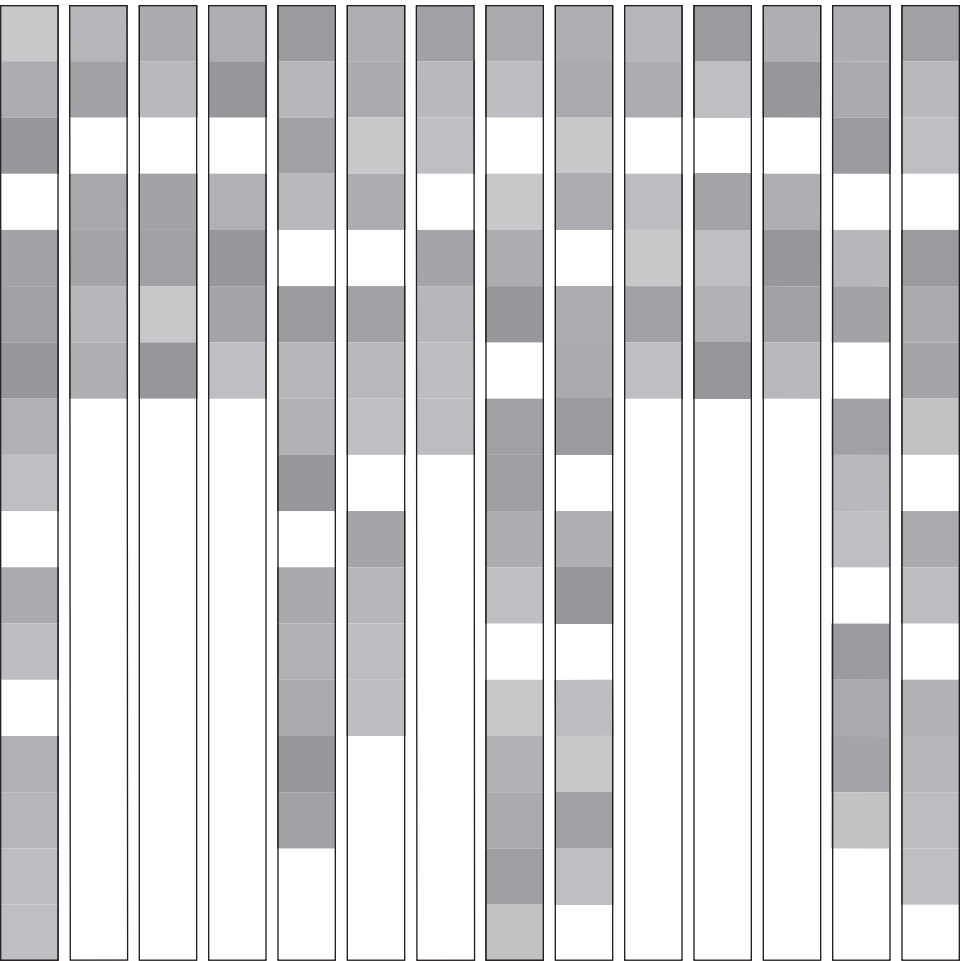


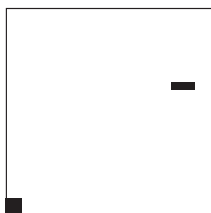
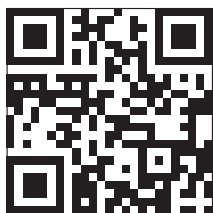
# THE XENOTEXT

BOOK 1

CHRISTIAN BÖK



THE LATE  
HEAVY BOMBARDMENT



(After 325 generations.)

## THE LATE HEAVY BOMBARDMENT

Welcome, Wraith and Reader, to the Hadean Eon of the Earth. When Myrmidons hurled their cobalt bombs into your molten world of basalt and bronze. When mighty golems swan-dove from orbit to drive their glaives of iron into your black mesas, only to be engulfed by the blast waves. When meteors fell earthward in droves, each one a gigaton warhead, ablaze. When supervolcanoes erupted, flammivomous, after each hammerblow from these endless blitzes of ærolites and firebombs. When bolides of brimstone collided, then exploded into ablative cascades. When tsunamis of lava, like napalm, bedrowned a subcontinent in a deluge of flames. When millions of Molotov cocktails shattered all at once upon the cobblestones of Hell. When Trojans, berserk with rage, stormed over the brink of your abyss, vowing to claw your face from the skull of the Moon.

What dire seed must these onslaughts have scattered, like shrapnel, across your cremated badlands? What prion? What virus? What breed of spore must have emerged, like a spear point or a sword blade, from these early ovens of Auschwitz (each cyanide bonfire, burning in reverse, spitting forth a fitful embryo, cloned from the smoke and the dross)? What orchid must have bloomed among the flame-throwers in the furnace? What dragon must have hatched from a burnt geode, buried in these ashes? Must the universe be so pitiless as to immolate all its offspring at birth? Even now, the astronauts have marshalled their forces to march, resolute, across the kill zone of your godforsaken crematorium. Even now, they forge ahead, onward, through war games of wildfire (unaware that, far away, a doomsayer murmurs prayers against them from a fiendish grimoire).

What howl can beckon, from the benthic fathoms of your damnation, so alien a ghoul as *Vampyroteuthis infernalis* ('the vampire squid from Hell'), a maw that can hurl itself at your soul, like an overcloak cast upon a coat hook in the dark? What does such a black brain, afloat in its vat of ink, know about the death blows to your planet? What does such an emissary think about the pageant of living things that go extinct, en route to your incinerators (the trilobites, the nautilites, the gorgosaurs, the pterosaurs, the iguanodons, the megalodons – all of them massacred, but unmourned)? All the deepest seas have withered and soured. All the tallest alps have crumbled and burned. You have choked on miasmas of methane. You have upturned all your braziers, spilling embers across the flagstones. All your fossils have dissolved in a flash flood of acid rain.

What Great Comet has yet to plummet from the heavens, like a rocket engine dousing its jets during splashdown in your oceans of nitroglycerine? What thunderclap has yet to herald the advent of this plowshare, which can bulldoze a mountain into rubble upon impact? What match-heads, when scraped against your atmosphere, can ignite its oxygen, turning the sky into a blazing typhoon? Only a demigod, like 99942 Apophis, can offer you this apocalypse by becoming the juggernaut that smashes through the massive bulwark of your bedrock. Only destroyers, like 2102 Tantalus or 4179 Toutatis, can erase all earthlings with the ease of suicide bombers at a marketplace. Can an oyster in its shell survive the inferno of free fall from outer space? Can a crocus thrive in soil made from pulverized meteorites? All hail, Hale-Bopp (and every superbomb yet to detonate)!

What Great Dying must the Earth foresee in the barren mirror of the Moon? What Fate? What Fury? What Muse must gaze upon the grim face of grief, reflected in your silver shield (a faceplate of bulletproof glass, pitted and strewn with scars)? What cinders, aflame, disintegrate in your grey seas of nectar, of vapour, of crisis? What shell shock must greet you when you stumble, aghast, upon the charred remains of a forest at Tunguska (its evergreens, toppled and blasted, all of them split, like matchsticks)? What crater, among the lunar maria, must you yearn to recreate whenever you vaporize an atoll? Even now, your battalions of astronauts stride across green plains of trinitite to storm the walls of Castle Bravo and Castle Romeo. Even now, Neil Armstrong returns, like Orpheus, to the airlock, his spacesuit reeking of gunpowder and burnt steel.

What American falconer must aviate your spyplane by the stray light of meteor storms from the Draconids or the Scorpiids (the flak raining down, like glitter dust, upon the desert during a nocturnal firefight)? What scythe-blades must the Vikings forge from the wreckage of an asteroid, recovered from Cape York? What Archangel must the martyrs placate when they kiss the Black Stone of the Kaaba at Mecca during the Hajj? What sunburst must erupt, like Krakatoa, over the Arctic Circle (when the firepower of your payload exceeds by tenfold all the dynamite exploded during World War 11)? Even now, the President of the United States sits alone at night, dreading the grim hour when he must open the memo from his aide, only to read upon the page the single phrase: PINNACLE NUCFLASH (the newflash that chronicles the omnicide of the world).



What global threat of *Sturm und Drang* must your armies yet endure (even in their granite bunkers, deep beneath the massif of Cheyenne Mountain)? When every fountain of hellfire in the firmament can destroy you. When a  $\kappa$ -dwarf star, like Gliese 710, can plow through the Oort cloud, bombarding the Earth with cometoids that shatter every land mass. When a Wolf-Rayet star, like WR 104, can outshine the galaxy in a burst of gamma rays so bright that the blaze must burn away the ozone layer. When the Sun itself can bloat, then flare, to engulf you in a flaming embrace that atomizes the iron core of your planet. Even now, your astronauts are running out of air while they writhe inside their blazing coffins. Even now, you must despair, for you have listened to the throb of the universe, yet you do not hear the cries of any other souls in Hell.

Tell me, Wraith and Reader, tell me: Will love save us from our fear that we are here alone? What then if we peer into the sky at night but see no distant lantern blinking at us from the far end of the cosmos? What if such a beacon goes unnoticed, like a dying flame in the darkness? What if only the most wicked people in the world (the pharaohs, the warlocks, the assassins) ever get to read this signal from outer space? What if the message, when decoded, says nothing but a single phrase repeated: 'We despise you! We despise you!' What if we find the evidence for such hate embedded in our genomes? Even now, colonies of dark ants from a species called *Mystrium shadow* feed themselves upon the blood of their young. Even now, my love, these words confess to you that the universe without you in it is but a merciless explosion.

*Come with me, and let me show you how to break my heart.*