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The Archive: Digital Art and an Unsustainable Future

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The Archive: **Digital Art and an Unsustainable Future**

Tallulah Harvey

The philosophical ideas explored in this narrative are twofold, interrogating society's dependence on unsustainable energy resources and examining the future of art in the face of climate change. Both debates stem from a desire to document an anthropocentric construction of history, immortalising mankind's past endeavours, whilst neglecting the conditions necessary for humanity's continued survival. With inordinate levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and dwindling supplies of fossil fuels, the need for sustainable energy resources and the re-examination of our current energy consumption has never been more dire. Eco-critical and science fiction narratives which speculate on the future of humanity and the possibility of alternative energies, from hydrology to human labour, attempt to imagine a world beyond a petroleum driven capitalism. Speculation about the future redirects our focus towards the present by eradicating any nostalgia for the past. This precognitive characteristic of science fiction is at the very heart of my short story, *The Archive*. I have opted to use an analogy to imagine a future landscape where human life and culture has survived the effects of climate change, but at the cost of all other nonhuman life. With this creative piece, I am not dismissing the value of human art and life, quite the opposite, instead I argue that we should not risk sacrificing *all* life on earth for the sake of preserving our current way of life. In the words of Naomi Klein, 'climate change isn't an "issue" [...] [i]t is a civilisation wake-up call. A powerful message — spoken in the language of fires, floods, droughts, and extinctions [...] [t]elling us that we need to evolve'.¹ We must adapt, and that adaptation should work cooperatively, and not at odds, with nonhuman life on the planet.

The narrative is primarily set at an archival institution where physical art is copied into a digital format before being stored. *The Archive* explores some of the larger implications of our long-term dependence on technology and asks whether a simulated reality offers a satisfactory substitute for real life experience. The short story plays with the irony that the role of the Archive is to digitise human

¹ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), p. 25.

cultural production, and yet all of its archivers value the tactility of art, and are drawn to the archival institution because of the absence of physical art in their day-to-day lives. This piece partly grew out of the ‘e-book versus paperback’ debate. Our experience of art is increasingly mediated by technology and the e-book has completely changed the way we see and experience literature, allowing readers to carry hundreds of books around with them in one small, light, handheld console. Those who defend the paperback, stress the value of touch and smell in the experience of reading, which aids both pleasure and memory by acting as spatio-temporal markers. *The Archive* asks: what is lost in the process of digitising our daily reality? What part does sensation play in our mediation of the world around us?

Depicted in the future society of *The Archive*, traditional fossil fuels have been replaced by an unknown sustainable energy resource. The new *clean* energy allows citizens to consume electricity without the worry of further ecological degradation or finite resources. Unlike her friends or colleagues, the protagonist switches off the program to remind herself that the surrounding world is constructed, artificial, and virtual; unaware that in doing so she becomes the closest thing there is to an environmental activist in a world that has no regard for its own future (demonstrated by its frivolous dependence on an unknown energy resource). This fictional landscape reflects the current energy crisis. Our ignorance and naivety prevents us from taking responsibility for the immense impact our single species has had on the global climate. We instead seem to be impressed by the extent of our own ingenuity, and as a society — especially in the West — respond to climate change by celebrating humanity’s greatest achievements. The human brain has produced great feats in the arts and sciences, creating masterpieces and lifesaving breakthroughs, and yet the activity of the human brain has also brought about the extinction of many animal and plant species, and polluted the Earth’s soil, water, and air with dangerous toxins. The endeavors of humanity will come to very little if we cannot break from our current destructive tendencies, as things

continue humanity ‘may have to settle for the distinction of being the first species ever to understand the causes of its own extinction’.²

The two genres of Gothic and Sci-Fi collide in this short piece, largely inspired by Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, widely regarded as the first science fiction novel, and the work of Octavia Butler, famous for her gripping post-colonialist science fictions. However, it is Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* which underpins the narrative of *The Archive*. I chose to allude quite heavily to this piece of Gothic fiction and most notably the figure of Mrs Rochester, the madwoman in the attic, because of the significance of fire, insanity, and the female body in the novel. The image of the burning body, and specifically the female body, alludes to postcolonial and feminist discourses within environmentalism, which warn against the body once more becoming an alternative to our current fossil fuel driven capitalism. *The Archive* does not offer a more viable energy resource, sustainable or otherwise, but highlights how detached we have become from the environmental injustice performed at the hands of industries, prioritising our comfort over a prolonged solution or strategy for coping with climate change. Humanity’s involvement in climate change is becoming increasingly difficult to deny as natural disaster and catastrophic weather conditions become frighteningly more common, and yet our collective denial perseveres.

I have chosen the short story form because I believe that literature provides an important scope for ecological debate; it accommodates the need to tell new stories about humanity and the planet, but also bridges the gap between the scientific community and general public consciousness. As science reveals the negative impacts of climate change and demonstrates a growing concern for humanity’s contribution, literature operates as a form of cultural documentation. It details public awareness and anxieties, and acts as a conduit for change by urging empathetic responses and rendering ecological controversy accessible. Speculative fiction provokes active engagement in ecological issues, reminding us that we exist as part of a global eco-system, and evokes responsibility for the world we inhabit.

² Joseph W. Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1997), p. 5.

The Archive

I wonder. How do I know this is water?

I stand there, my face pressed up against the shower head, liquid pounding hard and hot on my skin. It was a stinging sensation, like scratching at an itch, your fingernails leaving behind trails of coarse pasty skin. I touch the tiles and they feel like tiles: cold, smooth, hard. But do they *feel* blue, or square? Can I feel their lustre or the way the light refracts off the surface? Maybe it's just part of the projection and not *natural* light at all. I wonder. I step out the shower and walk into The Towel; warm air coats the surface of my skin in perfect synchrony, until the moisture gauge reaches its peak and switches off the dryers. I emerge goose-pimpled and exit the room. The program flickers off. First the tiles, blue and square, leaving behind only an indistinct corner dull white and unlit, and then The Towel, toilet and sink, reverting back to their original inferior forms. All its decadence, its personality flickering off with it; only the bare bones of a bathroom remain. Lifeless. Even the rubber ducks are gone, are virtual, the faint trace of an after-image hovers for a moment before fading. My friends berate me for switching off the program after exiting a room, rather than leaving it on permanently. I defend myself with poor excuses, *I do so to conserve energy. What energy? They solved the energy crisis long before you were born. Fossil fuels are almost prehistoric.* The truth is, I like to switch it off to remind me that it's not real.

I work on the outskirts of the city at a huge government-owned storage and data collection centre, and I have to travel on a company owned shuttlebus to reach it. On the shuttle, sleepy commuters make their final touches to their personal data, double checking that they have the correct binary input for “curly hair” or “purple blouse”. Sometimes watches are too far up the arm or trouser legs too short and the input has to be adjusted accordingly. Those slower at putting in today's codes have to take their nutrition capsules, or “coffee”, on the way to work, swallowing them dry. The government has strict dress-codes, anyone slovenly dressed — mismatched socks, skewed collars, ill-fitting trousers, wonky hairdos — demonstrates their incompetence at coding, a basic requirement for the archival industry. It's important that all employers are technologically savvy, any mistakes made could be permanent. Mona Lisa would no longer smile, Jesus might be absent from his own Last Supper. Since we can only access

objects through their virtual constructions, the digitised pieces must be complete and perfect copies of the original object. Its physical twin locked deep within the vaults, preserved, protected and never to be seen again. We pass the waking city. Technicians have been called to fix a glitch at a housing complex. The large bay windows and stylish cuboid infrastructure pixelates, fading in and out of focus. The technicians shut down and reset the system in order to update the program and thus eradicate any faults. The projected image blinks twice and then vanishes, leaving behind a windowless grey block.

‘So that’s what they look like without the program’, I heard someone whisper at the back of the bus.

The whole city has been redesigned and intricately rewired so that the program can function without impediment. This is now the universal and unquestionable design for all major global cities. Every monument or famous piece of architecture has been rendered digital, to the finest detail. The originals have been deconstructed—the most famous landmarks, St Paul’s or the Eiffel Tower, for example, have been stored in archival outposts, to be preserved for all mankind—and replaced with a virtual manifestation. Some historians and religious practitioners protested at first, but were soon persuaded that the program offered society a more than adequate substitution and that the virtual templates could be altered and perfected as society deemed fit. Rather than taking a number of years and millions of pounds in tax payers’ money, Parliament could be fully refurbished in only a handful of hours of reprogramming, and the costs of running the program were now almost nonexistent since governments had switched to new methods of sustainable energy. The new methods were never questioned by citizens. *Solar panels perhaps? Hydraulics?* The transition was so expertly and efficiently enforced, and clean energy resources so desperately needed, that the general population were unconcerned with explicit details. The only significant impact experienced by the public was that their energy bills were lower than was ever before feasibly possible.

The Archive is such a large infrastructure that it’s been programmed to appear invisible to the untrained eye. No one really knows quite *how large* The Archive is; the staff elevator has 113 floors, but the first floor itself begins miles above the ground. The archival staff have no accurate knowledge of how far down the building descends below floor one, or how many floors precede 113. Staring out

from floor 105, the department of English Literature already felt like halfway to space. On clear days you could see the outlines of the coast, the dead empty landscape stretching in every direction away from the city, but most days were spent among storm clouds. The city has always been the centre of man's art and cultural production, of work and change and revolution, now the cities contain *all* human life. Governments around the world call it progress, but I still dream at night of walking through woods, sunlight trickling through the tops of the trees. As if in denial, we select the program for "busy street" or "mountain range" and stare out at these manmade digital landscapes to distract us from contemplating the sheer magnitude of The Archive, with its vaults stretching miles above and below ground. Mankind's artistic legacy is sealed tightly in its artificial ecosystems, locked safely away from the damaging effects of moisture and flash photography.

We archivers never see the artworks again once they have been catalogued; they are carted off to a separate service elevator, whose access is not privilege to the archival staff. Our job is to scan, import and digitise humankind's cultural production, everything prior to 2017 (when the program was first conceived). My role in the literature department is not simply to scan in or type up a novel. I have to capture its very essence, including the reader's experience of the work, everything that the, now outmoded, ebook failed to incorporate. The texture and smell of a good book is equally important when documenting it. I collect several versions of the same print: different editions, vintage copies, collectors' items, various cover art, older used copies, banned copies, annotated works. From these I immortalise the text.

I wake with a jolt. *What was I dreaming about?*

My head's pounding. I skipped my Dinner last night again, the evening dosage of nutrients and supplements needed to keep my body functioning, and now experience pangs of hunger pressing hard against my empty stomach. I raise my hands to my forehead and rub hard at my temples. I can feel the duck-fluff growing again along my scalp and I grunt in disdain. *It's that time again.* I roll onto my stomach and groan loudly into my pillow, my arse raised high in the air like the mating call of some bird or monkey. I roll again onto my front, but misjudge the width of my bed and fall flat on the floor. *Did I not turn on the program when I got back last night?* The room is cold, grey and unwelcoming. All my paintings have gone, along

with my bookshelves, which usually extend the full length of all four of my bedroom walls, like the ancient scholarly libraries of provosts, Romantic poets and old white men. I go to the main router and check that it's switched on, which it is, but instead of a green light is go symbol, it flashes a less friendly red. I try a trick I know from an old colour television show I watched as a child and turn it off and on again, but to no avail. I can hear the commotion outside my apartment, as people wake to the shock of an empty room, as if all their possessions — including their wallpaper, floorboards, and windows — have been carried off in the night. I wash my face under the tap in the bathroom, before raising my head to face the blank wall where my mirror once was. Suddenly the program boots up again, a small cheer murmuring through the building as the lights and home-furnishings switch back on. I look at my own reflection, my eyes red and puffy still, and notice that I'm frowning. I grab the razor and begin shaving my scalp until it's smooth and hairless. This process, a familiar enough part of everyday life, is one of the few moments where the illusion is broken. Of course this is done in the complete, and somewhat shameful, privacy of one's own bathroom. But it is the only moment when we see ourselves without the program, our *natural* state. The wizard behind the curtain. Exiting my flat, I overhear the neighbours' complaints,

'This has never happened before, in all my years here'.

'The same happened last weekend, at my brother's place on the other side of town'.

I've been working for the last couple of years on a large body of gothic literature, mainly the work of Victorian women — the bodice-ripping narratives of ghosts and terror stricken virgins — and am currently archiving Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The figure of the madwoman in the attic has been haunting my own imagination of late. When I close my eyes I see her running, running and burning; fire fills my dreams and waking thoughts until every image is incinerated, leaving behind something other than darkness. All is blank, void, like peering into the nothingness of a black hole or watching as a film reel catches alight in the midst of a scene. I am so taken by these scenes of rage and fear that I've picked up the peculiar habit of staring intensely into the distance, my face stiff and expressionless. Noticing this new custom of mine a colleague, Debbie, asks *whether I'm feeling alright?* A sweet faced, plump woman with a deep and slightly sinister love for animal fiction, from children's literature to the darker tales of

bestiality and communist satire. I respond to her question, the words falling off my tongue and out into the open air before I can stuff them back inside my mouth.

‘What happens when we run out of art?’

It’s only after hearing the surprised gasp, and seeing the stunned look on Debbie’s face, that I realise what I’ve done. Too late to unsay what I’ve already said, I continue onwards with courage and stupidity.

‘I just mean that all new art is created digitally, nothing is produced on paper or made out of raw materials anymore. So when we’ve archived and stored all the old art, what will we do?’

‘Well’, each word stumbles slowly out of her mouth, ‘I’m sure that won’t happen. I mean not in, not in our lifetimes. I guess that’s for future archivers to worry about, I –’

‘But just think about how much you’ve already archived in your career?’, I butt in.

‘Yes... but that’s beside the point’.

Poor Debbie becomes increasingly red-faced and flustered as other colleagues put down their work and look over at us. The general literature manager walks towards us, his left eyebrow raised rigidly in concern and suspicion. Quickly I say,

‘I’m sure you’re right, we don’t need to worry about it right now’.

The room lets out a collective sigh and normal working conditions continue; the palm trees sway in the tropical scene on display in the window and I return once more to Mrs Rochester.

I wait patiently in line for The Canteen. My conversation with Debbie has the unintentional impact of isolating me from my regular lunchtime companions. I can see the literature team standing six people behind me in the queue, but I have Mrs Rochester for company and read as I wait. The book’s an old Penguin edition, its corners dog-eared and the print blurred along the edges where sweaty fingertips had once rested. I hold it to my face and inhale deeply. I love the smell of books, the weight of them in my hands, the texture of the paper. Strangely enough, *this* behaviour is socially acceptable, at least within the confines of The Archive. Part of our jobs as archivers is to accurately document every aspect of the artwork, so archivers tend to be tactile people. This is a safe space for lovers of everything vintage and material, an aspect of everyday life now extinct outside of the archiving profession. I watch the people

in front of me enter The Canteen, ready to be scanned and weighed, before receiving their portion of nutrition pills, each perfectly tailored to their bodily needs and health regime. I too step inside, placing my feet firmly on the scale and wait patiently as my eyes are scanned, a process that allows The Canteen to access my medical data. A small, sharp prick and within seconds my blood has been analysed and my “lunch” deposited in the designated pill dispenser.

Filling my flask by the water fountain, I overhear a group from the art floor, one of whom I recognise from the abstract paintings department, he has an indistinct name that I can never quite remember. A thickly-moustached man who reminds me of the portraits I’d seen of nineteenth-century philosophers or aristocrats, the kind of facial hair that would have needed regular care and maintenance before the program or dietary pills were implemented. It is impressive, yes, but try as I might I can’t help imagining the food that might have got stuck in it, or the possible combination of items that could have been smuggled through, tightly concealed in its wiry bristles.

‘It was very peculiar, I’m telling you. I never realised there was floors in-between levels, jus’ suspected they was above or below the archive staff floors’.

I move closer to the group, so as to hear the conversation more clearly.

‘I was in the elevator when the service operator got in beside me with a large crate, I think it was from the Archeology Department. So I was very confused and he explained to me that the service elevator was bein’ repaired’.

‘But then, halfway between my floor, thirty-six, and the floor below, thirty-five, the guy puts a key in the elevator. There’s a small hole just above the buttons, I’d never seen it before but it’s there alright, I checked it again on my way down. When he put the key in and turned it, it stopped. Right there, between them two floors. I was a little panicked; I couldn’t help but think that both the staff and service elevators being broken was a worrying coincidence — not to mention a major fire hazard. And then the

doors opened', he pauses for suspense, 'and there was another floor'. We all look at each other in shock and excitement.

'What did it look like?', I ask.

'Different, more industrial. More like a factory than an office building, but I couldn't see much. It all happened so fast, the guy was out in seconds and closed the doors behind him. It was all a bit strange really'.

'Where does the art go?'

This time my question is less well received. It's evident from their faces that I've asked a very stupid question, one that every employee who works here knows the answer to.

'Somewhere safe, that's all I care about. That's why we do this job right, to protect it? As long as it's safe', the surrounding staff say *at me*, in almost complete unison.

The others nod in agreement once more and knock back their lunch, with a decent swig of water, before dispersing. I stand in the empty room a little longer, thinking about this secret floor, and then return to my own work. I peruse the elevator on my way up and notice the small hole above the buttons, seeing it for the very first time.

'Curiouser and curiouser', I say aloud to myself.

Unable to sleep, I walk along the corridors. The fire permeating my dreams begins to fade from my vision, leaving behind only a ghostly trace of light. It's impossible to tell from inside the building whether the sun is rising outside, since there are no windows or other means of letting in natural light. But the hallway's programmed to a balcony scene, overlooking the city, and is probably projecting a live feed from cameras outside the building. From the projection I work out that it's about three or four in the morning. I look for the communal-space-console and change the settings to "aquarium". Sharks and tropical fish swim along the walls and ceiling hypnotically; seaweed lines the floor, stroking gently at the edges of the walls. I walk along the underwater scene, trying to untangle my wayward thoughts among

the extinct creatures, familiar to me only from the old nature documentaries I watched as a child. A key? I continue along this line of interrogation and then repeat to myself aloud.

‘A key’.

In a world of digital pass-coding, ocular screening and fingerprint recognition, where almost everything that could possibly be made out of light and electricity was made insubstantial, virtual: why would he have used a key? A key placed in a lock. I run along the corridor and down into the storage basement, half jumping down each flight of stairs. The fish follow me. I enter the passcode for my storage space and the disused door opens with uncertainty. I spend several hours hunting through the 2x2 room until I find what I’m looking for, a 3D printer. Now outdated, the 3D printer was a fad rendered completely irrelevant by the program’s technologies, but my mother had owned one and let me play with it as a child. I loved making something I could touch and hold in my hands. I blow the dust off it and carry it triumphantly up to my flat, along with my other discoveries. I spend the last few moments of the early morning, before everyone else in the building begins to stir, staring deep into the fire, having set the program in my room to appear as if my bedding were alight. I sit amidst the virtual fire and slip my fingers through the flames, unable to feel its warmth.

I had felt it in my dreams. I had *felt* it.

I join the sleepy commuters on the shuttlebus and receive an array of discouraging looks, sitting down amidst a percussive of people shuffling nervously in their seats. One of them gets up, crosses the shuttle towards me and whispers,

‘You’ve got no hair’.

This is a strange remark to receive, since technically no one here on this bus *actually* has any hair. I then realise he means that I haven’t *programmed* my hair today. Smiling, I say,

‘I know. I did it intentionally’.

With confusion, and poorly concealed disapproval, he returns to his seat. It’s not a completely uncommon occurrence to see someone who is bald, but it’s usually a fashion choice, their baldness coded into their personal program. They tended to have either very short hair, or a beautifully smooth and evenly tanned hairless head, not the grey, stubbly scalp that I was parading around. No one shows

another living person their bare head, not even their partners or children, and here I am sitting on a crowded bus. I turned my program off this morning and am wearing a full set of clothes for the first time in my life; some items of my mother's that I had found in the storage room. I wear a '50s housewife number, one of those full dresses inflated by petticoats, with a pair of clunky Dr. Marten boots. They're heavy and I keep stumbling around in them, surprised and unused to their weight and to the constriction placed on my toes, which are squished tightly against the front of the shoes. The clothing choice is not the strangest combination and is received as precisely that, a choice; unaware that I'm sitting fully dressed in a bus full of nude commuters. But it's my bare head that makes my colleagues uncomfortable and an hour or so into my shift, Debbie comes back from the storeroom with an orange woolly hat and gestures it towards me.

'Cover it with this so that the boss doesn't see, but you really should get that glitch fixed and soon. You know how regimented they are around here as regards to uniform coding'.

I do as instructed and place the hat over my head. It nests into place and I'm surprised by how satisfying the experience feels. It's so soft and warm.

There's a power cut in the facility for a full hour after lunch. People run around me in flustered panic, whilst I look absentmindedly out the window where storm clouds are gathering. Pulling my hat further down my head and clutching at my copy of *Jane Eyre*, I mouth passages from the book into the open sky. When the lights and computer terminals come back on, I hear my disgruntled work colleagues scramble back to their desks and scorn their machines for not saving their morning endeavours. I have already, however, disappeared and start heading towards floor thirty-six. Using the chaos caused by the power cut as a diversion, I manage to obtain what I need without drawing too much attention to my actions or presence. Back in the empty elevator, I use the stolen handheld scanner — used by the art archivers for documenting microscopic details on very small or very large art pieces, neither of which were sufficiently archived using the regular machines — to scan the keyhole. Walking back to my workstation I'm stopped by someone who tells me they like my outfit, *very punk*.

I wait until everyone has left the office. It takes longer than expected, because of the work and time lost by the power cut. There isn't a backup system in place for this kind of occurrence, since there has

never been an incident like this since the installation of The Archive, causing hours of work to evaporate in an instance. I hover around the art department, wandering back and forth along the seemingly endless corridors; inspecting each and every office space until I find one that's empty. If anyone stops me, I simply explain that I'm waiting for a friend, but most people walk straight past me quite oblivious. Evidently my attire's appropriate for an art archiver. When a room becomes free, I shuffle in and use a computer, the one furthest to the back, in the hope that anyone walking past won't be able to see me. I boot it up and log in with my guest user. Having done so, I hook up the handheld scanner and the 3D printer. I'm not sure whether it will connect, but after some fiddling around and some creative wiring, I manage to get the computer to recognise the printer and use the program to create a key (based off the data collected from the scanning device). After years of converting physical objects into immaterial coding, I use the immaterial to create something physical.

I run, key in hand, to the nearest elevator. I have to go up and down several times until the elevator's completely empty. Once it is, I press the thirty-sixth button and force the key into the hole after passing floor thirty-five, turning it with care and conviction. The doors open and I walk out of the elevator and onto an unfamiliar floor. It's loud and I have to cover my ears with my hands as I run along the passages. I hide from the service staff but it's relatively empty, probably because it's also shutting down for the day. As I move further into this peculiar landscape, I become increasingly aware of the humidity; beads of sweat begin forming on my forehead and dark patches appear under my armpits. This is a new experience for me, since all the buildings, domestic and professional, have regulated heating and moisture controls, and no one wears material clothing. Sweat marks haven't been seen for decades. I notice a heavily loaded transportation trolley in the distance, and follow it carefully. There are no door codes down here and it looks like the program doesn't operate here. Everything I could see was actually what I was seeing. I walk through a series of heavy doors, the heat growing more unbearable with each one. The tips of my fingers are singed by the metal as I push the last door open and stare into the deep flaming abyss before me. *This is real.* I run back the way I came, my boots slamming hard on the floor, tears streaking down my cheeks. In the elevator I wretch, pressing the ground button over and over and

over again. At night I sit in bed, my room aflame. In a blind fury I pull all the books off my shelves and feed the fire. Once they've burnt to ashes I reset the program and repeat it anew. Screaming: *burn, burn, burn.*

I head to work in the same clothes as the day before, my eyes dry and bloodshot. I hear the commuters around me whispering and I hug my book closer and closer to my chest as if to gain strength from its pages or to push it deep inside my body, where it might truly be safe. At my desk, my supervisor approaches me.

'This is unacceptable behaviour I'm afraid. This is completely unprofessional. You know the importance of the dress coding system here, and you flaunt savage disarray, your improper coding, your—'

'You have access to the art catalogue don't you?'

This is obviously not the response he was expecting and he answers my question before he has time to absorb it. Yes. My voice is calm and steady, speaking with a sense of newly found purpose.

'How many books are left?'

'What?'

'How many books still need to be archived? I have searched all morning and I can't find many more, some obscure pieces of Russian literature, some rather poor fan fiction and perhaps an unfinished manuscript or two. We're running out of art. It's not going to be enough.'

He continues to look at me, his face blank and pale; watching the movements of my lips but without the words corresponding.

'We're going to run out', I repeat.

'Well yes, eventually. But I'm sure there will be plenty more work for an archiver, if you're worried about losing your job you don't need to...'

'It's not sustainable.'

'Sustainable?'

'The power cuts, the glitches. It's not going to be enough, it isn't sustainable. They're burning everything. *We have all been so blind.*'

I sit down at my desk and begin typing violently. He stands there frozen for a moment longer before returning to his own office. I work furiously for hours, programming and reprogramming until

my fingers become sore. I work all through my lunch hour, colleagues drifting in and out the office; some might have glanced over at me, but either I didn't notice them or they were too wary to approach. Blisters start to surface, my fingers spotted with blood, and yet I continue typing. Even once everyone has left for day, I stay and work through the night, and the sun is rising by the time I've finished. I see it through the windows, it's so close, I can see its rays creep through the curtain of clouds. It's warm on my skin. I can feel its warmth.

Is this the first time I've ever seen it rise with my own eyes?

I wait in the control room until everyone has arrived at work, shivering in the corner behind the main operating system's console, shaking with cold and excitement. I'm terrified. I imagine the confusion on the faces of all the archivers when they step inside the building and feel the cold for the first time. I had turned off the heating and moisture moderator. I wasn't sure anyone would know why they were cold, standing there naked in nothing but their virtual clothes, which would offer them little protection from the brisk morning chill. Will they even *know* what it is to be cold? I abandon my own clothes, leaving them in a bundle behind me in the corner, and begin inputting my code into the primary computer console. I've made a computer virus and hope to infect the whole system from inside here. Once I'm certain the majority of the workforce are inside The Archive, I activate my enhancements to the program. Hearing the screams before I see any of the chaos, I walk the corridors, my body and head completely bare. Flames are everywhere, burning up everything in sight. Every architectural detail, every immaterial object, every item of clothing operated by the program, enveloped in flames. I can feel the smooth, dense floor beneath my feet, feel the textures of the small hard elevator key as I turn it between my fingers. I walk a slow and steady path down one corridor to the next, walking each and every floor. All the time I clutch at my ragged book, taking strength from its pages. I want to experience the confusion and terror, the air full of sounds and textures, and I try hard to breath it all deep into my lungs. No one seems to notice my presence, either too convinced by the flames, or too preoccupied with trying to reboot or reprogram the system. I can smell and see and feel the fear, and for the first time in my life it feels real.

The screaming sounds real, the stench of panic-stricken bodies smells real, the cold touch of the floor and walls feels real, and yet these flames still aren't enough. *I need more.*

I head towards floor thirty-five and a half, longing for the heat of its flames. It takes me some time to retrace my steps and in my madness I care little about being seen. Perhaps I wanted to be caught, to be stopped, and yet my mind has never been so clear. I pass through this alien place without being seen. When I find the furnace I stop, my hands burning against the door, my legs trembling uncontrollably. I push the heavy door open with what little energy I have left. The heat flooding through the open door stings my bare body and I see red patches appear on the surface of my skin. It is so hot that it hurts, and the pain is so welcome that I weep with joy; my body alive with a sensation never before experienced. I push forward against the weight of the heat, extending my fingertips forwards, grasping tightly onto the dark metal bars surrounding the edge of the great pit. Propping myself against the barrier, I lean over the bars and stare deep into the furnace; a bottomless chasm extending miles underground. I scream and pour all the pent-up words inside my heart, deep into its depths.

'Bertha?'

A woman enters, dressed in heavy service uniform and nudging forward a large trolley full of books, ready for the fire. I run towards her screaming, my voice strange and echoing off every surface; they're no longer just my words, we speak with a singular voice. The service woman stands there paralysed, seeing only the shadow of a madwoman, the whole room saturated with an indescribable sound. She reaches behind her and hits the security alarm, thumping it hard with her thickly-gloved hand. I throw myself onto the books sobbing, the tears evaporating from my cheeks before hitting the pages of the books, which have begun to curl and brown under the intensity of the heat. I feel arms snatch at me from all sides; genderless, faceless things, pulling and grabbing at me.

'Take me instead', I beg.

I twist and contort my body, wriggling out of one grasp before being caught in another. I feel exposed and ashamed. Someone or something prizes open my fingers and takes *Jane Eyre* from me. I howl in pain and horror, and the harpy scream erupting from my mouth helps to loosen their grips momentarily. I snatch back my book and climb above the hoard of uniformed bodies, balancing

precariously on the barrier. I stand on the edge clasping the book to my chest. No one moves. The metal bar burning deep into the arches of my feet and I have trouble standing, my knees growing weak. *I'm coming Bertha.* One of the creatures comes forward and tries to reach up at me but as he touches my skin, I flinch. It was only the briefest of moments, the flicker of an eyelid, and I was falling. *Did I slip or step?* Skin peeling off my flesh, my muscles protruding through the fresh wounds. I can feel the flames; these flames are genuine, absolute fire.

'Dead? Dead! Ay, dead as the stones on which her brains and blood were scattered', I mouth with what was left of my parched lips.

I smile, shrouded in the ashes of her pages, then all is dark and all is aflame, and I was alive, just before I died.

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