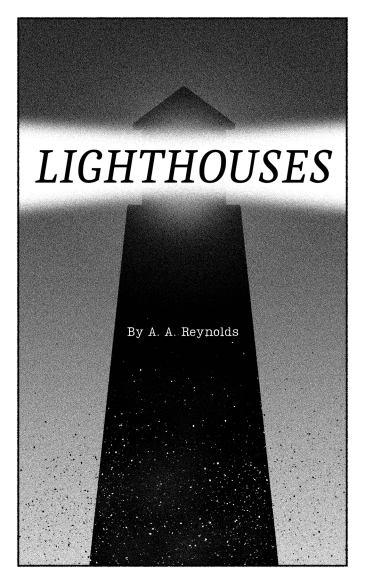
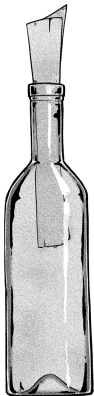




LIGHTHOUSES

By A. A. Reynolds

To the keepers we have lost,
and to the ones we will yet lose.



Lighthouse noun /'laɪt.haʊs/

A tall building near the coast or shore with a flashing light at the top to warn ships of rocks and other dangers.

The safety paradox is the name given to the phenomena where the presence of safety leads to greater risk-taking behaviour. On the micro-scale, this includes things like not washing fruit before eating it because it came from the "clean" environment of the grocery store.

On the macro-scale, the safety paradox is the stupidest fucking way humanity will kill itself, and some of us have had front row seats for a while.

Those of us in lighthouses have seen the rising tide and the aggressive storms. We've watched as the rocks beneath us have crumbled and threatened our foundations. But we do not fall, because we are stubborn, or we care, or we have something to prove, or we have nowhere else but the lighthouse to go. And so we shine the lights, we keep the glass clean, and we oil the machinery.

But the ships just keep coming, and some of their crews even proclaim that they're in no danger, because they "reckon" they know the seas better than any lighthouse crew. Hell, why should they listen to a bunch of lighthouse keepers? Who even put the lighthouse there? Who's funding all these things? I'm just asking questions! And when was the last shipwreck on this coast anyhow?

Fuck you, you stupid know nothing-

It's so tempting to say "let the fuckers sail into the rocks, if they're so sure." But the thing is, one way or another, the ocean's getting stronger and it has been for a while. A cohort of the worst men in the world have spent a lot of time telling us that we're imagining it, or that rough seas are good, you see? But they're wrong. A lot of boats sadly listen to wrongful men, though.



There's no way off this rock for us without ships who'll listen to our warnings. We're all just as doomed by the current as each other in the end. The lighthouses will fall with us inside them, and then even more ships will steer towards the rocks, unknowing of the dangers.

What a senseless waste of it all.

All so that those same wrong men can loot the bodies that wash ashore. They'll die too, of course. But they were richer than god while it lasted, so why should they care?

I care, though. That's why I'm a lighthouse keeper. Or do I only care BECAUSE I'm a lighthouse keeper? Does the distinction even matter if we're all going to be picked over by looters eventually? I don't think that's a productive argument to get into, but all things considered, probably not.

If we feel so strongly that things will only get worse then why do we even bother manning the lighthouses at all? Well, what else would we do? Some of us are too stubborn to stop, others care despite it all, still more have a point to prove, and for most of us it's currently apparent that there's nowhere but the lighthouses to go.

I don't think any of us want to be in the lighthouses. Not if we could help it. But we can't, and the lighthouses are far away places to put people you don't like as punishment for their innate qualities.

It's hostile on the rocks and the cliffs. We make do. But the blinking of our beacons fades into the night sky, until it's just another star. People begin to treat us like white noise, and fixed features of the landscape.



The lighthouses are built strong and seem filled with an impossible perseverance but so many keepers died before they even made the swim. And the lighthouses aren't immune to the weathering of the waves. It's just a slow horror of realising that we're the ones who were strong swimmers.

The small boats wreck first. Less able to withstand the waves already, they're no mach of the pillars of jagged stone that dot the shore. But you don't notice small boats, because they're small, and maybe they're far away.

Then on the news you see a bigger boat meet its end. Then another. Then another. But they're not where you are. They're not your ship.

And then your ship wrecks too.

Maybe you found this message in a bottle, floating by the board you're clinging to. In that case we'll do our best to fish you out of the water, and keep you warm in what's left of our lighthouse. We'll share our food, and commiserate together over the raging storm. We'll secure the windows, and keep the light going, because what else would we do in a lighthouse?

"I told you so" is cathartic, sure. An earned response in many cases too. But why die in anger when I could die surrounded by love in defiance of the wrongful men, and the storm they profit off?

You have to appreciate the small things. The end is nigh, but at least I got correctly gendered that one time on King Street, I guess.



I never asked to be a lighthouse keeper. Most keepers don't. We're just not given any other option worth living. We make the best of the isolation, though. We have each other, and our beacons shine oh so bright.

That's the real horror of this polycrisis, though. The fact that some of us have been yelling about it for so long and nobody listened, or at least nobody who had the power to stop it before it came for them, too. Are we so unimportant, or is humanity just doomed to the safety paradox? To assume that there's no danger? Because "no ship has wrecked on this coast for generations, pay no attention to those lighthouses!"

I don't want my world to end and the last thing I feel to be bitterness. I'm not ready, despite years of watching the ocean get more and more angry and threatening. I'm not ready to go yet because I'm still in the lighthouse and without keepers what good are these beacons?

Just dead towers slowly crumbling in the dark, their lights snuffed out, falling to the waves. This is not what they're for.

I've been in the lighthouse so long now that I don't know what life outside even feels like anymore. I don't think I could go back even if that was somehow possible. I'm here now, in the lighthouse, a keeper among many and I'm so tired. We're all so tired. It's all I can do to keep the light lit and the glass clean, and the machinery oiled. Maybe someone will pay attention this time, and steer away from the rocks, maybe they won't.



Maybe tomorrow we'll pull another survivor from the wreck.

The sea's getting higher, craftily hiding the dangers just beneath the surface of "normality." It's frustrating sometimes that inexperienced boats boast about their ability to sail freely, unaware or uncaring that us keepers know the rocks, and are intimately familiar with their forms. But when a ship wrecks and we briefly yell "we fucking told you so!" It's no sign or symptom of uncaring, we yell because we care and aside from the cultures and rituals we make for ourselves in the community of keepers, to the sailors we serve one purpose: To warn them of the dangers. And yet so many sailors have chosen to believe the lies of the looters on the shore that the keepers are all scheming liberal elite alarmists, backed by some unseen wealthy force who they can't name but when pressed will say "you know the ones." The reality is just that we had nowhere else to go.

Some of us used to be on the ships, washed overboard, lucky enough among the millions drowned to survive the currents to make it to a lighthouse. Some of us were rescued by other keepers and still so many more were born in the lighthouses knowing nothing else.

I said I don't want to die bitter but how else can I be? you're heading for the rocks you stupid bastards! We've been warning you all this time and still the ocean will claim more... and I can't help but wonder if it's too late for most of the ships I see from the tower now. They're already so close to the murderous shallows, and what was once Cassandra-like prediction and is now well worn experience, tells me that a lot of them are going to wreck.



If it's inevitable, then I guess acceptance makes sense. It's better than being bitter, at least.

So I paint the walls of my lighthouse in bright colours, warning of the dangers, yes, but... also because I think the colours are pretty. I make lanterns and hang them from the rafters. I cook meals for my fellow keepers. I journal and sketch. I make projects like this one. We laugh, we cry, we make love, we argue.

We have each other. I think that has to be enough.

And when the waves rise, and break down our doors, we'll move higher up the lighthouse defiantly. And when there's nowhere left to climb, or when our lighthouse finally succumbs to the constant wearing away of its stone, we'll all drown together.

I hope beyond all fucking hope that one day, after that has happened, something of mine, something that I was part of, a chunk of my lighthouse washes into the hands of someone who can appreciate its dazzling colours. I don't know how likely that is, but I can hope. And while there is that hope I don't plan on being taken by the ocean quietly. The waves will have to come to me if they want me dead so badly and all the while I will be shining that light deep into the darkness. I don't care if I lose blood or a limb, or take a bullet, or see everything taken from me. I do not care if the waves destroy the lighthouse around me.

I will shine that beacon so long as there is a scrap of land not yet submerged to stand on because I'm a fucking lighthouse keeper and this is all I know, now.



Ships can choose to heed our warnings or not. We don't have that luxury. We know the rocks and we know the waves.

Still, as long as us keepers have each other, no matter how distant or how close, how loudly or how carefully we decide to communicate with signals and flashes that the ships and the waves don't even understand, we did our best.

No one could expect more of us, facing off the horror of fearing what was to come and being proven so right so often that we begin to fear even our ability to predict because it tells us of yet worse to come. There will be and is already blood against the rocks and it's so senseless and tragic, and it's mournful to know that one day my blood will be on them too. But until then, I'm a lighthouse keeper. What else would I do?

And if you're now reading this, stranded among the waves, desperately trying to tread water but too stubborn to drown, then, if you can, try and make it to a lighthouse. Find that rock on which you'll be as safe as you can be even if impermanently, while the storm rages on and on. And in that lighthouse you shine the light, clean the glass, and oil the machinery. You're a keeper now. It's what you do. And when someone sees all the little things you decorate the tower with in spite of the waves, and they ask you why you bother with small joys and hopes of future hands to appreciate them if the ships are just going wreck anyway, if the seas will just keep climbing higher no matter what you do, you tell them this.

You're a lighthouse keeper.

What else would you do but keep the light on?

Thank you for reading my message in a bottle.
I hope you will decorate your lighthouse, too.

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