

Alexander Archer

It is 2120. There is no longer any such thing as poetry, or poets. What happened?

I am in my sister's room. It's I who live there now, since she has gone away. I don't remember when I got there, but I am sure it was a long time ago. I can tell from the mould creeping up the walls, and the thick sediment of dust built up on the bedside table, which I am sure was not there when I arrived. It sits undisturbed. I spend most of my time lying supine on the bed, naked, staring at the ceiling. When that begins to be too overwhelming, I lie on the floor instead, sometimes sideways, occasionally prone. These little changes of scenery satisfy me for days on end, and assuage any desire for movement my body might feel. I don't sleep anymore, and I haven't eaten anything for years. I don't feel hunger or tiredness, or even the desire to urinate. I haven't seen another person for a very long time. I haven't left the room since I arrived.

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If I were forced to guess (and there's no question of that anymore), I'd say I was about eighty years old. I know I am definitely past sixty—I remember that birthday with some fondness, celebrated inwardly, as it was—but out onward it becomes something of a haze to me, those weeks and months of blissful ataraxis. My hands, when I look at them, are still young, and my bones are yet free of any of the aches and pains we were taught to associate with great age, but I am sure that I am old. The years become clearer and clearer, I think, the further back into my past I delve, so it is in relation to them that I ground myself.

Things all began, I believe, when that man Dormin discovered the secret of immortality. He was a marine biologist, and if I remember correctly he had been carrying out some sort of investigation into lobsters. I read it in the newspaper. Yes, lobsters it was, and they had in them some transcendent quality he sought to extract. They were unable to die, you understand, except in combat (or when boiled

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alive and eaten by humans, God help us all). Disease and decay left the lobsters alone to be the victims of more painful deaths. Dormin eventually discovered, after a great deal of lobster vivisection, that this fantastic asset of theirs could be translated quite faithfully into humans. Having isolated the right gland, or chromosome perhaps, he was able to synthesise a powerful drug and spread it all over the world in a matter of mere months. But life is never so simple, you realise. For some unfortunate reason, it had a disproportionately robust effect on humans, making them completely impervious to death. It is possible to boil an immortal human alive until rapture.

At the time, I was a student—yes, that I am certain of—and a stern enough Catholic to be quite unimpressed by this looming Tower of Babel. It distressed me to no end, then, when a bull was issued by the Vatican which encouraged the use of the drug, with the facile logic that refusing to take it was essentially suicide, denying the continuation of life and

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so on, a sin more grievous than pride. I think that was the reasoning, perhaps, but it was all so absurd to me I could easily have substituted in some fantasy of my own. Indeed, that's exactly the kind of thing I'd do without noticing, so convinced am I still of the fundamental apostasy of the situation. Most, if not all of the people I knew accepted the chemical. Everyone in the world seemed then to surrender their bodies to this insane covenant, without a second thought for their souls. It's very possible that I might be the last person on the planet who still has a soul. But from time to time I do think I feel it slipping away, even I.

When everyone became immortal (and I use the word with a certain precision, as I do not wish to associate those base people with the holy state of 'eternal life'), so began a sharp global decline into illiteracy. That was one of the ultimate effects. Do not misunderstand me, at first everyone became very interested in reading indeed. With infinite time at its disposal, I remember the general public began to

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consume the canon at unprecedented speeds. People had nothing better to do, with no wars to fight, no future to worry about (for it stretched before them incomprehensibly), no causes to believe in. No hell to fear. Almost all action, I realise now, all action and all conviction, is motivated by the fear of death. So they read. Hardy, Eliot (x2), Faulkner, Austen, Greene; yes, all the great novelists and playwrights of the English language, these names burn still in my mind like mild golden embers (look, how I remember the literary). But the foreigners too: Boccaccio, Goethe, Molière, Brontë (or was she English, or did I read him in translation?), Tolstoy. All devoured in a ravenous frenzy by the immortals, hungering for human culture. Imagine my anguish, forced to coexist with the philistines, gaping maws, the autosarcophagy of culture.

I am sorry, I don't mean to become impassioned. These times are long past, and so is the abuse of literature. Now only oblivion. And better oblivion than abuse, of that I am

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sure as I experience my own oblivion with such ecstasy. Oblivion was certainly to follow. After reading everything that was worth reading, the immortals, now bored, advanced to the outer reaches of the written language, to the books written by the modernists and lunatics (although I no longer feel qualified to judge). Joyce, Broch (Bloch?), Proust, Schmidt (Sch=mⁱ_u-tt?), Guyotat; I saw them undeterred by even the most gargantuan and indecent of works, drawn as they were to the extremities of expression by monstrous ennui. Eventually even those books were exhausted.

After prose came poetry. They thought it more pure. I didn't think about poetry anymore. They read from Ancient China to the Dolce Stil Novo, from the Troubadours to the Stridentists, and so on and so forth in what I saw as an aimless spiral of dissatisfaction. It seemed, after time had passed, that the written word was simply not enough for them.

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I was aware of all this because of my sister. I cannot remember her name, since she went away long ago. Since she became bored of me, perhaps. Sophie? No, I do not want to make such rash guesses, it seems unwise. I refuse to engage in the matter entirely. She was, like everyone else, an immortal. Yes, she told me about all the books and poems people were reading. I can't remember why she told me those things; perhaps she just liked that I was separate. It was good to see her.

When my sister stopped reading entirely, she wanted to explain why. She told me—and this exchange I remember quite clearly—about the apathy and helplessness she felt as she faced an infinitely long span of time ahead of her, in which, she realised, an infinite number of things would happen to her. In such circumstances, one slowly (or, in relative terms, I think, with infinite speed) becomes completely estranged from any conception of past or future, and instead lives in the continuous present. There is simply

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no other way of comprehending time. She made that very clear. I could see she was afraid, but wouldn't always be so. She also thought that, after an eternity, she would have thought every thought in existence. This disturbed her greatly, as she thought this would perhaps mean her losing her individuality entirely. If everyone else were also out there, thinking every thought in existence, how would she tell herself apart?

Most of the other immortals had thought of this too, and subsequently became much too existentially anxious to read. That was it, for them. No more books, no more poems, no more novelists, and no more poets. Better to abandon oneself to the present, I think they concluded. The one thing no one else could encroach on, in their simultaneous flux of experience. Music might occasionally provide a spark of intense joy; it could be holistically appreciated at one rapturous point in time. Similarly, paintings and sculpture. But literature was frightening and unnecessary.

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Before she went away, my sister showed me a poem
she'd thought of two years before. She wrote it on the wall.

It's since faded, but I think I remember it quite well:

no more letter a

no more letter b

no more letter c

no more letter d

no more letter e

no mor ltr f

no mor ltr g

no mor ltr h

no mor ltr i

no mor ltr j

no mor ltr k

no mor ltr l

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no mor ttr m

no or ttr n

o or ttr o

r ttr p

r ttr q

r ttr r

tt s

tt t

That was the poem. I may have left out the capital letters. Yes, she thought that poem very profound indeed. She told me it was happening in her head. When I read it, though, I didn't really understand it. I concluded that the mind of an immortal must be fundamentally incomprehensible to a mortal, so I did not pursue the matter. She then went away, leaving me alone there in the room.

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Since then, I have begun to attach some sentimental value to that final message my sister sent me. But no artistic value; I do not see it as a poem. Poems no longer exist. I am happy without them, there in my room. Time has passed. Outside it is 2120, perhaps. I need not venture out. I can stay, where I happen to be.