

Griphotikon



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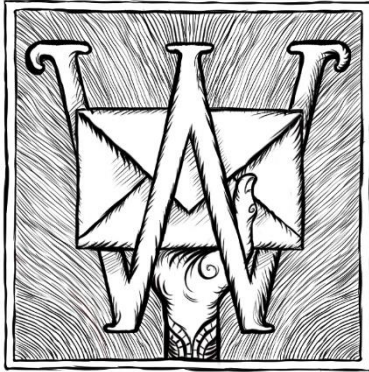
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Introduction.

Griphotikon (/gɹɪfətɪkən/)

A township like any other, built into the sides of a mail slot. Its hustle and bustle mostly lie within the door: in passages, sewers and underground train stations. The mail slot alone faces the sky, which looks down upon a small alleyway, lined with shops, drying clothes on spider thread and balcony apartments built high. The air smells of a France that doesn't exist, like an Italy that never was. The going-ons develop as though seen through the eyes of children, yet all that occurs is unmistakably adult. The residents of the town are animals. Shots ring out through the alley from time to time, mere scare shots, and the street is usually empty when they occur. The clock tower shows the wrong time with unworldly figures. The trains are late,

and no one must commute. The police are a hired force.



hen the mail
arrives,

The people of Griphotikon stall and stop and run into the crevices of imagined side alleys, under awnings, into buildings.

When the mail arrives,

The usual shots stop their clattering and chattering, bullets frozen in midair, waiting to be swept away by a letter from God.

When the mail arrives,

It's announced with sirens first, then bell tower bongs, then the darkening of the slot-

shaped sky and finally the opening of the ground.

When the mail arrives,

The hired police keep the peace as new word from God is delivered through this breathing transitional town, space between spaces. Word from God can bring sunlight or rushes or thunder or rain, but never once snow, it's not that kind of town.

When the mail arrives,

No one more chats or gossips of its contents; it's a nuisance really, an awesome interruption.

When the mail arrives,

Giants' steps soon follow, all pots and pans and cupboards fall but no glass and no vase and no porcelain breaks, as the people of Griphotikon have long since resigned and

finally made it tradition to keep dishes on solid ground.

When the mail has arrived,

The street seals back up, behind it the insinuation of an enormous hand, reaching down, travelling the entire town from far below the surface.

And nobody knows whose hand it is,

But they say: It's divine.

And to gaze upon it harsher than the dimness of sunlight.



Decorative sign with ornate scrollwork.

Stylized sign with decorative elements.

Vertical sign with decorative elements.

BARRETT'S

COIFFU

Clock tower face.

Decorative sign above an archway.

Stylized sign above a doorway.

Small sign above a doorway.

An Afternoon in Griphotikon

Is spent dozing and lazing, and for the unfortunate many, waking and working. The one street under its bright sky – too bright for some inhabitants, who prefer to take shelter to build a home and shop inside the town’s passages – is usually peppered with a loose crowd. The gunmen and snipers in the bell tower allow this, for usually, there is no reason to scare the townspeople away then. Paradoxically, Griphotikon is at its most quiet at its busiest.

Hired police watches over the people strolling to and fro, busy meeting each other and taking care of their affaires.

Artists purchase bread at the Panagerie, clochards stuff the crumbs they leave behind into their pockets; scavengers return from the

Underworld, satchels full and spirit empty, on their way to diversion. Wives have their fur cut, and many a one engages in Griphotikon's most important pastime: Gossip.

It truly is the way of this town, to call any philosophy as the rumour that it is.

Here, children stand together around a young woman – a late school lesson from their teacher, the words of which they graciously repeat to merge them with themselves.

“A door was installed, into the newly renovated abode of a higher being.

Outside: The sky, currently a bright blush.

Inside: The underworld, itself illuminated.”

She stalls here, so I continue:

The residential God of the down-below rarely goes out. Thus, born from His adolescent, paranoid dream, Griphotikon was built into the intersection between sides: the mail slot.

Some say that people live inside the crevice between the door itself - their flat little land - and the frame - the boundary of their world; however, the lands of this outer rim are cursed with darkness, and all who go there speak not of what they have found.

Occasionally, travellers from those distant lands arrive in Griphotikon.

Travellers like him.

The Slayer of Griphotikon.

Word from God is that a foreigner has arrived at the train station. Its passageways reverberate careful footsteps, echoes somersault with the dragging of metal on the uneven tile, clack screee clack click clack. The sound is self-perpetuating and rises in volume with the approach of a creature. The warning shots ring louder, more frequent, and the tower bells swing angrily, letting the alley and meandering topology of Griphotikon know: Beware.

The tunnel lamps dimly light the silhouette. He is a tall, carapaced being, walking on two legs. Claws are dangling off his two arms, one respectively, each swaying with every careful, disconcertingly quiet step. One is empty, the other drags an object behind him. The people of Griphotikon couldn't get a good

look at it in the ever-flickering tunnel glow, but those that could make out its shape recognised it as divine: A knife that cuts sharply but stabs dully. Its blade has a rounded tip, like whatever purpose it was intended for decrees a smooth finish.

Those who have seen the knife and lived to tell the tale say that it seems broken, or perhaps unfinished: Its grip implies a continuation, like it was once held, or intended to be held, by an unworldly, enormous hand – a hand the people of Griphotikon only see during their brief glimpses into the underworld.

Those who haven't lived tell no more tales, for their carcasses lie beheaded, freed of their words, in the dark corners of Griphotikon's burrowing, meandering tunnels. And soon, the creature disappeared, never once

having stepped into the main street to greet their home's sunlight.

But ever since, the hired police have been patrolling the tunnels more carefully, more frequently, different officers every day. While whispers have gotten loud that he, the Slayer of Griphotikon, took a train back to the unknown parts of the world from which he seems to have emerged, it is commonly accepted by the disparate peacekeeping force that he is still out there, hiding, and that there is no reason not to be on high alert. The people have pleaded with them, every new hire on the job, to stop the trains from running. But they have all stated the same: That the railway is beyond theirs, and even the mayor's, jurisdiction.

But the bell tower is not.

And so, it bellows out, day in, day out, among the clattering of scare shots:

Beware.

To be homeless in Griphotikon,

is a hard lot.

But it is to be expected that a town like it would have clochards. It is a sleepy place, a warm place year-round, a place where only the few do not care and the many want for connection.

This does not mean that a homeless life, a life where money exits your hand as fast as it enters it, a life without fixed abode to write down, proving your stature in Griphotikon's society, doesn't come with its own set of challenges.

I shall make an example the only way I know how: Through specificity.

The sunlight warms the dense, short grey fur of a young woman, illuminating patches of

matted dirt on her snout. She likes it that way: It means her head is always kept cool, as are her words.

When asked of her name, her pink snout will scrunch up into a grin, showing her buck teeth, and she'll say:

“Gimme a fiver to find out!”

And upon being given one, she'll state:

“Fae.”

Fae was a delinquent kid, ran away from a home that now no longer exists. No parents, not anymore; all that they have left on her is an



imprint on the brain and a crooked tail.

She dulls the aches of said indentation with Grass, a plant recovered from the underworld by scavengers. It isn't cheap, and her habit has often left her unable to eat – which, in her words, “sucks big-time, cuz you get hungry on the stuff.”

Her ramshackle abode regularly changes location at the request and violence of the hired police, and with the direction taken by the scare shots in the streets. In this instant of observation, she is nestled into a dirty hole, burrowed by some divine beetle, between the Panegerie and the Coiffura. As she would put it: “Meet me at mine, between the bakin boys’ and snipmen.” She has always wanted to have an address, and so, she makes them up anew with every time she moves.

In a linen bag, she carries all her belongings: An ever-dwindling ration of Grass,

a razor to trim her whiskers, a ragged cloth to wipe herself down when the dirt can't cool her sufficiently, a needle and thread. Rarely, there are the remaining crumbs of eagerly acquired and shovelled-down food that dirty the entire affair, which she eats in desperate times.

This is not all that she has, however.

Unless we stipulate love as being without possession.

For in a side-tunnel, between two shopping passage establishments, spread apart,

There lies an entrance, humid to the touch, warm.

Pink-rimmed, you feel like you are committing a faux-pas by brushing against its silky curtain.

But you aren't, as the people of Griphotikon do not care much about sex.

Sometimes, it needs to be done, even if money changes hands.

And Gina knows how to do it satisfactorily.

A customer, freshly serviced, exits the little shop of Gina, the sex worker. Pointy-

eared and whiskered, Gina's short-snouted mouth yawns with their departure. Scrutinising her long fur, she flexibly laps up debris from her body before occupying her time with resetting her setting.

Her floors are always slick with suds from fresh cleaning – she insists, despite her own exhaustion after the fact of her task, to keep everything as tidy as possible. Customers bring money in, but also sawdust on the sole of their feet.

The room that her job was carved into is a backroom to her biggest passion: She collects and sells Grass, glass, artefacts, things from the underworld. Many of her customers are scavengers, exhausted, excited from a day of exploration of the unknown, and along with money, they bring gifts that excite her curiosity. She knows their stories, but, unlike most townspeople, her words remain behind

her lips; Perhaps she is mute, or merely says truly important things when they need to be said.

She will, of course, make noise during her task. The customers demand it.

But her words are the fire inside a furnace with its door closed, never escaping, yet producing the warmth of her body that so many have embraced.

And when it does open, it is for one person only, and for one phrase alone:

“Fae, I love you.”

Her mouth may also open for one of Fae’s many desperate, innocent kisses, rambunctiously leaning into her taller girlfriend as their snouts meet.

Behind a curtain, at the deepest wall of her workplace, a piece of paper, unframed, but

carefully placed, is hung. Whenever Fae arrives at the shop, it is taken down, and worked upon beneath quiet smiles.

It is yet unclear what the drawing shows; it isn't far enough along in its progress, and perhaps, it will never shape anything coherent.

But Gina and Fae have implicitly agreed to the following: that, as lovers, they should have projects together; and because their love itself is not among them, it will blossom into something beautiful.

The rumor mill spins and spins.

As there are no rivers in Griphotikon, it is instead kept turning by the residents' words, the one thing that lets them know they're alive.

Once a week, the people of this transitionary town, this medium between two Gods, come pouring into the main road, from dark and light abodes both, and wait. Before the most intricately decorated passage that branches off the main road, they stand in perfect, devout silence. A series of iron gates typically bars entrance to this sacred catacomb. But on this weekday, the day of the Spoken Word, not only is the bell tower quiet – the scare shots, too, have ceased. All manners of residents stand together: Artists, bankers, clochards. Even the hired police stand mixed with the common populace.

None whisper a thing, knowing it inappropriate.

Eventually, the first loud sound of the morning directs everyone's eyes forward: Creakily, the gates are opened, one after the other, at the Words' acolytes' hands.

All enter a stained-glass, underground dome, with a wheel hanging off its apex: The town forum.

Behind the all-encompassing windows, a burst of light comes forth, spreads all round the townspeople, and ignites a multitude of torches, bathing the hall in a colourful glow.

The mill hanging from the ceiling begins to turn by some heat-powered contraption. The people know:

It is time to gossip.

And so, their words pour out of them, into receptive ears.

They talk of their ever-evolving language, their lives, but especially the lives of others.

Children note the new world's details, the elderly sway with remembrance of things past.

A few intellectuals talk of religion, of the Hand, of God's word passing through unread.

And some, even - the bravest of the rumour-spreaders, those whose words move mountains - dare speculate on the nature of the forum:

“I believe that the Hand lights the torches that illuminate our spirits so.”

“Never you mind! The acolytes move behind the walls into the catacomb to light them!”

“They can SCARCELY throw flames!”

“It must be the mayor.”

“Sssh! Quiet on that!”

“I have heard-”

“Do be quiet. You know not who you challenge. Your words are brave to the point of stupidity, so rein them back.”

And indeed, a tail disappears behind a dark corner, and soon, settles again behind the throne upon which its owner sits.



Mayor Denise
Diderot's office is
located on the far
end of
Griphotikon's
street, under an
arch in the bell

tower's brickwork. An enormous, gaping maw,
it swallows up anyone seeking an audience
with her, deep, deep into the bowels of
Griphotikon's most feared annex tunnel.

Down below, in the furthest catacombs of
the structure's heavily ornamented, spiky
architecture, the woman who sold the world
roams around her office, to this corner or that
one, picks up parts of her grandiose collection
of costly artefacts, sometimes scrutinising
them for errant dust, or giving them merely a
glance that speaks ennui.

It is when admittance to her office is sought, as announced by one of the shivering, droopy-eared tower gunmen, that excitement puts a grimace to her face.

“Come in.”

I dare you.

Audiences with Ms. Diderot are typically short-lived affairs. If you are lucky, you are entertained for a few minutes, then removed by one of the gunmen and released back into the street into the scare shots’ firing line. Worse than that, they end with an incinerating blast from her rough, scaled nostrils, of which none of the people of Griphotikon dare speculate whether hearsay refers to a metaphorical fire, or a real, all-consuming inferno.

There is another outcome to seeking entry to

the mayor's office, however – the one that most consider to be the worst.

You could be sent on your way with a new job.



As a member of the hired police,

Your options are gravely limited.

For a lifetime of boredom and ear-piercing noise, you could become a tower guard, menacing and annoying the people of Griphotikon eternally with scare shots, until you truly believe the petty reasons you were given for doing so.

Alternatively, you could become a patrolling peacekeeper – the law in the streets, a holstered six-shot handgun by your side, a baton in your belt, retorts as replies to innocent questions.

Street-level officers usually come in sets of two; and there is one pair that has been more inseparable, for longer, than anyone else on the revolving-door force: Nathaniel and Maxine.

In the morning, they rise in their shared bell tower room, by the thunder of the morning

scare shots (“Ever reliable as the rooster’s doodle-doo!”, Nathaniel would say), and if not by those, then by the first warning sirens and bell songs that, for weeks now, have reminded Griphotikon of the Slayer.

Maxine says: “I think it uncouth of them to use no spoken words as warning of the Slayer. Posters and writing are fine and good, but nothing can be as easily made quotidian as a good word received with open ears!” Nathaniel just chuckles and gives her a kiss to shush her – or perhaps to drink her words for himself.

Soon, they stand fully equipped, armed and semper fidelis, revolvers at their side, before town hall.

As hired police, one is afforded certain luxuries: Tailor-made, artisan uniforms, housing, a livable income and, most importantly, pistols fit for whatever shape

one's hands may have grown in. As such, it is no wonder the people of Griphotikon predominantly dislike the officers: They are given beauty, comfort, wealth and power, and most everyone lacks at least two of these traits.

Exiting into the street, Nathaniel checks his pocket watch. Their assignment today is to sweep the residential passages for loiterers, delinquents and, of course, the Slayer. Maxine points at the tower clock above, saying something to the effect of "Just look up, you dunce!"; but Nathaniel has never been able to read its strange face. Some say there's a trick to it, but said trick is elusive to most.

Past the stark-scented smoke of this tunnel's meagrely maintained generator ovens,



their steps lead them deep into the bowels of their jurisdiction, into the working district. Here, a despondent populace lives in the walls of a vast, brick-built underground space that looks itself like the insides of their factory workplaces. All manners of residents and radicals live here; the select few have their own wall apartments, while others live in unmanageably crowded and small abodes. Many work with their hands; whoever is unable due to theirs being inoperable can still get hired by the force, scavenge the underworld or – worse – leave town.

Maxine and Nathaniel pass by a myriad of faces; few take notice of them, fewer still follow them with contemptuous eyes. Maxine, lackadaisical as always, fails to recognise even a fraction of the potential criminals and Slayer-accomplices Nathaniel sees, his hand at his holster, ready on the draw. Anxiously, he

again checks his watch: “We’re on schedule, Max. Next stop is the station.”

Good grief does Nathaniel hate the station.

“Oh, how I love the folk of the railroad! Charming, they are!” Maxine hops ahead.

The railyard workers’ words are habitually inappropriate, as is their silence. As a collective of independent labourers – some of them from Griphotikon, others from unknown lands – they live together in a commune by the tracks, maintaining the railroad undisturbed by political meddling. At this moment, they quietly watch the two hired officers’ approach, their gaze reproachful, their mouths pressed shut as though barely containing insult.

“Hello, fellas. We do not mean to trouble you, simply checking these parts for the

Slayer.”, Nathaniel states as officially as he can.

“Of course.”

“Why, th-“

“Of course, you would call him ‘The Slayer’. Disgusted at his work, you feel no empathy for him and his own nauseated repulsion of what your ilk is.”

Maxine quizzically chimes in: “What are we, then – furry?”

“No. Chatty.”

Maxine chuckles with delight at the railman’s retort; Nathaniel finds it entirely unsettling. His paw is placed squarely on the grip of his revolver.

One of the railroad folk begins loading up the engine on this, the only track out of Griphotikon, with Hay, a sweet smelling, dried

herb that burns bright and powers all manner of things in town. Nathaniel covers Maxine's mouth with her collar, then his own. People who work ovens are strange kin; they say once you start, you cannot stop until the soot has filled your body so completely that you asphyxiate. Nathaniel speaks to the train engineer: "You are on your way, then."

"Ayup. Passengers to get.

Your lot

Will be on their way soon, too

As will He."

Nathaniel hesitates fretfully, then turns away. Maxine follows. The Slayer is not here.

“A wise woman once said:

‘We do not know a lot of things.

We do not know the hand, who it is affixed to, if to anyone or anything.

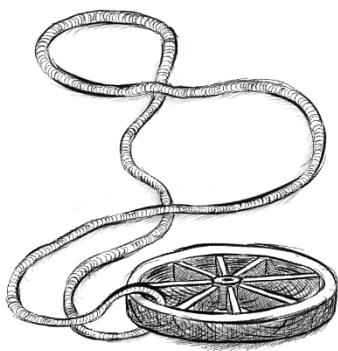
And we’ve tried to explain:

“The Hand is an enormous contraption of illusory intent, to make us feel like somebody is there, watching over us!” Such say the academics of the town. The theists just say: “Somebody lives there.”

We do not know if the hand knows we’re there.

And we’ve theorised, we’ve rumored:

“There seem to be no eyes on the other end, so we have reason to believe that all it cares about are the letters from God.” There



are those who go
so far as to say:
“We are an
invisible dream to
Him.”

We do not
know who brings
the Word of God, from whom.

And people say:

“Word from God comes from many
sources, what makes it special is that it passes
through here.” A child even blurted out: “I
think they’re bills, He has to pay rent to God!
What makes Him so special, huh!” and people
chuckled, but soon realised the profoundness of
what she said.

We do
not know where our water runs, where our coal

comes from, where the little delights of Griphotikon's streets originate.

And most agree:

“The scavengers are good people. Let them have their peace, let them have their privacy, their silence.”

We do not know what animals are.

And I say:

For this, there never was a need to find out: people just look different in Griphotikon, each one uniquely so.

These, my dear, are the universal Unknowns.”

One of the clochards, the self-proclaimed “Clochartist” Ben, once took a bucket of paint to immortalise these words before memory

would continue to trace over them and thereby render them less clear in her mind.

The hired police arrested her for this, vandalism of the mayor's - of God's! - property. She was soon freed at many townspeople's requests and, despondent with grief over the further loss of clarity of her account of that wise woman's unknowledge, went into hiding in the tunnels.

And thus, even now, singular words of these universal unknowns can be found carved into the brick of Griphotikon's tunnels, so the intensity of the irregular lamplight allows it.

The hired police, meanwhile, keep a keen eye out for Ben on their sweeps of the tunnels for the Slayer.

And not a one has ever found her.

It was on the day of the Spoken Word,

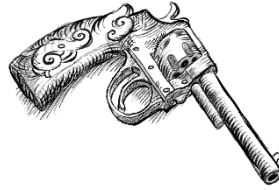
That the Slayer of Griphotikon, for the first time, exited the tunnels.

When it hit the hired policeman guarding main street, he fell back in his chair, jumped to his feet and arched his back to fire in the air: Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang: Nigh his whole magazine depleted to warn the remainder of the force - one bullet remaining to defend himself.

The Slayer set foot before the shivering guard. The officer's gun pointed at the ragged creature, a frightful gaze glazed the enemy's visage: In sunlight, it appears as though the Slayer's eyes shine in all manners of coloured light – the guard had only ever seen a sight this beauteous inside the town forum. He marvelled for a moment, his eyes unfocusing,

failing to realise that the slayer's torso was presently twisting back to prepare for a devastating cut.

A hired policeman's head was the first to roll, his last shot unfired.



Those nearby heard his words cease, and the crowd burst apart, running into buildings.

Only two more officers were left in main street, the rest had lost their way inside the tunnel network seeking precisely the Slayer, who was presently at large on Griphotikon's public face, like a wasp on your eyeglasses. The large, carapaced creature, perhaps man, perhaps unworldly, stared them down, and the song of his dragged blade resounds, click click scree clack click.

The first shot rings out. Overly eager. It ricochets off the Slayer's armoured skin, tearing a hole in his rags that turns his mood even more sour.

Both unload their revolvers, 11 more shots, in him, to no avail, their stares sink into the creature, and their life's final impression,

Is one of hatred of everything they stand for, of what they speak and write and are. Of the Mill, of Griphotikon.

Of their heads on their shoulders.

A last resort: The tower guards direct their focus, and the muzzles of their guns, down the street at the Slayer. The commander, a maned man, taken aback, barks:

Fire!

And still, he stands.

But Ms. Diderot cannot stand this.

She cannot idly sit upon her throne while her force, so costly to hire and bribe, is decimated and humiliated in this, her beautiful township.

A man of no words is a soul-less automaton.

And his violence deserves retribution of the highest order.

On all fours, Denise Diderot crawls out of the clock tower tunnel, and emerges into the brightness of main street.

“SLAYER!”

He does not turn to meet her words.

Approaching him, she inhales deeply, perhaps to reproach him, or bite.

Her breath, however, is cut short, like her neck.

Denise's body tumbles to the ground. The slayer's multifoliate gaze regales himself on her corpse.

As he turns away to continue his work, however, a miraculous thing happens.

The mayor's head grows back twofold,

And, getting up swiftly, she engulfs the Slayer in flames from two maws. Taken aback by the anguish of being cooked alive, he runs soundlessly back into the tunnels, lighting the brickwork passing him by with the errant fires on his rags.

The train departs, a passenger on board.

And Denise recedes back into her lair, twice as loud as before.

One final time, "Beware", the tower cries.

Beware.

Fae and Gina, in their dreams, see the
Man of the underworld, the body whose Hand
picks up the mail,

The mind whose words make Griphotikon
what it is.

Fae pities him; Gina sighs in her sleep, for
they know:

He cannot go out.

He is not old, or frail. He is young like the
world.

But the outside is a danger to him,

As it is to others like Him, across all the
world.

And behind Griphotikon,

in the Underworld,

He is safe.

Through our town, He receives His letters
from God,

Packages, too.

But soon, this, the two of them dream
simultaneously,

His cough shall resound like the roar of a
brewing storm through the town.

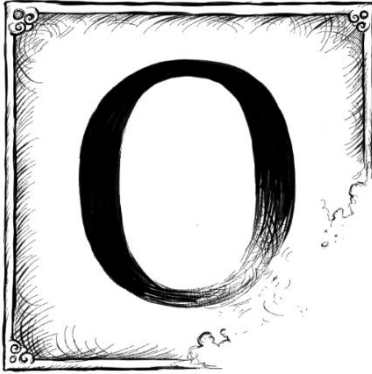
He is not ill. He couldn't be; He is divine,
as is His hand.

It's all we can hope.

For if He is, well – what then?

Will He keep thinking our words in
death?

Or oblivion?



ne beautiful day, a
little later, a little
earlier,

The words, big as they are, worlds as they
are,

Run out.

The devout notice first, as the mills round
their neck stop their spinning, deprived of
their waterfalls. They look to the sky, then to
their feet, seeing no post arrive, not knowing if
anyone was ever there.

Then, the hired police realises, when,
whilst cleaning up the Slayer's recent
massacre, the bodies begin disappearing – first
the dead, then the living, their own kind.

The communal drawing that Gina and Fae have made becomes a blank piece of paper, and their outlines, their fur, both recede, and fade to grey.

Mayor Denise finds the glorious detail of her chamber dull and fade – medals were once described, and, after this sentence, disappear with their descriptions of them. And now, so does she.

One after another, Griphotikon ceases to be talked about, thought about, and thereby,

Ceases to be.

Beat.

Beat.

Beat.

Beat.

Your mind wanders. The book is nearly finished, a mere two sentences remain.

What will you read next, what will you dream tonight, what will your life bring, which ideas?

You cannot know, but soon, you will find out.

To be continued...?