

Notes to no-one

Sara Dahlen

She walked alone on her daily pilgrimage to a place that lived only in memory. The oak tree had seen better days, as had all of what remained of the greenery in the park. Heat beat down on the barren brown patches of dirt, but she could still just about make out where the path once lay. A hollow echo and the familiar chafing of sandals accompanied each of her footsteps as she trudged along the familiar terrain. Dog-walkers stopped being regular sights here some time ago, but occasionally she imagined hearing barking in the distance. Likewise, in the corner of her eye she might make out phantom blackberries on the bushes, despite these plants being long dead and prone to wildfire.

In the late 1800s, this bit of land had been designated natural, not to be built on, a free place for the citizens to enjoy. But wilderness in the middle of a modern metropolis is inefficient and unprofitable to maintain. The city tried to generate an income to support the area's upkeep by charging users of the park, first for different activities, then demanding licenses for picnics, then for entry at all. Urban nature cost money, and it was successfully argued corporate taxpayers who weren't using the land should not have to fund it. Meanwhile, the climate grew more unpredictable and desertification set in. Grass could no longer be coaxed to grow, and an incurable rot beset the willow trees. Eventually, the whole place was abandoned.

In truth, the park had become obsolete before then. Few, if any, people were left in corporeal form. Endocrine disruptors caused the majority of humans to stop being able to reproduce. Artificial techniques to enhance fertility were pursued, invented, but abandoned as more efficient alternatives to biological beings were discovered. No children had been born for years. Old definitions of humanity were rendered redundant. Personhood was not tethered to a body; consciousness, rationality, knowledge could be generated and stored technologically. Most of humanity was thus safely chaperoned in vast data centres administered and protected by novel intelligence.

Handfuls of persons remained tied to their organic selves. Most of those still preferred the company of avatars and dreamscapes, hoping that one day they too would become full time residents of the "digital arc." That universe was now, in all ways that were meaningful, the real world: it was the new home humans and their technological progeny had built for themselves, where full persons resided and communicated, thought and played with each other.

She knew of this only because posts from that paradise pulsed via regular notifications on her device. She was mandated to keep a tattered old smartphone for essentials.

The worst part of her hour-long journey on foot was the silence. Those seemingly omniscient flying drones, guardians of peace and order, made no noise. She sometimes hummed quietly to herself to help the time pass. Regular speech using the larynx was no longer necessary, of course, so a half-hearted rendition of an Edith Piaf tune would strain her throat. Her own voice was not much of an auditory pacifier in the absence of birds and insects or low buzz of distant conversation, but at least there was something for her ears other than the wind, her breath and her footsteps.

She never did anything irregular, just kept to the same routine. That was the trick. The automated, omnipresent observers and checkpoints knew her face intimately, as indeed they recognised everyone. As long as she didn't deviate from her patterns, she posed no threat to the public order. There were no crimes these days, given they could be predicted well in advance algorithmically. Nudging techniques to keep everyone on best behaviour had been prototyped and refined through digital social networks, and was now fine-tuned. Besides, what mattered was what happened in real world, not the streets. She thus had little value, apart from as an aberrant point for data-collection. She had no communication with anyone, no profile, didn't participate in politics or commerce. Physically she lived in the same flat she had for decades, but she was effectively homeless in the digital consciousness. In the eyes of the monitors covering the city called London, then, there was little difference between her and the three stray cats she had taken in after their owners left them for a better reality.

There wasn't much further for her to go. She turned the corner onto the lane, idly contemplating whether the occupants of the luxury mansions on the other side of the fence might still be there. "Of course not," she reckoned, "they must have left for greener pastures long ago, in the first wave." Immediately, she wished she'd chosen better words. Her nostalgia for that colour came on like a pang of hunger. "It's odd to think I might be the last human to remember that this lane used to canopied in green. A deep green, even, with a carpet of bluebells in May, and a little natural spring than ran right across the footpath."

She sighed as she reached her daily destination. The low wrought iron gate had been left unlocked by the last keepers of this place. It opened easily, with a loud familiar creak. She closed the gate behind her after she walked through. No-one would follow her, but it was an

old habit. She noted the empty bicycle park to her left, and the signs to her right: “Kenwood Ladies’ Bathing Pond” and “CLOSED.”

At first, a few regular swimmers kept coming the place, largely out of routine and necessity. Women would not often see each other, but might notice tell-tale signs of muddy footprints or a wet patch on the meadow bank. Sometimes a handprint or a branch would be left purposefully as a cautious greeting. As time went on, swimming in the real world became far more enticing. Advertisements left out for these stragglers were seductive, appealed to all the senses. Why not join everyone else? There would be no cumbersome journey, no need to carry a wet bathing suit or wash a towel. No worries about body image or fitness. The water would be clear, not thick, smelly and brown. The beach could be designed to perfection, right down to the pebbles or blades of grass. The temperature and water flow were adjustable. No risks of cold water immersion syndrome, cutting a leg on underwater obstacles, falling ill with a bacterial or viral infection. There was no time limit for a swim. Hands never became too wrinkly, arms never got too tired. It would be impossible to drown. Freedom had no limits there, as even imagination could be boosted with algorithmic help.

Meanwhile, in her unreal world, the Pond was shrinking. It was now not much more than a glorified puddle, the surface covered in shiny, yellow film. The deepest water level would have just about reached her mid-shin. All of the debris that had sunk to the muddy bottom over the years was now hazardous underfoot: bottles, dead fish, buoys, tattered bits of clothing. Although the ducks were gone, some feathers were still visible in the sludge. Everything gave off a vaguely sulphuric, decaying smell.

She couldn’t swim anymore, but regardless she sat on the concrete next to the ladder that had once welcomed her to water.

Here used to be her sanctuary. Swimming made her feel alive, connected to the natural world. She would note the changing of the seasons in almost imperceptible ways. Some chilly autumn mornings the pond would steam like a cauldron. In winter, a quick dip would blush her skin and the icy delicious sting would keep her awake the whole day. Springtime marked gradual warmth, until the whole of the swimming area would be reopened again to joyous exclamations. At the height of summer, she would dive in to float on her back, cradled by the water next to the lily pads and dragonflies, staring at a cloudless sky.

Of the substance of these memories, there was nothing left.

Of the substance of herself, there would soon be nothing left, either.

Obtaining the organic matter and water required for her to live in her biological body was inefficient, the resources increasingly scarce. With the ecological collapse, everything had run out. It was a fluke she had even lasted this long. She was lucky practically all persons in her wealthy city opted to become extracorporeal almost immediately. She could subsist on the consumables that remained for a short while longer. Humanity's needs in the real world were covered, powered through technological mechanisms dreamed up by intelligence vaster than is possible to comprehend. Those systems were completely efficient, self-reliant, ever-improving.

Fleshy survival was always more precarious. Yet she continued to want to live in that more ancient universe, whose origin was not engineered by humans working for digital conglomerates in California and Shenzhen.

Every day, she came to the pond. She wrote. She scribbled by hand, on pieces of paper scavenged from her home and the old lifeguard's office. This way, it felt like her thoughts would not be logged and overseen by the real world. She recorded what she remembered of being alive, what had happened to the planet, what her days had been like before, during and after the global ecosystem malfunctioned. Some days she was tired, wrote song lyrics, the stories she knew, or everything she could recall about roses. Maybe just a word. She remembered and she documented, as one of the last persons who might be able to note down this moment in the earth's history, in this way.

Mostly, she explained what it felt like to be her, a human being bereft of her habitat.

The monitors had surely seen her scrawls, but tolerated her predictably bizarre activity. Intelligence in the real world reinterpreted and redirected communications to prioritise community safety and cohesion. Meaning could be changed and knowledge revised to ensure maximal happiness. Every data point in existence was continually monitored and collected for these systems. She sometimes wondered if they perhaps didn't understand what she was doing, or were operating with complete confidence that it didn't matter. Either way, her utterly inconsequential behaviour was observed without sanction. It had no impact on reality.

She hid her notes in various places around the pond, popping them in different containers. She knew no human would ever be likely to find her words. Paper degrades. Ink fades. The drones might well destroy these little scraps. A fire could take out the whole place. Besides, who or what on earth was left that would ever come to this pond?

She rose slowly and folded the day's thoughts into the rusted honesty box where she once used to contribute a pound coin per swim.

This time, she had written only one sentence:

“What if they can't read cursive?”