

Atomic Parable #3

Sophia Holtz

He and his family had been living underground for nearly a year when he decided to look through the periscope. He waited until the children were asleep, his wife reading the same page of newspaper she read every night. It was an article someone had written about their year herding sheep in the mountains—a great deal of discussion regarding the resilience of grass in the face of grazers and frost. The secret was the depth of the roots. She had told him this once, perhaps before, perhaps more recently. They had burned all the other newspaper for fuel. He was sure she had the article memorized, but it was extremely important that they did not fight in front of the children. Standing by the periscope's pulley, he watched them now, faces dirty-looking in the dim generator light, blankets pulled up to their ears.

Looking through the viewfinder, he'd expected charred cars, the steel-beam skeletons of skyscrapers, perhaps even people—former neighbors covered in rags. There was none of this. The lens lifted through layers of gray piping, and then everything white: a world of snow.

The Longest Road

Death on a Pale Horse, Albert Pinkham Ryder, 1895

Sophia Holtz

Tornado season. A man arrived yesterday. He is staying at the inn—it's been a long time since we've had anybody stay here, but the man, he talks too loud, too fast, doesn't mention his name—leaves in the wind. There is always wind knocking the shutters. We find oak trees laid out in town center some mornings—barely a crack in the wood. Strange weather.

The stranger says he's a salesmen, says he is here to sell us things, useful things. *Like cloth? Like iron?* asks a boy. *No*, he says, *like a road*. He says he will sell us the longest road. But we don't understand. Roads connect the whole county—how could he sell us a road? Something made from years of trampled dirt, of use. *You cannot sell something like that*, murmurs the crowd.

Our mayor is an ambitious man. He once tried to sell our town clock, the black one with pale numbers that hangs from the top of the church. He said he would put a gold plate in its place, shine it up 'til it looked like the sun; people would come from miles. We would have tourists like a bigger town. And we nearly let him but for his plan

to melt our wedding rings. He tells us a road would give us a way out. Now we listen. The stranger sets to work, but only once it's dark. The deal is that he'll do it for less if he can have the help of our young men. By dawn they return so dirty we can't even cut up their shirts for rags, so tired they can't help us harvest for weeks. They don't eat at dinner, sleep for days.

We close our windows tight after the sun sets around here. There is a kind of danger that sleeps in the night air. In the dark anything happens; snakes leave their nests, and your best calf is killed by morning—its mother lows into the dawn. Men find scratches in the paint by the door, claw prints in the dirt. We don't know the names of all that comes out of the earth.

The sky is a dark green the day the stranger has finished. The light so yellow, but cold; the whole world glows like the bodies of the sick. The storm will be the biggest we've seen in years. We prepare our shelters with food, but we unveil the road first like a new machine. We cannot tell how far it goes—there is dust everywhere, but it looks just as used as the highway north, and we don't have time to examine what we have paid for; we must gather and hide, we must go underground.

When we emerge everything is silent—the wind took away everything. As we open our trapdoors, we find we are all that is left of our houses. The man, the rider, nameless, is gone. What remains is our road, a promise imprinted on the land, a promise he kept. The road is endless, a circle—we could walk it for days but never get anywhere. We do not touch it. The dirt there looks almost gold.

Atomic Parable #4

Sophia Holtz

In his travels he once came across a house. It was unusual to find one still standing in those days. The worst that had happened to it was a few broken windows and paint chipped away by the wind. The front door was not kicked in. The room inside huge, a chandelier with dusty crystals shivered above it. The peacock-patterned wallpaper was just beginning to peel.

The next room was completely taken up by an enormous wrought iron cage. A few benches upholstered with threadbare velvet lined the walls. The cage door was open, a hammered silver key left in the lock. He noticed how heavy it was when he removed it. Holding it, he noticed the dirt gathered in the cracks of his palms. He thought of water and bedsheets, warming ovens, the smell of libraries. Of the robin's egg he had collected as a child for the color, crushed in his pocket, how he had thrown the remnants in a bush, disgusted, and now—could he hear chirping?

It could not be birds.

He opened another door, and the sound of birdsong filled him—a room brimming with feathers: sparrows, canaries, and starlings; wrens, chickadees, and cardinals; two mourning doves nestled in a corner. They sat on every perch, had built nests of carpet thread and fabric torn from armchairs. Birds that had been so common when he was young, he now marveled at them as they preened—their beaks shining in the dust-yellow light.

He killed two for food and kept the bones. Everything else, he left.