five meters before the steps. The radiator hissed softly, a thin stream of coolant evaporated in a stuttering fashion on the hot metal of the underbody.

The driver's door swung open.

A woman got off the train. She was in her mid-forties, wearing a dark blue cotton jacket over a faded shirt and sturdy canvas shoes. Her hair was pulled back tightly, powdered a matte gray with the finest sand. She carried no luggage, only a worn brown canvas travel bag, its zipper half open. The crumpled paper of an old Naples timetable was visible in the gap.

She stopped at the bumper. Her eyes wandered over the weathered boards of the cabin, silently slid over Phillips, and finally settled on Lucas's shoulders.

"The train from San Diego was four hours late," she said. The origin and tone of her voice carried the precise cadence of those academic circles in Naples where Phillips had once taught, cool, precise, devoid of any dramatic intonation. "The connection in Indio exists only on network maps now."

Phillips did not reply. He fixed his gaze on a point far behind the rear of the car, where the track ended in the sediment.

She looked at him without tilting her head. "She's stopped taking the medication, Michael. The doctor at the clinic says the neural patterns aren't responding to the correction. She's stopped asking about you."

She grabbed her bag, walked past the steps, and stepped through the open door into the cabin. Her footsteps on the wooden floorboards sounded hard and unpadded. A short, metallic clink followed as she placed the bag on the table, precisely where the files for the experiment had lain until the previous day.

When she stepped back into the light of the porch, she was no longer wearing the canvas. She sat down on the step below Phillips. Her back almost touched his knees, but neither of them sought contact.

She turned her head slightly towards Luca. Her pupils were dark, with fine reddening, and her eyelids were sharply defined.

"He told me you would be here," she said. "An assistant from metrology. Someone who believes in reconstruction."

"I'm not here for the measurements," said Luca.

"Then why?" she asked. She ran two fingers over the wooden step, scraping off a fine crust of dried dust. "To watch a system burn down? To keep a record?"

"He didn't leave the lab because the data was wrong," Luca said, his throat tightening. "The ARS didn't simulate, Martina. It eliminated the possibilities. Every circuit erased a world."

A brief, silent smile crossed her face, cooler than the shadows under the corrugated iron roof.

"My name isn't Martina," she said quietly. "Martina is the variable from the simulations. The daughter who sat on the bus to Rome in the seventy-seven-hour shift. The one whose parameters you corrected every six weeks in the InSIM data centers."

Luca looked at her. The wind caught the thin dress, pressing the fabric against her ribs.

"It exists in the data set," he said.

"The dataset is a mathematical corpse," she replied, without raising her voice. "A vector of probabilities, constructed from his lecture notes and the Jesuits' confession records. My father never learned to distinguish between a person and their wave function. For him, disappearance was merely a change of state that could be reversed through enough iterations."

Phillips didn't move. The light refracted in his blurred corneal edges, rigid and reflective.

"We lost the signal," the old man said suddenly. It was the first time in three days that his voice had filled the room. It sounded flat, devoid of any resonance, like an announcement over a broken loudspeaker. "On the twenty-fourth of August. The sensors in Sector Four showed only noise. No mass. No body. Only the disintegration of coherence."

The woman looked at her hands. Her fingernails were cut short, her knuckles whitish from dust.

"I was in Pompeii on the twenty-fourth of August, Michael," she said calmly. "I walked through the excavations. I walked past the plaster casts. I looked at my phone. There was no signal because the masts in the valley were switched off. Not because the world had ceased to exist."

She stood up. The wood of the step groaned under the slight relief.

"The car has no more fuel for the return trip," she told Luca. "I stopped in Ocotillo on the way, but the pumps are closed. They cut off the power there three weeks ago."

She didn't go back into the cabin. She strolled slowly around the dusty sedan, ran her palm over the hot metal of the hood, and stopped at the rear. The late afternoon heat rose from the desert, thick, sluggish layers of shimmering air that dissolved the image of the mountain range to the north into distorted, horizontal stripes.

They sat on the porch until the reddish-purple light of dusk faded into the gray sediment. Not a single star was visible; the atmosphere above the depression was saturated with the finest dust.

The next morning the car was gone.

There was no engine noise. No tire tracks in the dust. The space in front of the veranda was empty, as if the sound of the old sedan had never filled the air. Only the two deep grooves in the volcanic rock, where the cooling water had seeped away the day before, stood out as dark, encrusted lines in the sand.

Luca stepped onto the step. The wind stung his eyes.

Phillips sat in the same spot as the previous evening. The small glass window of the detached sensor lay at his feet. The morning sun was reflected in it, not as a point of light, but as a dull, matte surface across which an ant was lazily crawling.

"She will not come back," said Luca.

Phillips did not turn his head. His cheeks appeared sunken, the skin over his cheekbones stretched like parchment.

"The probability of a return lies within the margin of error," he said quietly. "If you observe a system long enough, the edges become sharp. There are no alternative states anymore. No daughter. No city beneath the ashes."

He raised his hand, slowly and with an almost microscopic movement, and pointed to the field of dark basalt blocks that stretched beyond the depression in the morning sun.

"The stones no longer measure," he said.

Luca sat down on the step next to him. He drew his knees up and crossed his arms over them. The cold of the stone penetrated the soles of his feet. They no longer spoke. The shimmering above the field began again.

Chapter 8: The Daughter's Silence

On the sixteenth day, the flickering had not resolved.

The sedan was still at the foot of the veranda, slumped precariously in the loose sand beneath the left side of the vehicle. Heat rose in visible waves from the fenders, like pressure escaping from an incompletely insulated chamber.

The woman sat on the lowest wooden step. Her neck was bent, the tendons beneath her dull skin pulled taut like wires in a casing. She wasn't looking out at the basaltic debris field, but at the space between her own shoes, where the finest volcanic sediment collected in the folds of the canvas.

Luca stepped out of the doorway. The door frame smelled of resinous pine and old oil. He sat down three steps above, the wood giving way with a dry crack.

"They did not interrupt the ignition," he said.

She didn't move her head. "The valve is stuck. When the pressure drops, the head draws in air. It's not a thermal problem, but a mechanical malfunction."

Her voice had the characteristic dryness of the Neapolitan university district, but there was a layer of dust underneath, as if she had poured the vowels through a sieve.

Phillips appeared minutes later. He was still wearing the light-colored shirt with the dark stains under the armpits, the edges of which had bloomed a salty white. He didn't hold onto the post. He slid along the wall until he was seated, his elbows wedged on his knees, his fingers interlocked as if in an exercise in reconstructing crystal lattices.

The silence was not an absence of sound. It was a dense, physical matter, formed from the continuous ticking of the cooling sheet metal and the piezoelectric mass of insects in the dry grass.

"The curve in sector nine was never closed," Phillips said after an hour. His pupils constricted in the bright reflection of the sediment floor. "Teilhard called that the Omega Point. But there was no convergence. Only the increase in entropy in the marginal areas."

The woman ran her index finger over the leather of her sandal. A trail of grey dirt clung to the crease.

"In the clinic in Capodichino, there was a room with two windows," she said without looking up. "You could see the sea and the airport's approach path. She sat there all afternoon counting the turbine frequencies. She said that with each landing, a path out of the matrix is erased."

Luca looked at her shoulder blades. "Those were the tranquilizers."

"No," she said coolly. "That was the syntax. Her syntax. He taught her to read the world as a tree of case decisions. If you count long enough, no trunk remains. Only branches."

The seventeenth day.

At eleven o'clock, the sun stood as a pale, fiery point behind a wall of atmospheric dust. The horizon had lost its contours; the rock and the sky merged into a single, pale continuum.

The woman had taken off her jacket. The shirt was damp at the shoulder blades, the contours of her spine were sharply defined like the segments of a fossilized backbone.

"The casts in Pompeii are hollow," she said, referring to the space between her knees. "The ministry tried injecting polyurethane in the sixties to preserve the organic remains. But the tissue had long since disappeared. They only sealed the shape of the cavity."

Phillips didn't move. A fine film of sweat glistened on his forehead, without beading up.

"The void is the state before the measurement," he said. His voice sounded like dry paper being dragged across concrete. "The ARS mapped the voids. Nothing more. If you pump liquid into it, you destroy the overlying layer."

"They pumped plastic in there, Michael," she said quietly. "It still stinks of solvents when the sun shines on the display cases."

Luca leaned forward. He felt the heat of the wooden floorboards through his thighs. "Why did you leave the coast?"

She turned her face slightly towards him. The redness in her eyes had deepened, forming fine radiating lines of burst capillaries.

"Because the databases were full," she said. "InSIM halved its computing capacity in May. The servers in Rome consume too much cooling water. They deleted the secondary paths. Martina was a secondary path."

"And you?" asked Luca.

She looked at him, staring, without blinking. "I am the residual error. The number that gets left behind because rounding takes more processing time than the storage space."

In the evening, the crickets filled the dry scrub behind the cabin with an intensity that drowned out one's own heartbeat. They ate cold canned beans without cutlery, scraping the greasy layer from the metal edges with their fingers.

Phillips refused food. He sat in the shadow of the inner wall, his face turned towards the dark corner where the terminals had once stood.

"There's a phrase in Loyola," he murmured into the twilight. "The third kind of humility. When the subject wishes to be considered dead so that the order of things is not disturbed by its presence."

"This isn't a Loyola, Father," the woman said from the doorway. She held the empty tin can in both hands, as if weighing its mass. "This is the documentation of the processing cores. Page forty. Drift correction."

The eighteenth day.

In the morning the wind had changed direction. It now came directly from the Ocotillo basin, laden with the smell of burnt rubber and dry salt.

The sedan stood motionless. The front right tire had lost air overnight; the rim now rested directly on a flat basalt block.

The woman stood in the open space in front of the veranda. She carried the brown canvas bag under her arm. The straps hung down, dragging through the fine sediment dust.

"In the third layer of the ARS, there was a parameter for silence," Luca said. He stood on the top step, his hand pressed flat against the dried-out doorpost. "A threshold. If the entropy exceeded a certain value, the algorithm stopped outputting."

She didn't turn around. "That wasn't an algorithm. That was staff exhaustion."

She set off.

She didn't use the track the Sedan had left in the dust, but cut straight through the field of dark basalt blocks. Her canvas shoes landed with a short, dry crunch on the sharp-edged stones.

Luca took two steps forward. The heat hit him like a solid plate against his chest.

"Leave them," Phillips said from behind him.

The old man's voice was so quiet that it was almost lost in the hissing of the wind.

Luca didn't look back. "She goes into the hollow. There's no shade there. No roads."

"It doesn't dip," Phillips said. He hadn't gotten up. He was sitting on the floorboards, his hands wrapped around his knees, his head slightly tilted, as if listening to the sound of distant hydraulics. "It only goes out of the sensors' field of view. That's the difference."

Luca watched the woman's dark silhouette. It shrank, not smoothly, but in jerks, distorted by the rising layers of heat convection. At a point about two hundred meters away, where two massive volcanic blocks formed a narrow gateway, her outline dissolved. The dark blue cotton of her jacket blended with the dark tones of the rock.

A flicker, brief and sharp, as if a lens had corrected the focal length.

Then there was only the basalt.

Luca stopped on the step. He felt the fine dust settle on his lips, dry, with a metallic aftertaste of sulfur and outdated electronics.

"She was here," he said. There was no question about it.

Phillips didn't answer immediately. He reached down and picked up the small glass window of the detached sensor. He slowly turned it between his thumb and forefinger. The surface was covered with microspheres of molten quartz.

"The system has no history anymore," the old man said. His eyes were completely fixed, focused on the dim reflections of light in the glass. "If you can no longer read a state, it never existed. That is the elegance of architecture."

Luca sat down on the hot step. He placed his palms on his knees, precisely in the imprints that Phillips had left three days earlier.

The stones in front of them did not change color. They absorbed the light, silently, heavily, without any tendency to resonate.

Chapter 9: The Blank Page

On the nineteenth day, the hut was filled with a dry, mealy crunching sound.

It was the timbers that yielded under the vertical pressure of the midday sun. Luca lay open on the frame of the cot. The pillowcase smelled of old tallow and the inorganic dust from the ventilation shafts of InSIM. He sat up without putting his feet on the floor. The light pushed through the cracks in the corrugated iron wall in narrow, razor-sharp strips, cutting lines in the dim light of the chamber.

He stepped outside. The air had the viscosity of cooled oil.

Phillips sat on the porch, his forearms folded on his thighs, his gaze fixed on the pale strip of gravel where the sedan's shadow had ended the day before. The car was still there, its bodywork sunk deep into the sediment, as if the weight of the metal itself had completely compacted the loose soil beneath the basalt.

"She didn't go through Sector Four," said Luca.

Phillips didn't answer. His fingers slowly traced the seam of his trousers, back and forth, with the steady ticking of a relay in standby mode.

Luca walked around the building. The back wall was roughly sheathed, the cut edges of the boards encrusted white-gray with resinous bloom. He walked down the gentle slope to the rocky outcrop where the series of experiments had begun in June. The dust silently absorbed his footsteps. No trace, no imprint in the loose pumice. He didn't call her name. The frequency of a human voice would have instantly evaporated in the vastness of the basin, without echo, without reverberation against the solidified magma formations.

Inside the hut, the small room behind the kitchen was deserted.

The bedding lay taut over the horsehair mattress. Not a single pillow was compressed, not a single wrinkle betrayed the contours of a resting body. On the rough spruce top of the small table lay only a landscape-format notebook of Italian manufacture, its cover made of worn, black oilcloth, the corners slightly curled by the coastal humidity.

It lay there open.

Luca approached the table. His hand hovered two centimeters above the paper. The right side was white, with an almost aggressively pristine, untouched density. Not a speck of graphite, not a mark from a pen pressed too hard.

He turned around. Phillips was standing in the doorway. The old man's shadow was short, a dark, dense mass on the floorboards.

"She left nothing behind," said Luca.

Phillips stepped closer. His breathing rattled, like sand passing through a fine brass sieve. "There are no legacies in Everett's model. When a branch of the wave function loses its coherence, it takes its edges with it."

Luca reached for the book and flipped back through the pages. The pages crackled dryly.

The first pages contained ink drawings. Not landscapes, but schematic cross-sectional drawings: the stratigraphic sequences of the Pompeii excavation sites, ground plans of Regio V, hatched squares with millimeter measurements of volcanic sediments. Interspersed, in the woman's fine, steep handwriting, were mathematical matrices for the decay of isotopes.

He reached the last page with writing on it.

There was no long text, no justification. Just a single, isolated line at the top, written in thin ink that was microscopically frayed at the edges of the letters:

In another iteration, I did not confirm the parameters.

Luca closed the book. The oilcloth felt greasy under his fingertips.

"She has not left the system," he said.

Phillips looked at the empty tabletop. His eyes seemed dull, as if a thin membrane of cornea covered the light through his pupils. "It refused the measurement. That's the only form of deletion the algorithm accepts. Anyone who doesn't report their status is dropped from the matrix. We observed this in test field six. Three hundred sensors. They didn't show 'zero.' They showed 'No receiver.'"

"She was a person, Michael. Not a sensor."

"That's a semantic difference, Luca. A question of scaling. The ARS doesn't distinguish between a biological interface and a diode when the data streams break down."

The twentieth day.

The midday heat pressed the smoke from the stove flat against the ground. They had placed the stand in front of the porch. A tin can of water sat on the burner; the water was just about to boil, without forming bubbles, sluggish and silent.

Luca looked at the stones. The field of rubble stretched to the horizon like the solidified ruins of an ancient necropolis. In the dazzling light, the basalt blocks appeared completely flat, without depth, as if painted onto a desert panorama.

"In Pompeii," said Luca, "there is the Casa del Fauno. In one of the cavities, they found the imprint of a wooden cabinet. The grain of the wood was preserved in the pumice. The wood itself had been dust for two thousand years."

Phillips didn't move on the step. His hands lay flat on his knees, the skin as thin as parchment paper over the bluish arches of veins.

"The material deteriorates," he said quietly. "What remains is the geometry of absence. The ARS was never a reconstruction of life, Luca. It was a mapping of voids. We traced the contours of the dead until the signal was strong enough to replace the living."

Luca looked at him. "And Martina?"

"Which Martina?" the old man asked. His voice wasn't cynical. It was flat, completely cleansed of emotion, like the machine-generated speech output of an old terminal. "The daughter who attended lectures in Rome? The wife who walked through the rubble yesterday? Or the variable in the algorithm we checked every evening at six o'clock? They've all been silenced in the system. One by one."

Phillips stood up. His movements were extremely slow, as if it took an immeasurable effort to raise the mass of his body against the gravity of the depression.

He descended the wooden steps. His soles left no deep imprints in the hot dust. He took two paces into the rubble and stopped in front of a waist-high, sharp-edged block of volcanic rock.

He did not touch the stone. He merely tilted his head, as if listening to a frequency just below the range of human hearing.

"They no longer measure," the old man repeated. "The stones have lost the ability to record data. We are at zero, Luca. Omega has been reached, but there is no elevation. Only the silence of the material."

Luca did not follow him. He remained sitting on the porch, his elbows on his knees.

The air above the basalt blocks continued to shimmer. On the horizon, the line of the mountain range dissolved completely, dissolving into a milky, glaring band of unfiltered light. They sat there as the shadow of the hut slowly crept across the ground, a dark, sharp wedge that finally swallowed them both without offering any relief from the heat.

They no longer spoke. The silence was now complete, seamless, sealed by the immobile presence of the rock.

Chapter 10: The Negation of the Circumference

On the twenty-first day, the heat was reflective.

It didn't stand above the dip; it lay within it, solid and homogeneous like a cast block of silicon. Luca stepped to the edge of the door. The Oldsmobile's sheet metal reflected the midday light in dull, whitish cascades. The hood bulged slightly, warped by the expansion of its internal components.

Phillips sat on the lowest step. His elbows rested on his thighs, his hands clasped together in a rigid, delicate symmetry. His posture was that of a man awaiting the completion of a series of calculations whose duration he can no longer influence.

"The tank is half full," said Luca.

The word *Tankit* dissipated against the corrugated iron sheet.

Phillips didn't look up. A dry, rhythmic sound came from his chest, the expulsion of air through constricted airways, precise as the ticking of a compressor. "The road to the west cuts through three sectors. There are no more data points there. InSIM dismantled the masts four weeks ago."

Luca got into the car. The leather upholstery sent a stinging wave of chemical heat and synthetic resin through the chassis. Phillips followed him half a minute later. He sat in the passenger seat without slamming the door; the latch only engaged on the second attempt, a dry click of metal on metal.

They started driving. The wheels gripped the pumice stone, threw a flat, grey volley against the wheel arches, and found the compacted track of the gravel road.

The first settlement was a collection of geometric shapes made of cement and corrugated iron. A gas station with two rusted pumps, their mechanical counters jammed to zero. Next to it, a low building with the faded neon sign of a diner.

Luca left the engine running. The vibration of the V8 engine was transmitted directly through the steering wheel to his palms.

He entered the room. The air smelled of frying oil, burnt filter coffee, and the ozone of an old flypaper buzzing on the ceiling. Behind the Formica counter stood a man in a blue cotton shirt, the fabric of which was darkly stained under the armpits. His pupils didn't move as Luca approached the counter.

Luca placed the photo on the Formica plate. It was a computer printout from the archive in Naples, 300 DPI, the face slightly rasterized, the edges of the jaw pixelated.

The man didn't look. He looked through the paper at the metal base of the coffee machine.

"She's wearing a dark jacket," said Luca. "Made of sturdy cotton fabric. Her hair is tied back."

"We have no passage here," the man said. His voice was wooden, stripped of any local color. "The main road has been closed since the 12th. Construction work at the substation."

"She is traveling on foot."

"Nobody walks across the threshold," the man said. He took a damp cloth and wiped an invisible elliptical shape into the Formica. The wet film instantly evaporated under the fluorescent lights. "There's no data on pedestrians here."

Luca left the picture where it was. When he pushed open the glass double door, it swung silently shut behind him, a vacuum seal that kept the heat of the outside room inside.

They reached the intersection three miles further south.

No building remained. Only a concrete foundation from which four rusted threaded rods protruded into the sky. The sight resembled the foundations of the Villa dei Misteri, where, in the nineteenth century, archaeologists had poured plaster into the cavities to preserve the shape of the burnt wood.

Luca stopped. He didn't turn off the engine. The exhaust spewed an irregular, bluish plume of exhaust fumes over the hot gravel.

Phillips stared rigidly through the windshield. The glass was covered in microscopic impacts, a patchwork of refracted light.

"There is no Martina in the suburbs," the old man said. His voice sounded like a transcript. "You're looking for a location in a matrix that no longer supports spatial coordinates. It has deleted the vector, Luca. Not the body."

"A body leaves traces," said Luca. He gripped the plastic steering wheel. "It displaces mass. It consumes water."

"In the Pompeii iteration, there were four hundred bodies, of which only the sandals were found," Phillips replied. He didn't move his head. "No bone meal, no teeth. Just the iron buckle in the volcanic rock. Because the signal broke off before the ash cooled. The ARS does nothing different. It fills in the gap with the most likely hypothesis. And the most likely hypothesis for this depression is: nothing."

Luca put the car in reverse. The gearbox whined briefly. The car spun on the narrow gravel strip, the tires digging deep into the pumice until they reached the oncoming lane again.

When they returned to the cabin, the shadow of the porch had shrunk to just a few centimeters.

Luca went straight into the back room. The notebook was still lying on the spruce board, exactly parallel to the edge of the table. The corners of the oilcloth seemed slightly warped from the heat.

He opened the page.

The line at the top remained untouched in the room:

In another iteration, I did not confirm the parameters.

He ran his index finger over the ink. It was perfectly dry, smooth, burned into the fibers like the layers of soot on the frescoes of Region V.

He stepped out onto the porch. Phillips was sitting in the same spot again, his heels digging firmly into the hot dust.

"She knew about the protocols," said Luca.

Phillips closed his eyes for two seconds. The leather of his eyelids was thin and cloudy. "She wrote the protocols. The dialogue grammars for InSIM's speech output were hers. She knew that the system only processed responses that contained a logical affirmation. A negation is an input. A refusal is the noise between two queries."

"She has deleted herself."

"She broke the loop," Phillips corrected quietly. He pointed with his thin index finger at the white surface of the depression. "When Teilhard de Chardin spoke of the Omega Point, he meant the final condensation of consciousness. He was wrong. There is no condensation. There is only the infinite thinning of probabilities. We are sitting here at the lowest common denominator of the data set."

"We are here," said Luca. "I can feel the heat. I can smell the gasoline."

"That's sensor data," the old man said. "Synthetic feedback from a faulty calibration. You think you're driving down a road because your brain demands the sequence of images. But the tank hasn't run dry, Luca. The gauge has been on the same mark for three days."

Luca looked at his palms. The skin was dry, covered with a fine, grey layer of dust that could not be rubbed off.

He sat down on the step next to the Jesuits.

The light slowly faded at the edges of the mountain range. Not an ordinary sunset with reddish hues, but a gradual dimming of brightness, as if the illumination of the valley were being reduced in discrete quantum leaps.

"What's left?" asked Luca.

“The material,” Phillips said. His voice was now barely more than a whisper, lost in the creaking of the cooling corrugated iron. “The unmeasured mass. The stones that no longer send signals.”

They remained seated. The shadow moved across their knees, cold and heavy as liquid lead, erasing the contours of their bodies in the twilight.

Chapter 11: The Observer's Interferences

On the twenty-third day, the night was a solid body.

Luca didn't wake up to a noise, but to the absence of thermal tension in the timbers. The hut was cold, a space without resonance. The wax candle on the console tabletop had burned down to the wick; the melted tallow was solid and white like the limestone layers in the canals of Herculaneum.

He stepped onto the porch.

The moon was at its zenith, a flat, silvery point of intersection in the dull blue of the sky. The pumice depression reflected the light with a harsh, shadowless intensity. Each volcanic block possessed the sharpness of a mathematical projection, as if the depression lay not in space, but in a rendered test field by InSIM.

He saw the figure at the bottom of the gravel strip.

It moved without the typical swaying of a body shifting mass over uneven ground. It was a smooth glide over the sediment.

The man stopped three meters in front of the wooden steps. He was wearing a dark, tailored jacket made of heavy cotton, the same cut Phillips had worn in the consortium's 1994 photographs, when the first algorithms for the archaeometry of Sector V were programmed.

His face was unscathed by the UV radiation of the depression. No deep gashes at the temples, no corneal membrane over the pupils. It was the physiognomy of the Jesuit from the newspaper clipping in the Naples archives: the narrow, academic chin, the deep forehead wrinkle of a man who pored over matrices for hours.

"The probability density in this sector is extremely low," the man said. His voice had no reverberation, as if the sound were absorbed directly by the surface of the pumice blocks. "You should turn off the burner. The exhaust gas is altering the isotopic values in the sediment."

Luca didn't stand up. His fingers gripped the rough, resin-sticky edge of the railing. "We were looking for you in the outskirts."

"There are no more overlaps there," the younger man said. He wasn't looking at Luca, but over the corrugated iron roof at the line of the hills. "InSIM has lowered the sampling rate. What you call outskirts is now just the buffer area between two iterations. If a variable refuses to respond, the ARS compresses the parameter range. Martina hasn't left. She's just lost coherence with this storage unit."

"This is a theoretical construct," said Luca.

"It's the architecture you're sitting in," the man replied. He raised his hand, a brief, almost casual movement. The skin on his ankles was smooth, without blemishes. "Phillips published

on the logic of entanglement in Rome in the 1970s. He knew that you can't simulate consciousness without allowing it to escape the system. If the observer no longer confirms the measurement, the state doesn't collapse. It remains in superposition."

"Who are you?" asked Luca.

The man slowly turned his face toward the veranda. His eyes caught the moonlight like two polished lenses. "The state before the decision. The part of the algorithm that remained in the archives of Pompeii when the project received its initial approvals. We didn't build the model to bring the dead back to life, Luca. We built it to eliminate the need for a single reality."

"Phillips is lying in the room," said Luca. "He's moaning in his sleep. His veins are bulging on his legs."

"He dies in the main loop," said the younger Phillips without harshness. "That's the condition for this series of measurements. An observer that is decaying produces the sharpest signals. But Martina no longer needs the signal. She is in an iteration whose parameters do not need to be adjusted."

He didn't turn around. He merely took a step back, and with that step the contrast of his figure seemed to fade, as if the dissolution of his contours lost its depth. The dark cotton of his jacket blended into the gray of the pumice stones.

"If you keep looking for her," said the voice, which now seemed to be coming from the direction of the rocky outcrop, "you're only amplifying the noise. The ARS doesn't process grief. It only processes coordinates."

Then the sediment was empty. Not a footprint, not a displaced pebble. Only the flat, monotonous shimmer of moonlight on the basalt.

On the twenty-fourth day, the sun stood like a white-hot stamp above the corrugated iron.

Luca sat on the wooden steps. The dust on his boots had dried into a thin, greyish-beige crust due to the night's humidity.

Phillips stepped out of the door. His movements had the brittleness of rotten wood, yielding under the slightest pressure. With a long, whistling exhale, he sat down next to Luca on the top step. The bandage on his neck was brown at the edges and peeling.

"The gradient is dropping," Phillips said. He looked down at his own hands, which rested limply on his kneecaps. "The processor is throttling back. Did you hear the frequency?"

"He was here last night," said Luca.

Phillips didn't move his head. "The reconstruction relies on old data. If the primary memory is damaged, the system retrieves previous states from the cache. This isn't a ghost, Luca. This is a read/write error in the registers."

"He was wearing your jacket from Naples."

"He wore the texture that the ARS had programmed for my thirty-year-old self," the old man said. His voice was dry, a consonant sequence devoid of vocal cord vibration. "The system is trying to fill the void Martina left. It's offering you a substitute signal so you don't relinquish observer status. As long as you respond, the simulation continues."

Luca reached into the dust between his boots and picked up a piece of volcanic rock. The stone was light, riddled with tiny cavities, trapped gas from an eruption that had occurred two thousand years ago.

"And what if we stop answering?" asked Luca.

Phillips looked at the stone in Lucas's hand. A minimal, trembling light reflected in his dim pupils.

"Then there is no more iteration," said the Jesuit. "No Pompeii. No depression. Only the immeasurable mass. The pure, timeless presence of the rock."

They sat side by side on the step. The heat rose from the pumice stone like the shimmer above a fresh layer of ash. The shadow of the veranda shortened centimeter by centimeter until it disappeared as a narrow, dark line beneath the wood, leaving it completely exposed to the unfiltered light.

Chapter 12: The End of the Observer

On the twenty-fifth day, the light shrank to a thermal frequency.

Luca awoke with his cheek resting on the rough pine surface of the table. Beneath his temple lay the octavo notebook, its paper noticeably yellowed by the extreme dryness of the desert air. The edges of the pages curled up like dried plant sap.

Phillips sat on the porch. He was motionless, bent over his own thighs as if leaning over a barely perceptible vibration pattern in the sediment. The bandage on his neck had come loose at the left corner; beneath it lay the pale, scarred mark of an old puncture wound, gray like the calcium crusts on the well walls of Pompeii.

Luca picked up the fountain pen. The ink flowed sluggishly, interrupted by micro-pauses in the flow. He was no longer noting the sequence of hours, but the physical deposition of time: the expansion of the pumice stone under the midday heat, the soundless cooling of the metal clamps in the roof truss, the superposition states that the ARS sent as noise through the outskirts.

He wrote down the syntax that the Jesuit had conceived in Naples: the entanglement of matter and memory. Teilhard de Chardin's model, translated into the binary silence of a quantum processor: the Omega point not as salvation, but as the maximum condensation of all unchosen iterations. Martina hadn't left. She had merely left the observation space to remain in the unmeasured field.

Phillips entered the room during the night. He dragged his heels across the floorboards, a dry, scraping sound like quicksand on tin. He lay down on the cot without removing his shoes. His breathing was shallow, synchronized with the periodic hum of the solar generator behind the cabin.

On the twenty-seventh day, InSIM ceased signal processing.

The shimmering band on the horizon, which for weeks had marked the boundary between the depression and the cement quarries, had disappeared. The landscape had lost its depth; the rock formations appeared flat, silhouettes punched out against a sky of bleached zinc.

Luca joined Phillips on the steps.

"The interface is breaking down," said Luca.

Phillips didn't look up. His fingers fiddled with a loose thread on his jacket. "There's no interface anymore. The consortium has released the storage area. What you're seeing is the matrix's idle state before the first data acquisition."

"The octavo notebook is full," said Luca.

"The notebook is just an additional storage unit," the Jesuit replied. His voice was little more than a hissing blast of air breaking against his emaciated lips. "You interpreted the data. That

was your mistake. The ARS doesn't record meanings. It merely registers the density of states. If you try to find a meaning, you create noise that destroys the signal."

"I'm leaving tomorrow," said Luca.

Phillips remained silent. A shadow flew across the pumice depression , not a bird, but the shadowy shift of a pixel line in the upper field of view.

"The car is parked at the edge of the gravel track," said Luca. "The battery charge is sufficient to reach the coast."

"There is no coastline anymore," Phillips said quietly. He closed his eyes. His eyelids were so thin that the fine, bluish branching of the blood vessels beneath them remained visible, like the micro-fissures in the ash layer of Sector VI. "There is only the sediment and the observer, recording the decay."

On the twenty-eighth day, the room was empty of shadows.

The sun was perpendicular to the depression, a white, radiation-free point at the center of perception.

Luca packed his travel bag. The weight of the octavo notebook lay heavy at the bottom of the horizontal bag, a rectangular block of cellulose and dry ink. He stepped out onto the veranda.

Phillips sat leaning against the wall. His eyes were open, but his gaze no longer fixed on any point of the hill range; his pupils were fixed, reflecting the monotonous gray of the pumice blocks like two matte-polished basalt lenses. His chest was still.

Luca didn't sit down. He remained standing at the foot of the stairs. The dust around his boots was still, free from any thermal buoyancy.

"The measurement is complete," Luca said into the silence.

No answer. The texture of the old man's jacket seemed to merge with the rough wood of the cabin wall, a gradual leveling of surface tensions.

Luca walked to the vehicle. The engine started silently, a deep, low-frequency pulse that died away in the sediment. He put the car in reverse and turned it around on the narrow strip of gravel.

In the rearview mirror, the shack shrank to a flat square of corrugated iron and wood. The shape on the porch lost its contours, merging into the gray tones of the blocks, until only the slope of the hollow remained visible.

He drove through the buffer zone. The road only became visible a few meters in front of the headlights , hard, worn asphalt with the yellow dividing lines of Highway 190. After forty

miles, the first high-voltage pylons appeared, abstract steel grid structures against the pale, reorganizing light of the afternoon.

In Los Angeles, the airport was a room made of frosted glass and filtered cool air.

Luca sat at Gate 42. Through the panoramic window, he saw the fuselages of the aircraft, gleaming, rivetless, clean geometries in a continuum of kerosene smell and loudspeaker announcements. The passengers passing by had faces without depth of field, fleeting reconstructions in a densely packed loop.

He opened the horizontal pocket and pulled out the octavo notebook.

He opened to the first page. The paper was blank. No ink streaks, no entries, no diagrams of the interrelation of impulse and position. Only the uniform, pristine texture of the paper.

He flipped back through the pages. Page by page. The entire booklet was white. The characters had dissolved, as if the ARS had overwritten the parameters no longer needed after exiting the sinkhole.

The voice from the ceiling speakers called for Group B.

Luca stood up. He slid the empty notebook back into his bag, zipped it up, and stepped into the jet bridge. The passenger cabin of the plane was cool and smelled of ozone. He took the window seat, fastened his seatbelt, and watched as the tugboat reversed the aircraft.

The runway slid beneath the wings. As the plane lifted off, the landscape tilted slightly to the side: the sea of houses in Los Angeles, the grid of freeways, the thin line of the coastline, everything contracted into a flat, high-resolution texture.

He closed his eyes.

The brightness remained unchanged in the hollow. The pumice absorbed the remaining light. The blocks lay in the dust, without shadows, without temperature gradients, unmeasured and timeless.

Epilogue: The Stones

Time had lost its edges.

It settled like the pumice dust layers in the unexcavated regio structures of Pompeii , a continuous sedimentation process resulting from light exposure and cooling. The veranda no longer held a figure, but rather an accumulation of biological parameters that the consortium had forgotten to switch off.

A woolen blanket lay across the old man's thighs, stiff with salt stains and encrusted volcanic flour. The knees beneath were narrow, two protruding bones that stood out against the texture like petrified wood.

The sunset was unbroken. No red, no dramatic widening of the spectrum , merely a gradual decrease in color saturation over the hilltops, until the sand took on the tone of burnt bone ash.

He didn't look at the dip. He kept his gaze fixed on the point where the gravel strip transitioned into the buffer zone.

In the early years, the brain still generated name fragments.*Martina*. Not a face, but the rubbing of two strips of fabric in a corridor.*Luca*. The sound of boots on dried-out floorboards, the question of the observer.*Maria*. *Julia*. Words from an earlier iteration, when the data matrix still had interfaces to family books and civil registry records.

Now the names were just noise patterns in the rear registers. Frequencies bouncing off the rough surface of the blocks.

He reached for the ceramic cup on the floorboards next to the chair. The brew of dried herbs was cold, bitter like the metallic salts in the groundwater of Herculaneum. His lips touched the cool rim. The swallowing reflex was delayed, a mechanical impulse in the esophagus.

Teilhard had been wrong. The limit was not a spiritualization. The Omega Point possessed no metaphysics, no culmination of consciousness at the cosmic point. It was simply the complete leveling of the signal-to-noise ratio. The decay of all wave functions into a single, unmeasured ground state. The many-worlds interpretation had not been a promise of infinite lives, but a logical necessity for disposing of unchosen actions.

The stars emerged. They didn't flash; they stood as rigid, white pixels at the top of the image field.

He stood up. His joints made a soft, dry cracking sound , the sound of breaking flotsam.

He stepped down from the steps into the sediment. The soles of his shoes left no distinct marks in the dust; the material no longer yielded, it lay compact, solidified in its bulk density.

He walked to the rocky outcrop where the younger Phillips had stood three decades earlier. Or four hours earlier. In the ARS, there was no difference between eras; there was only the storage status.

He bent forward. The movement was slow. His hand, marked by age spots like the weathered inscriptions on the gravestones of the Via Nocera, groped for a piece of volcanic rock.

The stone was rough. The pores of the pumice stone cut minimally into the calluses of his fingertips. No residual heat. No impulse. Only the pure, non-storage weight of silicates and solidification.

He turned the piece of sediment in his fingers. A lump of ejected matter, preserved in the instant the pyroclastic wave reached the Villa of Mysteries.

He dropped the stone. It hit the surface without a rolling sound. A dull, instantly stifled impulse.

"They will stay," the voice said. It wasn't a statement addressed to anyone. It was an affirmation of a systemic state.

The man did not turn around. He remained standing at the edge of the depression until the shadow of the rocky outcrop completely covered his body and his outline blended into the darkened basalt.

The simulation kept the temperature of the stones at the specified value. No higher. No lower.

About this book

Contents

Luca, a 37-year-old doctoral student, travels to the pumice basin in California to visit the Jesuit physicist Michael Phillips. Phillips, once a full professor at the Gregorian University and the system architect of the dialogue grammars for InSIM, was instrumental in developing the AI/quantum agent ARS, the model that simulates states of consciousness in iterative reconstructions of Pompeian Sector V. Since the abrupt termination of the Pompeii project, the 78-year-old has lived in isolation at an abandoned experimental site in the desert. He has largely abandoned language; he sits on the porch of a wooden shack, observing the thermal solidification of the rock.

Luca is the son of Michael Phillips and Maria, a former secretary at the Pontificium Collegium Germanicum et Hungaricum in Rome. Maria raised Luca on her own and never revealed his origins to him. She moved with him to Boston, where Luca is completing his doctorate—not in theology or physics, but in a border field between language modeling and quantum information science. Luca knows who his father is; the resemblance, the letters in Maria's drawer, and the trace of the dialogue grammars gave him certainty long before he reached the pumice basin.

An anonymous letter reaches Luca in Naples. No sender, no declaration of intent, only the coordinates of a buffer zone and one sentence: He remains in an unmeasured state. Luca leaves. He takes the consortium's yellowed 1994 repertoire photograph, rents a car in Los Angeles, and sets off for the experimental field.

On the fourteenth day, the silence between the two men is broken by the arrival of Martina Rossi. The 45-year-old archaeologist is the daughter of Michael Phillips and Julia Rossi. Julia raised Martina alone in Pompeii after she and Michael separated in Rome. Martina enters the room unannounced. She speaks briefly about her mother, Julia, about archaeometric findings in Herculaneum, and about the need to escape the scrutiny of a colleague. Luca observes her presence in the isolated space of the depression, the absence of a distinct shadow in the late sunlight, the stillness between her movements.

On the eighteenth day, Martina eludes the measurement. She leaves no trace in the gravel; only her octavo notebook lies open on the tabletop. The pages are blank, except for a single entry in the back register: In another iteration, I did not confirm the parameters.

The disappearance destabilizes the system. Phillips retreats completely into the reconstruction loops of the ARS. Luca searches the surrounding area, drives along the bleached asphalt ribbons of Highway 190, questions the figures at the gas stations in the buffer zone, and returns without results. He begins to document the decay in his notebook, the compression of time, the quantum interfaces, his reinterpretation of Teilhard de Chardin's Omega Point as the limiting state of maximum entropy.

During the hours of maximum cooling, an apparition appears on the veranda: a reconstruction of thirty-year-old Phillips in the Naples Consortium jacket. Whether it is a parallel version of Michael from another timeline, a substitute figure generated by the ARS, or Luca himself appearing as a younger Michael in another iteration remains deliberately open. The ARS offers a substitute signal to maintain observer status. The entity articulates the logic of entanglement: Martina has not died; she has merely relinquished the state of coherence with this specific storage unit in order to remain in a parallel iteration of the system.

Luca stops the measurement and leaves the depression. When he boards the plane in Los Angeles and opens the notebook, all entries are erased; the paper is pristine and blank. Phillips remains behind in the desert. His existence merges seamlessly into the motionless density of the pumice.

Note on the timeline: *The Timelessness of Stones* does not take place in the same timeline as the other volumes of the Pompeii Project. It is one iteration among many—a possible story within the multiverse, in which Michael Phillips ends up not in Budapest but in the California desert, in which Martina does not flee but withdraws from the measurement, and in which Luca appears not as a rescuer but as an observer. The ages given (Luca 37, Martina 45, Michael 78) are therefore not meant to align with the ages in the trilogy; they mark the specific time axis of this iteration. Readers who approach the trilogy as a multiverse perspective will recognize in this narrative the internal perspective of a single story that does not strive for chronological consistency with the other volumes, but for the condensation of a single thought: that in the end, only the unmeasured material remains.

Background & Poetics

The starting point for *The Timelessness of Stones* is Don DeLillo's late novel *Point Omega* (2010), which in turn stems from DeLillo's engagement with Douglas Gordon's video installation *24 Hour Psycho* at the Museum of Modern Art. The narrative takes up DeLillo's interest in extremely slowed-down perception and transfers the motif of temporal dilation into the context of modern quantum archaeology and AI theory.

The triangular relationship from Point Omega, represented in DeLillo's story by the intellectual Richard Elster, the filmmaker Jim Finley and Elster's daughter Jessie, undergoes a fundamental thematic transformation:

- From museum to experimental field: Video art is replaced by the virtual reconstruction of Pompeii by the InSIM consortium. The slowing down of the film frames is used to lower the sampling rate of a quantum processor (ARS).
- From intellectual to Jesuit physicist: The role of the philosophical figure of reflection changes from Richard Elster to Michael Phillips. His reflections stem from the synthesis of Jesuit eschatology (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin) and the Everett-Deutsch interpretation of quantum mechanics (many-worlds theory).
- From disappearance to decoherence: The daughter's disappearance without a trace is not a criminalistic or psychological twist, but rather the exit of a consciousness from the observable coherence of a collapsing system iteration.

The narrative employs the cool, paratactic aesthetic of DeLillo's later work to depict the desert not as a physical space, but as an isolated space for observation. Language functions not as a descriptive tool, but as a seismograph of a freezing reality, in which ultimately only the unmeasured material remains. In this, *The Timelessness of Stones* is not a chronological continuation but an iteration of its own within the multiverse of the Pompeii Project—one possible story among many, in which the same characters take different paths under different initial conditions, and in which the question of guilt, observation, and the Omega Point finds a different answer.

DeLillo and the Silence

In *The Omega Point*, silence does not lead to emptiness, but to a peculiar timelessness in which knowledge is total and no longer expressible, though perhaps experienceable. The silence, however, also represents the silencing of interpretations: In a New York living room, the electronic systems fail, and with them disappear language, certainty, and order. What remains is a present that explains nothing and redeems nothing.

Two forms of silence stand in opposition: one as metaphysical condensation, the other as pure withdrawal. The timelessness of the stones encompasses both. The desert is the place where silence becomes a physical experience, not as an idyll, but as a state after the noise of data streams. The stones are what remains when all calculations cease: not a monument, but the residue.

Van Dormael and the possibilities

Jaco Van Dormael's *Mr. Nobody* (2009) unfolds a universe in which every decision creates a new reality. Time is not a stream, but a field. The protagonist lives all possible lives simultaneously, and every path is the right one. The "angels of forgetfulness," who deprive one of knowledge of all possibilities at birth, can be read as a metaphor for the many-worlds interpretation and for the Omega Point, which must have lived every version to possess this knowledge.

In *The Brand New Testament* (2015), an image of God based on fear, guilt, and control is disempowered. Éa, the daughter of God, sends everyone her date of death, thus depriving the Father of his essential instrument of power. God disappears not through refutation, but through meaninglessness. Meaning here arises not from order, but from relationship.

The fictional film *God Lives on the Third Floor* (from *Three Books Two Films*, a review of a fictional van Dormael film alongside *The Brand New Testament* and *Mr. Nobody* as part of the Pompeii Project) takes this movement further. Augustine, whose name is programmatic, rules his family through an internalized regime of guilt and certainty. His daughter Éa leaves the system and finds a fragile form of community among the homeless, a community that doesn't need to justify anything. In the end, there is no redemption, but a shift in power: God disappears not through refutation, but through irrelevance.

The connecting movement

What unites all these texts is not a message, but a movement. They do not lead to a new synthesis, a new covenant, or an ultimate truth. Rather, they show how power disappears: the power of technology, of the omniscient narrator, of the punishing God, of grand narratives of meaning. Not through destruction, but through irrelevance.

What remains is not nihilism, but a fragile form of humanity. Silent, provisional, without guarantee. An existence that does not negate suffering, time, and finitude, but also no longer needs to justify them. Perhaps this is the Omega Point: not the condensation of consciousness, but its thinning to the point where only the immeasurable material remains, the stones.

In this sense, *The Timelessness of Stones* is not a retelling of DeLillo's or Van Dormael's works. It is an independent literary elaboration of the same line of thought that underlies the *Pompeii Project* trilogy. It can be read alongside the trilogy, as an

internal perspective of a single story within the multiverse, while the trilogy adopts the multiverse perspective. For readers who wish to delve deeper philosophically, it is the most concentrated formulation of the Omega Point question in the entire oeuvre.