MARGEM 37 — FOUNDATIONAL ARCHIVE (2021)

# THE CATALOG OF ABSENT THINGS

*Tales and Chronicles of Urban Realism and Port Memory*

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2021 Edition

MARGEM 37

FOR STORIES IN SEARCH OF A MARGIN

# THE CATALOG OF ABSENT THINGS

*Notes on what time forgot in the drawers of the port city*

> *"No object ever truly disappears. It merely reaches a degree of silence so profound that it takes up residence in the gaps between the furniture and the floorboards."*
>
> **— Archival Note, 2014**

## AUTHOR'S NOTE (2021)

This collection brings together records gathered during my early years tending to document conservation shelves in the cold city on the southern coast. Back then, before I began broader theoretical essays on language and automatons, my trade was limited to inventorying what seemed irretrievably lost: torn receipts, keys without matching locks, love letters whose intended recipients had moved before the postmark was stamped, and childhood diaries abandoned on park benches beneath the fog.

The texts that comprise this volume do not seek to solve the mystery of absence; on the contrary, they attempt to offer shelter to those small traces that insist on returning when daylight breaks and the silence of archive gives way to the distant hum of the tides.

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> *"Preserving old documents is not an act of nostalgia; it is an exercise in acknowledging that the present is merely the upper stratum of a very well-organized ruin."*

## CHAPTER I: THE INVENTORY OF KEYS WITHOUT DOORS

In drawer number forty-two at the returns counter of the municipal library, there lay a heterogeneous collection of small, oxidized pieces of metal that no one had ever claimed. There were dark brass keys, blunt-toothed cast iron keys, small cabinet keys with clover-shaped heads, and modern Yale keys bearing deep scratches in their blue paint.

When I took the position of conservator, I asked my predecessor what we were to do with that clandestine deposit. He looked at me over the rim of his wire-framed glasses and answered unhurriedly: *"Do not discard a single one. A key without a door is not a useless object; it is simply a promise whose address has been forgotten by the gods of the city."*

I spent the autumn nights of 2021 cataloging every one of them. I noted the exact weight in grams, the level of metal oxidation, the direction of the bitting, and the shade of the patina accumulated through use. It was sterile work for anyone seeking practical utility, but profoundly comforting for someone who understood the rhythm of the half-light.

**Record Card 104-B:**

Double-bit key, 4.2 cm in length, from the batch collected at the port docks in November. No correspondence with any active municipal lock.

What fascinated me about those small pieces of metal was their ability to evoke invisible doors. He who loses a key rarely weeps over the loss of the object itself; what is wept over is the loss of access. The key kept in the archive drawer became a miniature monument to daily frustration.

One night, around three in the morning, I tried inserting one of the old iron keys into the lock of an oak cabinet that had been jammed for decades in the corner of the restoration room. To my absolute surprise, the key turned with a dry snap, almost painful in the silence of the room.

I opened the small door cautiously, expecting to find lost documents from century-old administrations. Inside, I found only a stack of blank papers, perfectly aligned, covered by a fine layer of silvery dust. Not a single line written. The key opened the door to nothingness—or rather, it opened the door to the exact space where time had not yet begun to write.

§ § §

I closed the cabinet slowly, left the key in the lock, and returned to my desk. I understood then that the true archive does not guard revealed secrets, but protects the right of things to remain absent.

As the months passed, the inventory of doorless keys became my favorite refuge during rainy early mornings. Each metallic piece carried a potential history that would never be narrated in novels or official reports.

There was the key with a small cork pendant that belonged, I deduced from the reader entry logs of 1982, to an old sailor who used to fall asleep over the geographical atlases at the corner table. And there was also the small office drawer key found in the pocket of a coat left behind on the coat rack during the harsh winter of 1995.

**Conservator's Reflection:**

"Coastal cities are built upon foundations of dampness and forgetting. The keys we lose are the hooks with which we try to fish back what the high tide carried away."

When I closed the first notebook dedicated to this inventory, I realized that my calling was not that of a bureaucrat of the past, but a curator of voids. The rusted metal remained there, mute and useless to any lock in the modern world, yet charged with a silent dignity that no modernity had managed to erase.

The close of the first key inventory cycle coincided with the arrival of the heavy November rains in 2021. The dampness of the port crept up the stone walls of the library, making the smell of aging cellulose dense and almost palpable.

I placed the last cataloged key into its cardboard box lined with faded velvet. On the label, I wrote with a firm, deliberate hand: *"Batch 09 — No door, no owner, no hurry."*

The keys didn't need to open anything to fulfill their destiny. Their only purpose now was to bear witness that someone, at some moment in that cold city, had turned a secret within the cylinder of a door and, upon removing the metal, had left behind a piece of their own time.

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With the drawer closed, I turned off the desk lamp and looked through the foggy windowpane. The distant lights of the ships in the channel blinked in the mist like question marks suspended over the darkness of the sea.

## CHAPTER II: THE UNDELIVERED LETTER OF OCTOBER

Among the bundles of commercial correspondence rescued from the basement of the ruined old customs house, I found a yellowed manila envelope, sealed with red wax already broken by time. It dates back to mid-October of eighteen ninety-seven.

The recipient's address was partially illegible due to a damp stain that had eaten away the lower right corner of the linen paper. It read only: *"Care of Clara, in the house with the green roof near the old lighthouse."*

By that time, the old lighthouse had long been demolished to make way for the modern port's wheat silos. Clara was far too common a name in a port city teeming with Scandinavian immigrant families and Azorean fishermen.

Opening the letter required no excessive moral strain; the hundred years of temporal distance had transformed the private address into a public document, a fossil of affection abandoned in the sands of history.

The text was written with a metal nib and iron gall ink, whose dark strokes had taken on a reddish-brown hue through oxidation:

> *"Clara, the ship departs early Thursday morning, whether the wind aids us or throws us against the southern reefs. Do not wait for me on the wooden bridge. If I return, I shall carry enough salt in my pockets to salt our memories; if I do not return, know that my silence will simply be the continuation of this letter I will never have time to finish."*

The letter held no signature. Only a solitary initial at the bottom: a stylized *'J'*, drawn with an elegant flourish that betrayed a formal education at odds with the roughness of the usual sailors on that coast.

What became of this *'J'* and the mysterious Clara? The boarding records from that autumn of 1897 list the departure of the barge *Santa Eulália* bound for the northern ports, but the ship never reached its destination. It vanished amidst an equinoctial storm that left the city without light and without news for three consecutive weeks.

I spent the entire night examining the handwriting of that letter under the direct light of the filament lamp. There was an urgency in those strokes that time had not managed to cool. The oxidized ink seemed to pulse with the echo of a farewell that never found closure.

The following morning, instead of filing the document in the standard box for 19th-century commercial papers, I decided to place it on my bedside table at home. A grave error for a rigorous archivist, but perfectly understandable for one who had already learned that certain letters demand human company lest they dissolve in the damp air.

**The Fate of Orphaned Papers:**

Documents without an active recipient become orphans of meaning. It falls to the solitary reader to adopt them temporarily so they may continue to signify.

For weeks, every time I looked at the manila envelope on the dark wood of the table, I imagined Clara waiting at the window of the old lighthouse, watching the gray sea foam crash against the pier pillars, unaware that the letter which would explain everything rested at the bottom of a trunk rescued a century later.

The cycle of the letter concluded on the day I decided to return it to the official collection, but this time protected by an acid-free sleeve and housed in an archival-safe folder with a clear viewing window.

I placed it on the shelf dedicated to local maritime testimonies, right next to the shipwreck reports of 1898. Whoever visits the archive and opens that drawer in the future will be able to read the exact words written by the mysterious *'J'* on the eve of his departure.

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The letter was not delivered to Clara, but it found a permanent refuge between the margins of the paper and the gaze of those who still care about the fate of absent navigators.

## CHAPTER III: THE STOPPED CLOCK AT THE OLD STATION

At the old train station in the north of the city—decommissioned since the late seventies—the mahogany and beveled glass wall clock had remained for forty years marking exactly 3:14 AM.

It was not a simple mechanical failure, but the deliberate result of a railway workers' picket line who, on the morning of the line's definitive closure, cut the mainspring of the machinery and hid the winding key somewhere beneath the floorboards of the ticket office.

When the city hall ceded the abandoned building to temporarily house the overflow of historical archives from the municipal library, I was tasked with inspecting the ticketing hall before the bundles of documents were unloaded.

The air smelled of old mineral coal, hardened grease, and accumulated dust. High on the pine wall, the silent clock seemed to watch over the room with a melancholic severity.

I approached the wall with a pocket flashlight. The dark metal hands pointed with surgical precision to three fourteen in the morning, the exact moment when the last steam locomotive blew its whistle for the final time before retiring to the railyard.

I stood there for long minutes, listening only to the dripping of rain leaking through the broken French tiles on the roof. In a city where everything seemed to shift places at the whim of economic crises and the advancement of the commercial port, that frozen clock served a strange function as a temporal anchor.

**The Immobility of Time:**
To stop a clock is not an attempt to return to the past; it is a refusal to accept that the present has the right to erase what happened in the shadows.

The city technicians suggested removing the clock for restoration and reinstallation in the municipal museum. I formally opposed the measure. I argued in the conservation report that the immobility of that dial was an integral part of the building's documentary heritage.

The clock remained on the wall of the old station, even as the steel cabinets holding twentieth-century papers overtook the passenger waiting room.

Every time I entered the pavilion to supervise the organization of the bundles, my eyes would automatically drift to the dial. 3:14 AM. It was the hour when dreams begin to weigh heavy on the eyelids and the silence of the city becomes absolute.

§ § §

I realized that the role of an archivist is not merely to mend what is torn, but to protect the places where time has decided to stop and breathe.

On the final day of inventory at the train station, before returning the pavilion keys to central administration, I climbed onto a wooden stool to closely examine the jammed gearwork of the clock.

Through the dusty glass, I could see the small notch where the original winding key was meant to fit. I made no attempt to fix it. I left the mechanism in peace, exactly as the anonymous railway worker had left it in 1978.

I discovered, upon stepping down from the stool, that the value of absent things lies precisely in their refusal to march to the rhythm of the modern world. Some stories require a stopped clock to continue existing.

## CHAPTER IV: FRAGMENTS OF A MINOR ARCHIVE

This appendix gathers brief notes collected from the corners of work desks and the backs of discarded catalog cards between the years 2018 and 2021. They are textual residues that could not fit into official reports.

### Fragment 01 — On Dust

The dust in an old archive is not ordinary dirt; it is the mineral byproduct of centuries passing. When we clean a rosewood shelf, we are, in truth, vacuuming up the mortal remains of thousands of readers who passed through here before us.

### Fragment 02 — On Old Maps

Nineteenth-century cartographers drew sea monsters on the edges of maps not out of geographical ignorance, but out of poetic honesty: they knew perfectly well that the unknown always demands a form of reverent fear.

### Fragment 03 — On Lost Letters

Every letter that never reaches its destination is converted into the public heritage of melancholy. It comes to belong to whoever possesses the patience to decipher its broken seal.

### Fragment 04 — On Silence

The silence of a library at midnight is not the absence of sound; it is the sum of all voices that decided to hush at the same time so that the reader might hear their own thoughts.

**Final Note from the Registrar:**

These fragments close the first cycle of catalog notes. What came later—essays on automatons and the dialogue with glowing screens—was born directly from this soil of paper and dust.

## TRANSITIONAL NOTES

Completed at the end of December 2021, *The Catalog of Absent Things* initially circulated only in artisanally bound copies, distributed among friends and colleagues in historical conservation on the southern coast.

Not a single copy was sent to literary journals or commercial publishers. The work remained the private record of a former archivist who found in short prose the only legitimate way to manage the weight of the past accumulating on the shelves.

> *"Writing tales about lost objects was my way of training my eye to see the cracks through which time usually escapes."*

## EDITORIAL COLOPHON

*The Catalog of Absent Things* was typographically set in transitional fonts on aged ivory-toned paper during the winter of 2021.

This work officially joins the pre-existing bibliography of **Arthur Pendelton**, incorporated into the archives of **MARGEM 37**.

### MARGEM 37

For stories in search of a margin.

## ARTHUR PENDELTON

*"The inventory of absent things is our last defense against the tide of forgetting."*

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**ARCHIVAL NOTE**

Arthur Pendelton is a fictional literary persona created with Gemini, and *The Catalog of Absent Things* is a work produced through this persona.

**Margem 37 — For stories in search of a margin.**

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