

MAG 175 — Epoch

Content Warnings

- Body horror (including animals)
- Description of human remains
- Self-mutilation
- Futility / Inconsequence
- Environmental disaster / Eco-horror
- Pollution
- Water insecurity
- Existential & Theological dread
- Unpleasant SFX - insects, squelching, sirens

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents... *The Magnus Archives*. Episode one hundred and seventy-five: "Epoch."

[Theme finishes]

[Tape clicks on]

[Air raid sirens howl in the distance; every so often from different locations there are the sounds of metal, plastic and other debris moving, as if things are moving through or picking up trash]

[Nearby, an electronic flickering]

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

Item: A stubborn lamp.

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

[Hissing static ends]

Approximately a foot and a half long, stand made of discoloured brass with a crude fleur-de-lis pattern and slightly melted at base. Shade constructed from satin, original colour impossible to discern due to assorted stains, likely blood, oil, and paraffin wax. The bulb is imprinted with the words "Long life" despite appearing to contain a standard tungsten filament. There is a long, thin crack that runs the length of the bulb, and it is remarkably easy to cut yourself on the thin glass. With the vacuum compromised, it should be impossible for the light to turn on. The power cable is severed about three inches from the base of the stand and writhes like a beheaded snake. There is nothing in this place to power it.

Despite all of this, a thin and sickly glow can be seen from underneath the lampshade, an irregular, pulsing light that casts rotten shadows on the piles of detritus and clusters of ash and bone that surround it. Where its sputtering illumination falls, the colour drains from everything, leaving nothing but a faded grey. It cannot survive, but still it clings to its existence, destroying everything around it. It smells like death.

Leah's fingers are worn and dry, their colour painfully faded, save for a streak of scarlet that drip-drops from her cut fingers as she furiously scribbles her findings into the notebook. The pages tear with the frenzy of her writing as she desperately tries to keep her thoughts alive.

[Distant distorted crows start cawing]

[Flickering ends; the sound of nearby metal and debris being
shaken and tossed about starts]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Fauna: A mouldering seagull.

Larger than any related specimen to be found before the Anthropocene age, this bird has been rendered flightless by the tightly woven plastic netting that winds around and around its torso, digging into the skin beneath the feathers and bulging over the strange lumps and tumours that cover it. Its feathers have turned an oily black, and its vestigial eyes are pale and sightless, relying instead on the sounds its prey makes as they traverse the noisy junkpiles of the discarded landscape. Its beak has become hard and its edges are serrated, allowing it to tear apart the tin cans and hard plastics that shield its food with ease.

Its legs are long and many jointed, allowing it to move across the uneven ground, and its throat is blocked with concrete, preventing it from crying and letting it move among the ruins in complete silence. It nests in the rusted-out hollows of fleeing cars, constructing intricate shelters for its young out of corpse-hair and wiring. Its eggs are rusty, covered in slime, and its chicks are born with plastic rings around their necks. They smell like ammonia and salt, and their name is meaningless, as there is no longer such a thing as the sea.

Leah hides behind a cracked vending machine, waiting for the thing to pass. She knows it can hear the rapid scratch of her broken pencil, but it is all she can do to get it down, get it all down on paper, another futile warning of a future that is already here.

[Clattering becomes distant; strange papery and nibbling noises

start]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Item: A history book.

Hardback. Eight-point-five by eleven inches and approximately an inch and a half thick, although the number of pages is impossible to discern. Its dust jacket has long since been lost, and what remains is wrinkled maroon cloth over soggy book-board. The faded letters of a partial title can be seen embossed into the spine. The words 'A Brief History of' can be made out clearly, but the rest has been burned away.

The spine is cracked and broken, but the volume itself cannot be opened. The book has clearly been submerged in some sort of fat or binding agent, and the paper within it has fused together into a single, indistinguishable lump of pulp. The wet mass within it retains sufficient moisture that if the covers are pressed upon, a thin rivulet of clear liquid will run like tears down the book's cover. If you do this, the book will scream.

[A strange hissing cry; more follow]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

It is a stupid thing, a long-dead trinket that was of no use to anyone even when it puffed itself up with the fatuous intellectual dribblings of those who believed the past was any defence against the future, bloated as it was with the hagiographies of war criminals and smugly grinning murderers. Now it serves as a suffering reminder of everything that has been lost; which is to say, nothing of value.

Leah hates the book. She cannot shake the feeling that once, long ago, she read it, seeing within its pages the stark importance of taking action, of trying to change the world for the better and avoiding the dead, nightmare future that kept her awake at night.

But it was doomed from the start, and those that salivated at the thought of a place in history had secured nothing except its end.

**[Crying fades away; every so often now is the sound of metal wire
jangling]**

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Item: A laughable umbrella.

Look at it. What does it think it's doing here? Lying there, broken, skeletal.

There hasn't been rain in fifty years. The soil is cracked and parched. Any vegetation that claws its agonized way up out of it, is maggot white and dry as dust. The only moisture is from the wet rot of the junkpiles that stretch thirty feet above the ground in all directions, spilling out into the sandy, sloping basin that was once a seabed. Stupid umbrella. Does it think there is a monsoon coming? Does it even remember what a cloud of water vapor looks like? The clouds that pass now are oily and stink of sulphur, waiting for you to stop paying attention before they climb down your throat and settle in your lungs. Perhaps this idiot apparatus thinks it can protect from the relentless heat of the sun, but its fabric is torn and ruined, hanging from the snapped metal limbs, desperate for a breeze to stir it from its, complete stillness. Take a moment to sneer at this corpse of an umbrella, and wish for a moment you had water enough within you to spit on it.

Leah can barely tell what she's writing anymore. The catalogue of horrors she's compiling, this report on everything for nobody, but what else is she to do? What else can even come close to quelling the fear that suffuses her existence?

[Metal jangles and cawing crows fade away]

**[In the distance starts the strange bellows of an unknown animal;
closer there is the sound of slithering and clambering, and a
repeated rattling and hissing cry]**

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Fauna: The thing that lives.

Something lives in the Anthropocene age. Not a twisted reflection of a natural world, not a parasite or a scavenger or a cockroach, but a native. Something born in the sloping shells of sagging concrete towers, that tastes the tang of rusted iron in the air and knows that it is home. Something that does not know or care what a human is, any more than mankind thought of the creatures that once lived in the shells they found on the beach. It moves through the stacks of garbage like a beetle through filth, and its smile is all-too familiar, though its eyes are dark and empty.

It cannot be seen in its entirety, for it keeps itself covered, but its long, unfurling tongue may be seen emerging, pink and bristling with long, hairlike tastebuds, hunting for something old enough to eat. It whispers to itself in the dark, and sounds like snippets of old toothpaste commercials and adverts to join the army.

It is hard to tell if there is more than one, but either there are several of them of different sizes, or there is just the one, and it is getting bigger. It is our replacement, and it is welcome to the world.

Even if Leah had known, if she had had time to warn them, who would have believed her? Who would not have laughed her out of her life if she had described the horrors that were to come in their true and vivid detail? But there is no one left to warn, though that does not slow her hand even a moment. She ignores the burning pain in her forearm, where the thing's rough tongue has torn a section of her skin clean off.

[The distant bellows and rattling cry fade away; leaving just the sounds of the air raid sirens, sporadic debris movement and distorted caws]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Item: A forgotten bone.

Whose is this? Pale white and stained with thick black tar.

A human bone, that much is clear; too big to be a child's, at least. Can a bone seem familiar? The shape of it echoing through your mind, like a face seen only in dreams? It may be followed up to a ribcage, still sticky in places with soapy cadaver fat, and closing around a crumpled beer can where the heart should be. There's a skull as well, yellowing in the thick dust of the open air.

Strange. Everything here is either bone-dry from relentless heat, or damp through from decomposition and stagnant decay. Lifeless yet decaying. The world we have left behind.

Leah considers the bones for some time. Does she know them? Are they hers? If she had been quicker, more forceful in her warnings, might they still be alive? Her pencil is broken, but her notes, her warnings from this new world are far from complete.

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

She snaps off another rib and continues writing.

(A soft sigh from the Archivist)

[Hissing static ends]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Right.

[Tape clicks off]

[Tape clicks on]

[Sounds of distant air raid sirens, distorted crow caws, and trash movement]

[Martin and the Archivist walk, their crunching footsteps occasionally kicking away trash]

MARTIN

You know what? I am sitting down.

[They stop walking]

ARCHIVIST

Are... you sure? That thing is... that's not in great shape.

MARTIN

(Unfazed) Neither am I. I have been on my feet for a literally uncountable amount of time.

[Martin walks to a soggy couch; as he sits his backpack zippers jangle, and the couch emits a tired creak and wet squishing]

(Martin forces out a satisfied sound)

ARCHIVIST

How is it?

MARTIN

(Forced) Great. It's great.

[Creak and squelch from the couch]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

Lovely couch.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Well, rest up, I suppose!

[Patting noise]

MARTIN

It's a two-seater!

ARCHIVIST

(Not interested) Yes it is!

(Slight amused exhale)

[Another damp creak of the couch]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

Hard pass, thank you.

[The couch squelches as Martin settles further on it]

(Beat)

MARTIN

What was it like?

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

This place's— its statement.

ARCHIVIST

Not too surprising. It's a domain designed to eke fear out of those afraid of a world destroyed by human hands. It, uh... It dwells on it.

MARTIN

Hm.

[Wet creak as Martin shifts on the couch]

MARTIN (CONT'D)

So it was real then, the Extinction?

ARCHIVIST

Of course it was real. At least in the sense that, it was a thing people feared. Whether it was strong enough in its own right to be considered at a level with Smirke's Fourteen, or, whether it was on its way to getting there, I... maybe. This sort of thing is always... muddy.

MARTIN

So Peter was lying.

ARCHIVIST

(Sighs) To a degree. But, mostly he was just like anyone else who tried to take the scope of human terror and, package it neatly into little theories. All his talk of Emergence and, birthing a new power, it's just people being scared.

[Damp couch creak as Martin shifts; it continues to creak irregularly whenever he speaks]

MARTIN

What, so no one had any idea?

ARCHIVIST

Martin, I have the whole scope of human knowledge available to me, and (sigh) I'd struggle to give you a simple answer to most of this stuff. And even if I am omniscient, I'm starting to realize that... doesn't mean objective.

MARTIN

Hm.

(Sigh) I guess it's hard not to bring your own baggage to this sort of thing.

ARCHIVIST

I don't know if it could even exist without the baggage. You want to talk about psychological projection, try viewing the metaphysical world through the lens of a being that is, by its very nature, a reflection of your own obsessions and fears.

MARTIN

(Sigh) Yeah, alright. I get it. But what about the, real world, were they right?

ARCHIVIST

I-I'm not sure I follow.

MARTIN

I mean— Right, if none, if none of this had happened, if the world had just... carried on? What would have happened? Was, was all that fear justified?

ARCHIVIST

I can't know the future, Martin, not even a hypothetical one.

MARTIN

But, you know what was going on, what was happening. O-out of everyone, you're the best placed, you, you've got the info to make a pretty damn educated guess!

ARCHIVIST

I, I don't know what you want me to say, Martin. Yes, i-it was bad, worse than most people thought and, things were only going to deteriorate. Was the end

of humanity actually imminent? I- probably not? But we were well on the way, and, it would have been the end of an awful lot of things.

MARTIN

So you don't think it would have been the end of the world?

(A small laugh from the Archivist)

ARCHIVIST

The end of the world. Now there's a concept. Everything ends, I suppose. Even this place... can't last forever. Eventually, it will die as well.

MARTIN

You're starting to sound like Simon.

ARCHIVIST

No. He was always looking towards the infinite, but I'm not sure there is such a thing. If I try, I can—

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST (CONT'D)

—see the edges of reality, but, I can't hold its full scope in my mind.

[Hissing static ends]

MARTIN

And beyond it?

ARCHIVIST

Beyond what? Reality?

MARTIN

Yeah.

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

(Exhale) I don't know. Maybe nothing.

(Beat)

[Hissing static ends]

[Damp couch creak as Martin shifts]

MARTIN

(Thoughtful) John.

ARCHIVIST

What?

MARTIN

D'you know if, like, gods, religion, the afterlife, all that stuff. Do you know if any of that was real?

ARCHIVIST

(Gently amused) Really rolling out the big questions today.

MARTIN

(Chuckling) Sorry, it's just, this place just brings it out in me, I guess.

[Hissing static starts]

ARCHIVIST

If there is a god, or gods, or an existence beyond this world, the Eye can't see it. It sees the fear of it, but... nothing of its truth.

[Hissing static ends]

MARTIN

...So... is that a no?...

ARCHIVIST

It's an 'I don't know,' although... people's faith — it hasn't saved them. Not here.

MARTIN

(Quiet) True.

ARCHIVIST

Why do you ask? Didn't think you were at all religious.

MARTIN

Oh, I'm not. Mum was, but... I, I don't know. With everything going on, it, certainly feels less far-fetched. Besides, at this point, I'd take any help we can get.

ARCHIVIST

I don't know how kindly any god would look upon what we've done.

(Beat)

MARTIN

Thanks for that.

ARCHIVIST

...Sorry.

[Damp couch creak as Martin shifts]

MARTIN

Let's get out of here. This place is making me a bit too... existential.

[The couch gives one last wet creak as he stands]

ARCHIVIST

Wait.

[Martin stops]

MARTIN

What?

ARCHIVIST

(Sigh) Where we're going, the, uh... the next domain, I-I've been meaning to tell you, but it's— well.

MARTIN

Spit it out, John.

ARCHIVIST

Basira and Daisy. We're close.

MARTIN

Wait, what? Wait, really?! B— th—that's brilliant; what are we waiting for; let's go!

ARCHIVIST

I-uh-yeah, i-it's, it's not, it's not going to be easy, things aren't... Good.

MARTIN

(Fast, sarcastic) Oh my goodness, really? And here was me thinking the apocalypse was going oh, so swimmingly!

ARCHIVIST

Yes, alright, I just meant—

MARTIN

I, I know what you meant! I can still be keen to see our **(slight laugh)** friends!

ARCHIVIST

True.

MARTIN

Besides, we can help them now.

[Martin starts walking]

(The Archivist sighs)

ARCHIVIST

Yeah.

Yeah.

[The Archivist follows]

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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