

2023, or The Persistence of Records

*There's a reason I don't open my door.
Not because of any visitors—there are none.
Nor any personal fear or aversion; I'm long past that.
It's what's on the other side that holds me back
Filling the halls, hanging heavy in the street...*

*Warm as flesh in my hand I clutch the doorknob and steel myself, deep
breath.*

*I flinch as arid 3rd-floor air assaults my face, blinking eyes
adjusting to bright light-shards bleaching carpet from shattered
hall-window.*

*I can feel it; thick haze poring unseen over skin, studying those in
its presence, wafting tendrils molesting... My eyes are burning.*

* * *

I don't know how long I've been alone. A year or so I guess. When you rarely leave the house it's hard to tell... I was like this before the end came too. I'd stay inside with curtains drawn, iPhone glow and A/C hum my companions till hours lost their meaning. Occasional night runs for cigarettes, see the cute graveyard shift boy down at the corner gas-n-go. Come home, jerk off, lay on the floor and watch hints of dawn slip beneath blackout curtains. Head emptied between carpet bloodstains and four loko headstones. The dark's a fine enough hiding place for a dropout.

It's not like inside's much better than out these days. I sealed things up as best I could, but evolution has conspired to keep us from living in sealed plastic cartons; so it's moot in the end. The smoldering miasma will find you eventually, seeping through with languid persistence, staining your pores unto baptism. Marked child of this city now. Brimstone mixture of gasoline, rubber, and coal heralds your approach; fitting for the end of the world, as if angel of human-wrought death. Fuck.

* * *

*I daren't breathe as I latch the door behind me, slumped back against
as a child clinging to mother's hem. Tears streaming from clenched
lids as blood pounds in urgency; head swimming.*

*A quick gasp and my knees go weak, coughs wracking my body necessary
evil; it's not as bad as usual.*

*Maybe I'm getting used to it; they always did say our species is
adaptable. I swallow the blood.*

Wrist over lips quick motion I straighten up and head down the hall.

Boots muffled by carpet, wood groaning twilight breaths in echo thru apartment husk; this place could go up in flame at any moment. Complain about choking then. Ha!

* * *

Sometimes when I'm scavenging for canned goods and alcohol I'll find a backpack left behind in someone's mad rush, signs of struggle amid spills of double-A batteries, too many abandoned children's toys. The final remains of some great exodus. Maybe if I'd left too things would still be okay. But was there anywhere spared of this fate? Over which horizon lies escape?

It's not like we didn't know this was coming. I'd made a habit of avoiding the news like everyone else, but no one could ignore that summer. Weird stories began rolling in from Portland as governments looked away, abandoning us for profit-positive distraction. Forecasters scrambled to update models while cable-news prophets dealt in emotional commodity from takeout place walls. Gas station boy made eye contact one night, told me to be careful—"People're dyin of heatstroke out there" (creamed hard that night). Sirens began roaring through the streets at all hours. My night walks became less frequent as temperatures stopped falling. Whatever. The impending doom fed into a helplessness in my heart that was already there. I was born to be an apocalypse girl.

Communications were the first to go. Overheating datacenters went offline to preserve a taxed power grid, phone cables sagged onto intersections. Distant radio spires dotting skyline felled by thermal expansion. A string of fires reached high into the night sky as electrical insulators exceeded their ratings in the walls of families of five. Ambulances stalled in the street amongst steel graveyard, countless rims rooted in roadbed draped in vulcanized shrouds. Deafening explosion out power-station way as my A/C stuttered its final revolution. Silence reigned. I exhaled, tried not to shudder beneath bitter smoke clouds.

The sane thing would've been to go out and assess the situation, try finding help; safety in numbers and all that. But instead I bugged out, too deep in my head to do aught but curl up on my floorborne mattress and hope it'd all be over soon. I'm guessing it was around then that everyone left. I've no idea where they were headed or how many made it, let alone what a city cut off from a world without answers would find to stake their faith around. All I know is I was alone when I finally pulled my emaciated body from its tomb to discover my birdsongless birthright.

* * *

Coughing again, rattle in chest as I lean into bannister rounding next flight of stairs.

It gets worse as one descends, thicker with gravity (like descending into hell lmao). From here on out every step counts.

*I'd kill to find a gas mask. Maybe then I could make a break for it.
I get out my bandanna and tie it over my face; I look like a bandit.
Continue the dive.*

*Incongruous presence, my forsaken footfalls find ground-floor landing,
stepping into foyer cautious glances thru asthmatic starfields soaked
with light streaming from murky double doors—No signs of life.*

*A strange sort of stage fright grips at my heart as my eyes adjust to
the grand light of the stage; my performance awaits. Do raw feats of
survival to no one in particular count as art? Cough.*

*In a moment of resolve I shake off my hesitation and stride into
hellish limelight's umbra, hand pressed on metal frame (searing pain)*

*I'm an immovable object as I step into the street, blinding white like
flashbulbs as light sparks in my eyes unfiltered*

*It's all around me now, thick as fog coiling, gagging on pitchy
fingertips; my body rejects my resolve.*

*Blinded eyes burn raw as my lungs explode and I take a bow, knee
colliding with sidewalk*

*Arms splayed before my great asphyxiator, black as devil's eye boiling
asphalt tarpit eternal!*

*Stares with indifference at my unmoving form, splayed like spiderweb
through urban domain.*

Bandanna sticks to my lips, lungs bleed out an offering.

Fade to black.