

The Last Dictionary of Living Things

(Word Count: 1994)

Marmoset, n. / A small theft of fur / clinging to the world's eyelid / until the wind blinks.

—Sylvia Kestrel, Uncollected Fragments

1. The First Erasure

At 3:07 AM, the word marmoset unstuck itself from the page. Elara woke to ink crawling backward - a sound like teeth pulling from gum - and found the definition gone. Not erased. Unwritten. The paper was cold as a specimen jar.

She rewrote "small arboreal primate," but the letters squirmed. Something was chewing through the o's, leaving holes like bite marks. When she pressed her palm to the page, the watermark pulsed once. A heartbeat.

Outside, the last marmoset's corpse was still warm in its cage at the Berlin Zoo. The keeper would note: "Died mid-sneeze." The dictionary, three countries away, licked its lips.

2. The Commission

The job had come three weeks earlier, in a black-edged envelope with no return address.

Elara Voss, Senior Lexicographer,

You are invited to compile the final edition of The Dictionary of Living Things. All terms must be verified against extant specimens. Fee: £20,000. Deadline: 90 days.

The client was anonymous—a foundation, perhaps, or a government agency. The money was real. She accepted.

Elara worked from a rented room above a shuttered pet shop, its shelves still lined with empty cages. The world outside was shedding species like a dog shaking off rain. Last month, the last wild giraffe had collapsed in Kenya. The month before, all three subspecies of red wolf blinked out within hours of each other. Scientists called it concurrent extinction. Elara called it poor cross-referencing.

3. The Rules of the Dictionary

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The manuscript arrived in a lead-lined box smelling of burnt thyme—and beneath it, something fainter: the iron-tang of blood, or perhaps the saline whisper of vanished seas. Inside, three rules inked in a spidery hand:

1. No struck-through words.
2. Errors require a fresh page.
3. If a species dies, its entry vanishes. Do not rewrite it.

Elara scoffed—until she tested it.

She wrote Passenger Pigeon and watched the ink hemorrhage. The page healed itself, smooth as scar tissue.

Her hands shook. She'd spent her career archiving the dead. Now she was drafting their epitaphs.

4. The Poet Who Remembered Things

The second disappearance was axolotl.

Elara chased the word to a crumbling flat near the river, where a woman named Sylvia Kestrel fed stray cats and wrote poems about extinct birds.

"You're the lexicographer," Sylvia said, stirring honey into tea. "I wondered when you'd come."

"You knew about the dictionary?"

"I know words don't just leave. They're taken." She slid a notebook across the table. Inside, sketches of creatures labeled dodo, thylacine, great auk—all meticulously detailed, as if drawn from life.

"How?" Elara whispered.

Sylvia tapped her temple. "I remember them. So, they're not really gone."

5. The Third Vanishing

That night, Elara dreamed of moths.

They clustered on the dictionary's pages, wings brushing the entries for monarch butterfly and luna moth. When she woke, both terms were half-erased, clinging to the paper like ghosts.

She called Sylvia. No answer.

The river flat's door yawned. The air still smelled of her—Earl Grey steeped too long, honey

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crystallizing at the bottom of cups. A tortoiseshell hair clung to the dictionary left on the desk. Elara wound it around her finger, tight enough to blanch the skin, before noticing the poem:

If you read this, I've forgotten.

The axolotl was first.

Then me.

The desk's wood bore grooves where Sylvia's nails had dug in, frantic as a moth trapped in a jar.

The dictionary in Elara's bag exhaled. She didn't open it."

6. The Revelation

Back home, she forced herself to look.

The page for human had developed a watermark.

Not fading. Not yet.

But waiting.

Axolotl, v. / To remember / in a language / the water hasn't drowned yet.
—Found scribbled inside a library copy of *On Extinction*

7. The Watermark

Elara slammed the dictionary shut, but the stain under *Homo sapiens* lingered behind her eyelids—a phantom blot, seeping through the fibers of the page like slow poison. She pressed her thumb to the cover, half-expecting it to dissolve like the others.

It didn't. Not yet.

She poured whiskey into a cut-crystal tumbler and drank it standing by the window. Outside, sodium-vapor lights stuttered in the rain. A tabby cat—one of Sylvia's strays, maybe—sang a hunger-song between dumpsters. Alive. For now.

8. The Archivist's Warning

The next morning, she went to the last place in the city that still kept physical records: the **Blackwell Archive**, a neo-Gothic mausoleum of books overseen by a man named **Rafe Holloway**, who wore gloves at all times and spoke in italics.

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"Ah. The Voss woman." He didn't look up from his ledger. "You've come about the dictionary."

Elara's pulse jumped. "You know it?"

"I know of it. The 1893 edition went missing after the curator's assistant drowned in the Thames. The 1927 copy burned in a library fire—along with the librarian." He turned a page. "They're not books. They're obituaries."

She set her bag on the counter. "This one's different. It's erasing things."

"Same function, new method." Rafe finally met her eyes. "It doesn't record extinctions. It causes them."

9. The Ink Test

Under the lens, the ink breathed.

A marmoset's fingertip breached the surface—primate whorls melting like sugar in tea—then vanished with a sound like a sucked tooth. Next: Sylvia's cat, its maw frozen mid-yowl, tongue a pink shard of glass. Last: Elara's own face, mouthing help, but the ink spat her out in a black cough that streaked the microscope's eyepiece.

The slide shrieked. The lens split like an overripe plum.

When she looked up, the dictionary had turned to the H section. Human was now H__n. The missing letters floated in her whiskey, dissolving when she cried.

10. The Memory Experiment

She tried to cheat.

If Sylvia had preserved species by remembering them, maybe Elara could do the same. She wrote Sylvia Kestrel on a slip of paper and tucked it between the pages. Then she recited every detail she could recall:

"Her hair was the color of printer's lead. She stirred honey into tea clockwise. She owned a tortoiseshell cat named—"

She stopped. The cat's name escaped her.

When she checked the dictionary, axolotl had faded further.

11. The Client's Call

Her phone rang at 3:17 AM.

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"Progress report." The voice was genderless, synthesized.

Elara sat up. "Who are you?"

"Do not rewrite the axolotl entry." A pause. "It would be... unwise."

The line went dead.

On the desk, the dictionary had fallen open to Homo sapiens. The watermark had spread.

12. The Underground Press

"Lennox exhaled smoke. 'That's no book. It's a predator that eats endings.'

Rafe had led her through sewer tunnels that smelled of rotting paper, to a workshop where press plates hung like flayed skin. Lennox—ink-stained and missing two fingertips—stabbed his cigarette at the dictionary's shadow.

'See its teeth?'

The Homo sapiens entry pulsed, the watermark now a mouth gnawing the margins. Elara's own name in the frontispiece had developed cavities.

'Burn it,' said Lennox. 'Unless you fancy being the last word it swallows.'

A drop of ink fell from the book. Where it landed, the floorboards forgot they'd ever been stained."

13. The Choice

That night, Elara dreamed of the dictionary's final page.

It was blank.

Not the blank of an unwritten word, but the blank of after. Of nothing left.

She woke gasping. The dictionary lay beside her, cold as a corpse.

She could burn it.

She could throw it in the river.

But then no one would remember the marmoset. Or the axolotl. Or Sylvia.

14. The First Human Word

At dawn, she opened the book to a random page.

The entry for echo was fading.

Not the animal—the word. The concept.

She pressed her palm to the page. "I remember."

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The ink stabilized. Barely.

Human, adj. / A temporary word / for the animal that names things / while forgetting / it too is underlined / in pencil.

—Last entry in Sylvia's notebook

15. The Voice in the Static

The calls came nightly now—always the same synthetic voice, always the same demand:

"Continue the work."

Elara stopped answering. Instead, she recorded the distorted syllables, played them backward, filtered them through audio software. Beneath the modulation, she caught a wet, clicking sound. Like a dolphin's echolocation.

Or a language older than ink.

16. The Last Axolotl

The aquarium's last surviving tank held water so clear it hurt. Inside, the axolotl's gills pulsed like ink dispersing in wine. Elara's reflection fractured across the glass.

"You're late," crackled the submerged speaker. Its voice was neither male nor female but the sound of a page being torn slowly.

She pressed a palm to the tank. "Why me?"

Its gills flared. "You catalogue the dying. Who else would hear their last words?" A bubble burst at the surface. For a second, Elara saw her mother's face in it—mouth open in the same silent O as the cat in the ink. "Finish the dictionary," it said. "Before you become an entry."

Outside, the streetlights dimmed. The water in the tank darkened to blood.

17. The Vatican's Copy

The Vatican's corridors coiled like a serpent's gut. Swiss Guards passed, their bootheels syncing with Elara's rabbit-quick pulse. "They burn thieves here," Rafe whispered. The chained dictionary exhaled as she touched it. The seal split—lobelia and lightning. Not paper.

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Dying breath. FINIS pulsed on the final page, its letters flexing like gills. Beneath, in handwriting that matched her own: Burn me. The ink is your last exhalation.

18. The Bargain

She confronted the axolotl at dawn.

"You knew," she said. "The dictionary doesn't just record extinctions—it needs them. The more words that vanish, the stronger it gets."

The creature circled its tank. "A book must end. Ours is no different."

"Then why save it?"

The axolotl's gills flared. "You think this is about survival? When your kind vanishes, who will be left to say cruelty? Regret?" Its voice splintered. "I'm not saving myself. I'm saving cruelty, regret, love—the words you'll need to beg forgiveness when the water takes you too."

Outside, the streetlights dimmed. The dictionary in Elara's bag grew heavier.

19. The Final Entry

She worked in the pet shop's back room, surrounded by empty cages.

The dictionary now weighed as much as a corpse. Its pages whispered when she turned them.

The Homo sapiens entry was half-gone.

She dipped her pen.

And wrote:

"Axolotl (*Ambystoma mexicanum*): A neotenic salamander. Last known specimen died in captivity, 2025. Survived in memory for 72 hours after extinction."

The ink held.

For now.

20. The Erasure of Elara Voss

She felt it start in her fingertips—a numbness, as if her veins were filling with static.

The dictionary lay open on the desk. The E in her name had already dissolved.

Lara Voss.

Then ara Voss.

She grabbed the pen. Wrote one last line:

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"Remember this: A woman once traded her name for a word."

Her hand vanished mid-stroke.

Epilogue: The Child Who Remembered

A child's voice in the dark:

"Miss? What does axolotl mean?"

The teacher's red pen hovered. The inkwell had turned translucent. Outside, rain needled the schoolroom window like a seamstress unpicking stitches.

In the vacant lot behind the pet shop, a tortoiseshell cat pressed its ear to the rusted aquarium. The water wasn't stagnant—it was breathing, and the red wasn't rust. It was Elara's hair, floating just beneath the surface, moving in time with the dictionary's whispers.

At the Vatican, the chained book trembled. On its final page, beneath FINIS, three words bled through in handwriting that matched the teacher's suddenly shaking hand:

remember her name

Deep in the aquarium's murk, where light bent like a prism through tears, something blinked—first with Elara's eyes, then with the axolotl's, then with yours.