

Standstill

The air is dead. It lingers, unmoved, unnatural. There is a sick purity to it, she thinks, breathing it in and smelling, tasting, extracting absolutely nothing. It's just air, minus the humanity. There but not.

In a cracked and tilted train car, a shell of a home with its own creaks and groans, she sits with nothing but time to ponder these days. Your hobbies narrow quite a bit when you're marooned underground, she thinks to herself. Always to herself.

You scavenge, you sleep, you think about air. You sigh. And isn't it worse to then think about how sad it is ... to think about air?

But it really ought to be full of things. Particles, you know? Aromas. Scents. Floating signs of food and animals and stinky feet. Imagine missing those.

Now all her senses are either trying to see in the dark subway, or squint out the gruelling, baking, endless light that pours in through manhole covers left ajar in the tunnel ceiling. Enjoying a hint of something in the air went from norm, to novelty, to nothing. The only thing there's left to smell is the heat, seeping through your nose like hot wax.

It is too hot to move - basically forever. Not too long ago, the world slowed down and contracted, everyone moving into the shade of cities and whatever infrastructure could withstand the sun's bleaching assault. When people couldn't share the space, they trampled each other. With rising oceans eating away the map, the world only had room left to stand. And so now things are at a standstill.

At least the skies are clear. She imagines wavy lines criss-crossing the clouds, polluting the air with a clash of crass voices - some radio show yelling about bad news never-ending, bumping into a bit of Chopin wafting in from a nearby tower. That loudness is gone now, the volume reclaimed by pure quiet.

In her head she doubles and triples the sound of footsteps all over the city until it's the racket of society. She imagines the people and the places they had to be, or not be. She pictures a girl skipping just for the hell of it. And why not? That could have been me, she thinks, if things were better. I could have been someone revelling in the motion and the privilege of going somewhere. Imagine missing that.

She can't quite remember what or how her life was - she was so young when the irreversible arrived - but she can still feel it, like she could run her fingertips across an empty niche and know that something was there. Something stolen since.

Why did they not do anything? Why did they leave me, she thinks bitterly, and leave me with nothing but a life of pointlessly willing people in the past to take action.

Some people must have tried to warn them, but that credit does so little for her, now. She imagines people pointing at the dried-to-death crops and piles of perished animals. She

imagines herself as one of them, screaming and screaming, her voice scraping painfully across its upper limits and still not being loud enough.

How can you be so unmoved by the plight of the world? How can you be a boulder, blocking the way? How can you just allow the whole world to stop in its tracks?

But now she's just running laps in her mind again. It always ends up with this or that anguished question and it doesn't matter. It doesn't go anywhere. Nobody's going anywhere anymore. The air is dead.

"Ok, that's enough spiraling for one day," she whispers. Her darkest thought is also the one that brings her the most clarity: If it's already too late, you can't do anything but move on. The pressure-cooked frustration stirs her to get up and go do something.