

# Futures

## Asymptotic sunset

A ray of hope. By Lauren Ring



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

### Classification of Sunset Archive Photo 43,685,30

**Dominant colour:** Blue

**Tags:** ocean, people, pre-swell

**Image description:** A sunset over a crowded beach. Children play in the surf as the day's last sunbeams glitter through flying seafoam droplets.

There are just short of 1 billion photos of the sunset online, and there will never be any more. There are more sunset photos in our archives than photos of beaches or weddings or even cats. It's very human, the urge to capture something uncapturable. Especially in those final days.

I've never seen a sunset in person. I'm a century too late and half a mile too deep underground for that. As an archivist, though, I've seen more sunsets than anyone living before the swell. There's plenty of time for me to contemplate that irony as I describe each photo, tag it, and file it away. For years now, I've done little else.

### Classification of Sunset Archive Photo 102,587,01

**Dominant colour:** Orange

**Tags:** proposal, people, pre-swell

**Image description:** A sunset framing a marriage proposal. The people pictured are silhouettes against the sunset, their features indistinguishable against the glory of the clouds.

I zoom in on the kneeling figure, doing my best to see the person through the jumble of anti-aliased pixels. These early photos don't interest the solar scientists much, but the general public can't get enough of the pre-swell records. Every time we release a new batch, the undernet buzzes with speculation.

What was it like to feel the Sun on your face without it burning? What was it like to take a breath of air above ground? We'll never know, and we'll always wonder. It's a sick sort of fascination, wonder mixed with envy. Is it an obsession if everyone shares it?

### Classification of Sunset Archive Photo 260,923,65

**Dominant colour:** Red

**Tags:** desert, people, mid-swell

**Image description:** A sunset behind tall desert rocks. The foreground of the photo is a low angle on a crowd of astronomers setting up their telescopes and gear. Some point up at the misshapen Sun, their mouths half open in captured speech.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm going mad. All of my friends and my co-workers seem happy enough, even as they mourn the loss of life above ground. We've never lived it, though. There's no one left here who has. We have endless digital records from those who had that life, a deluge of data in every format imaginable, but it's not ours, not really.

I did love this job at first. It was fascinating to see all the different scenes from all the different walks of life, all tied together by a common theme. I dived into classification and became one of the top performers, finding patterns no

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one else did. I even implemented the colour system to bring a little more visual interest to our categorized files. Every day, I would rush past the reservoir entrances and down the dim corridor to the lab, hoping that this would be the day I would find something fresh and new.

That bright-eyed excitement only lasted a few years. There really are only so many ways to take a photo of the sunset, even as the Sun itself swells and changes. It wears on me, seeing all this shared humanity. I've begun to feel less than human myself.

### Classification of Sunset Archive Photo 728,470,53

**Dominant colour:** White

**Tags:** city, empty, post-swell

**Image description:** A sunset behind abandoned skyscrapers. The swollen Sun fills half the sky, searing the pavement as its rays bounce and magnify between a thousand windows.

There are other parts of my life that I do love.

I go for long walks down the habitat tunnels and run my hands along the walls to feel the chill of the stones and the water pipes against my skin. I light birthday candles in the dark offshoot caves and watch the flame shadows dance and play. I visit my friends, I write essays online and I volunteer at the hydroponic gardens. The endless smooth rock cradles me and reminds me every moment that I am alive down here in the deep.

We have our own ways underground. A hundred years of adaptation and exploration has been more than enough for new traditions to emerge from the sunburnt ashes. Still, all anyone ever wants to do is read the records of the dead world above.

### Classification of Sunset Archive Photo 998,332,79

**Dominant colour:** Black

**Tags:** empty, post-swell

**Image description:** A sunset as captured by a member of the last group preparing to descend into the borehole. The blurry, skewed

photo is more ground than sunset, and the sunset is more sun than sky.

We can't go on like this. We can't spend another hundred years looking only backwards, basking in the light of sunsets dead and gone.

I know what I need to do.

### Classification of Sunrise Project Photo 1

**Dominant colour:** Silver

**Tags:** people, laboratory, now

**Image description:** A young archivist standing in front of a bay of computers, their towers all wired together with cables drilled through the rock walls. She is lit only by fluorescent bulbs and glowing monitors. She is smiling.

**Lauren Ring** writes about possible futures, for better or worse. Her other works can be found at *Pseudopod* and *Glitter + Ashes*, among others. You can see more at [laurenmring.com](http://laurenmring.com).

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

### Lauren Ring reveals the inspiration behind *Asymptotic sunset*

I wrote this story during the summer of the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, a time when it seemed that all I could do was scroll through my camera history and look at pictures from better times. My phone even categorizes them for me. Concert, 124 results. Amusement Park, 13 results. Beach, 9 results.

I was also inspired by Penelope Umbrico's ongoing art project 'Suns from Sunsets from Flickr', which brought to my attention the fact that 'sunset' is the single most common photo tag (on Flickr, at least).

I wondered what it would be like if humanity was under a different sort of lockdown, down underground, with access to the Internet but no access to the Sun. Would we still fixate on this central element of our shared history? Would anyone dare to look forward instead, and try to find beauty in their current situation?

