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Approaching the Apocalypse from Suburbia

The last night I ever spent in my childhood home, I tried to destroy it. I was out on my deck, trying to catch a final glimpse of my last sunset, ever, in the house — a ritual I cherished, having a west-facing room — and, upon turning the knob to go back inside, I found the door locked.

Stuck outside 15 feet in the air, with no phone and no means of contacting my mother downstairs, I started to panic. I kicked the door, hard, I banged on its glass, I screamed at it, I willed it to break with my whole soul. Never in a dozen years of living there had the door locked on me. I was stuck confronting the unprecedented, the unthinkable — and, most poignantly, in my ultimate refuge, the last place I'd expected to feel fear.

I officially left my house the next morning, on March 23rd. My mom and I had to leave at 5:30 to catch an early flight, and I overslept, so I remember being wrested from my home in the dead of night, rushed out without a goodbye, never to return. In the back of the cab, I watched the house recede into deep blue shadow.

And that, too, felt like panic. It was philosopher Bruno Latour's madness I experienced then. He described this "madness" as a permanently altered relation to the world, an inability to believe we belong to it — an anchorlessness, a grappling with a world refusing to let itself be grappled with. Like climate disaster, leaving my home sowed seeds of sheer incomprehension. How could my home turn on me like this?

The madness itself felt mad, though, because my home — the suburbs in which I learned to exist — are defined by their very immunity. Newton, Massachusetts is not the climate-change-ravaged Shishmaref, Alaska, nor the radioactive hotbed Chernobyl. Existence here is delineated by individuality; we lack the hot humanistic intrusion of cities and the wild entanglements of the countryside. We cut grass to precision and define distances by driving. Worse yet, we confine climate and nature to the science classroom, and call the weather "weird" or "beautiful" when it's downright catastrophic.

But exposure still seeps into our air, our water, the voices in the backs of our heads. This is a story of how I lost a refuge in the loss of my house, and how the supposed safety of suburbia — the purest and deadest of environments — lost its reality for me.

During my final days of inhabiting my home, I lost the ability to see it. Familiar nooks spoke to me only through their impending disappearance — *don't forget us!* they yelled. So I tried to memorize the shadows in my room, tried to contain a volatile and complex concept — a home — in imperfect memory. Moreover, I couldn't forget the online listing I'd peeked at months earlier. My habitat, my home, was there diminished into platitudes and square footage. Paradoxically, defining the dimensions of my room emptied it of real space; its emotional richness quantified, ignored.

I'm following, here, philosopher John-Luc Nancy's concept of equivalence, in which the apocalypse's meaning is reduced into its capitalist value, robbing it of all sensory significance. Latour's theory of immanence outlines a similar danger — the temptation to see in *this* world only a manifestation of the *next*; to perceive our immediate catastrophe only through the lens of

an amorphous future. Both authors find a cure for these tendencies in what they call the present or presence: a focus on "comings and goings," an intense *being-with* the apocalypse.

This "being-with," however, is precisely what my childhood lacked, and what, therefore, I had to experience alone. For disaster is never truly far off: each beautiful spring day deepened my despondency, because secretly, I felt that such days were running out. I remember, at age 12, staring out of the window at the foot of my bed for hours in the dead of night, when I'd first comprehended the urgency of climate change. I remember staring out the same window years later, as rain saturated the earth on a 65-degree Christmas Eve. I despaired.

But in the suburbs, climate change could only speak to us in the voice of Al Gore, in the lie of impartial science. Philosopher Isabelle Stengers theorized such "science" as that with a capital "S." Purportedly objective, this capital-S science is actually anything but, using as its groundwork the subjective concepts of relevance, importance, and possibility. She argued that we need to reclaim and recover that subjectivity, *own* it, for to do otherwise is deceptive and disheartening. And indeed, apocalypse described as science, as an academic intrigue, loses its emotional meaning.

But again, feelings and sensations stewed under this façade of sterility. Every year my father had our lawn sprayed with pesticides, although he did cut the grass himself, while most of our neighbors hired workers to do so. What did that *do* to them, to lose control over their own earth? To the workers, performing alienated labor that ought to be intimate and joyful work? And what of my father, knowingly poisoning his children and community?

The pesticides were our fragrance, the winter road salt our seasoning. Suburbia only convinced itself of immunity; the cracks were there, wildness could rejoice and wail. Mosquitoes multiplied in the summer as our winters grew milder, and bit us endlessly. Turkeys traversed our terrain year-round, stopping traffics for minutes at a time and transgressing sacred property lines. It was so funny to watch their flappings and mutterings as they milled about on a congested road. I stayed up at my bedroom window breezy night after breezy night. And one summer, coyotes killed my cat.

This co-existence of rigid shell and weak underbelly, our ostensible armor riddled with cracks and breaks, eluded easy comprehension. We kept nature at arm's length, and the topic of disaster was excluded from public conversation. But in the occasional quiet moment, I felt a current of anxiety dissolving that security. How could this hypocrisy persist? We installed solar panels over my high school's parking lot, but more and more students today are driving. As John Foster wrote, our relentless emphasis on sustainability only outlined the terms of our own denial. It gave us a way to compartmentalize the incomprehensible, and confine apocalypse to the diction of entrepreneurship. It is author Stacey Alaimo here who seems to best understand — conceptually, if not concretely — the way *out*, toward exposure. Alaimo, with help from philosopher Donna Haraway, concluded that exposing oneself to the broader natural world could be a pleasurable act, in which we humans inhabit our own diseased spaces, making intimate contact with the other species and beings already there.

This is happening already in Chernobyl. Old ladies have re-inhabited their homes and are cultivating the silently dangerous soil — while skipping down the overgrown paths, happily mashing radioactive raspberries, singing ditties and downing moonshine together. Though they

are old and dying, they would die nowhere else, for the pain also signifies home, and they have stopped running from it. It is a process riddled with play and surprise, something as joyful as it is frightening.

We have some of this now; my mother grew a garden from which I plucked raspberries and sucked on mint leaves, and my high school has a garden now, too, which students can tend. But what would a radically open, exposed suburbia look like? Could we invite the turkeys into our homes, eat the pesticide-laden grass, sleep in the mulch suffocating our trees and suffocate along with them? Could we replace A/C with baths in the mosquito-brewing swamps, release the apocalypse from its scientific bounds so that we may be "energized," as Stengers asked?

Could I revel in the loss of my home? Fill my mouth with its dirt, like the babushkas of Chernobyl? Contemplate my yard's overgrown corners, wrapping myself in tentacle-like weeds? Could I have dropped my fists on the deck during that last sunset, able to lose myself in the urgency, and just sit still?

It seems a dream, a hopeless hope. But even imagining a suburban embrace of the turkeys allowed me to realize what's missing now and what could be done to get there, or even propose it without being laughed at. The apocalypse is personal, and my response needs to start in my own head, with my own limbs. Latour said there is no cure for belonging to the world, but there is a cure for believing that we do not belong *to* it.

I dreamed recently of standing near the huge rock that dominates my back yard, feeling shorn grass below my feet and, below that, the immense, massive, unthinkably solid earth. It was a sensation I've experienced many times before. I don't want to end on a note of comfort; I think the suburbs will last awhile longer, contradictions and all. And part of me is still *banging* on that door, overcome with panic at the loss of home, at the growing chill, at the oncoming dark. But as long as I keep banging on that door — even in the dark, the cold, even when I can't see my fists — I do think part of me will be ok. For it's not a method of escape any more.