



RNN
DESCRIPTIONS

30 VERY SHORT
STORIES FROM A
NEW LAND

by Thorin Klosowski

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Mime Buried with Many Skeletons	1
A Small Round Boy with White Stones	5
Gold Cloth Face Reclining Around Hole	7
Small Animal Woman's Head	10
Man Seated on a Large Egg	13
Old Woman Wearing White Wood Horns	16
Gold Man with Mirrors	18
People Growing Fungal Figure	21
Large Figure in Tree Holding Portrait of Butter	25
Mime in Skins Seated at Right, Looking at Soldiers	30
Small Boys Decorating Ghost	32
Man Steals Bucket of Teeth	39
Time Flying Triangles Around Geometry	43
Glass Bone People, Holding a Jelly Figure	49
Man Feeding Fractals	55
Streaks in Front of Skull	59
Cube Looking Down to Feed	61
Children Seated in a Book	64
Portrait of a Man Seated on a Rainbow	69
Man Wears Geometric Outline of Woman's Head	74
Doors in Distance	79
Slums of Gold Full of Creatures with Metal Hands	83
Steaming Sphere Inside City	88
Children Seated in Front of Bomb	93
Human Figure with Large Baby Model	98
Chicken Tube in Front of Musical Meat	101
Ghost with Three Eyes Bearing Time Turtle	105
Ghost Bells Below Metal Moon	108
Man with Robot in Beet Cavern	112
Decomposing Little Mountains	115

MIME BURIED WITH MANY SKELETONS

Arturo opens his eyes again. Shoot, it didn't work. Everyone around him is still long dead. He's still stuck here.

Arturo sits up and looks around. *It's a nice tomb*, he thinks. It's clean, anyway, as far as tombs go. Not that he'd been in one before, but the *idea* of a crypt is messy with cobwebs and bugs. And this one is not so bad. He has room to move around a little bit, which is nice, but to do so he has to crunch and crack through the bones of dozens of skeletons.

Arturo situates himself against one of the walls and pushes the skeletons out of the way. It'd be nice to have a little bit of room. A tiny little square of solitude. Arturo looks around, contemplating what his next move could be. He can't get out of here, he knows that much. It's too well built. Plus, he'd just be thrown right back in.

Two days ago, Arturo was lowered inside. His fellow townsfolk were, as they put it, simply annoyed with his behavior. As is tradition in Arturo's town, after being declared annoying, he was lowered into the burial chamber and it was sealed shut.

It was his own fault for being annoying to begin with. He'd thought the town *needed* another mime because Dolores was, in his mind, too old school and boring. He wanted to break new ground in the form and truly entertain his friends. But nobody else was on the same page.

It took about a week for the town to grow annoyed. Now, sitting here, Arturo can see they were patient. Especially when you're dealing with a rogue mime. At first, the townsfolk gave Arturo the benefit of the doubt. They'd watch his performances, odd as they were, and clap politely. Most people thought it was just a phase, or perhaps the sheer nervous energy of trying something new.

As the days went on, though, the townspeople grew more and more annoyed. Arturo would burst into restaurants where people were eating and pantomime a single role of a popular play in an off-putting asymmetrical performance. Or he'd rush through town, knocking over anything that got in his way, acting out a scene where he was getting chased by a dinosaur.

But even those antics didn't push the town over the edge. It was the smaller things. The annoying little quirks. Arturo liked to draw attention to those who didn't want it. He'd often grab the shyest person in a room and make them the center of his performance. Or he'd spend a day following someone in a bad mood, repeatedly trying to make them laugh. Or at the very least, he'd suggest, pulling on their cheeks, just smile.

Eventually, the townspeople held a meeting and decided to put Arturo into the crypt. They'd done this plenty of times before. Every skeleton there now was

once someone who'd gotten on the town's collective nerves. There was Agata, who would routinely leave her water hose on, wasting the town's water. Or Bernardo, who was the type of town drunk who'd lock you into a nonsensical conversation, oblivious to your desire to escape. And then of course Taavi, who always spoke just a bit too loudly.

Arturo knows he doesn't have much time. Or an audience. But as he clears out his little space in the tomb, he can't help but pantomime his favorite scene from *Macbeth*, mouthing "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" into the darkness.

A SMALL ROUND BOY WITH WHITE STONES

A very small boy sits in a garden. He is extremely small. Terribly small. Remarkably small. Excessively small. Uncommonly small. He is the smallest boy possible. Yet somehow, rotund.

In front of the boy are several white stones, arranged in a circle with a line through it. The boy concentrates on the stones.

After several minutes of concentration, the boy lets out a sigh. The air grows thick, like a sauna. The boy collapses to the ground with a weak *thud*. All the moisture in the air collects around the boy, causing nearby plants to drip and tree bark to stretch thinly around the trunk, like linen wrapped around a wet leg. The boy begins to grow.

After a few minutes, the boy resembles a normal boy, in size at least. But like a balloon full of helium, the shape seems temporary. He tries a step but wobbles,

uneasy with his new size, and falls over. He rolls on the ground, briefly trying to right himself, like an egg attempting to balance on the tip. He gets back onto his feet after a few tries and takes his first large boy step. Then another. He's figured out how to balance, at least.

But with each step, he deflates slightly. In order to progress through the world, he will shrink. He stands still for a long time, deciding what to do. His face squints into the same concentration pose as before. His shoulders climb toward the sky, as though he's willing himself upward.

Eventually, he releases all his tension, lets a sigh loose, and takes another step. Then another. Until he is once again extremely small.

GOLD CLOTH FACE RECLINING AROUND HOLE

The great creature, Menom, sits alongside a hole. Her face is covered by a ceremonial gold cloth. She stares into the hole. Her posture suggests she's waiting for you.

You walk up to the hole and peer inside. Menom nods and gestures for you to enter.

You descend into the hole. It's not so bad. You can stand, at least, and through the echoing tunnels you hear Menom humming a tune. You walk, briskly but not hurried. Light from outside of the tunnel disappears, but glowing mushrooms guide your path.

After some time, you notice you're hunching down. The tunnel is getting smaller.

You carry on, eventually going from your hunched position to a crawl. Here, the tunnel walls are covered with newspaper, plastered to the walls like an

unfinished piñata. You can still hear Menom's song in the distance. It's comforting, enough to push you forward.

You're forced onto your stomach to continue. You inch yourself along by wiggling your shoulders back and forth. The smell of newsprint and glue surrounds your entire body. You can't imagine smelling anything else ever again.

You continue on. The newspapers rip off the tunnel walls and catch your clothing until you're fully wrapped. You can barely wiggle now, so you force yourself forward by pushing yourself with your toes, like a ballerina practicing their pointe technique. Your arms are locked at your sides. Your face is covered in newspaper, but not so much you can't breathe. But every breath you draw is still full of newspaper and glue.

It's too hard to push yourself forward with your toes. Menom's humming is faint now. You find, if you suck

in your stomach, you can push forward slightly using a combination of your stomach and your belt buckle as it hooks into the newspaper surrounding you.

It's dark here. The glow of the mushrooms is gone, and it's impossible to see how much further the tunnel goes. An itch rattles itself across your leg, just out of reach of your arm. Your shoulders feel like you've been carrying a backpack for weeks.

But the newspaper feels nice, wrapped around your legs and arms like seaweed. You're partially tangled up, sure, but also encased in warmth.

You're not moving much, anymore. The newspaper and glue smell doesn't seem so bad, and perhaps this spot is cozy, not debilitatingly small. Menom's humming matches your breathing. Your breath slows, and you drift off to sleep.

SMALL ANIMAL WOMAN'S HEAD

A bonfire burns. On a stake in the center of the fire rests the head of a small animal woman. The head seems to reject the very idea of fire. It's unfazed by the flames attempting to engulf it.

"She was a witch," a small boy mutters, looking into the flames.

His mother leans down and whispers in his ear, "No, she was just too powerful."

The boy's eyes widen as he stares at the head. The head's eyes twitch slightly and lock onto the boy. The head smiles.

The boy can feel the animal woman's mind knocking on the door of his own, politely asking to be let in. The boy lets her in.

He's in a forest now. The animal woman is steering his consciousness. He's seeing through her eyes? No, a

memory. He's seeing her memory.

S/he's walks through the clearing in the forest. S/he's being chased. The heart beats in the ears. The ears pressurize, it feels like an explosion is imminent. Feet paddle on the ground. Barefoot? Yes, barefoot. S/he comes to a cliff. Nearly falls off. Stops in time, turns. S/he sets eyes on the pursuers. A group of men holding weapons. The group speaks in one voice.

ANIMALWOMANITENDSHERE

"Why?" S/he asks.

YOU'VE BROUGHT DOWN OUR VILLAGES
BROUGHTS SADNESS FEAR
AND ANXIETY TO US WHERE WE WERE
ONCE PROUD AND HAPPY

"You were blind," s/he says.

WE WERE HAPPY

They lunge in and rip the animal woman apart.

The boy feels his mind shrink, reverting back to his own. He misses the animal woman's presence. He asks her to stay. He begs her.

The boy's mother tugs on the boy's arm. "Where did you go?" she asks.

MAN SEATED ON A LARGE EGG

Gundeibert stares into the sunset, thinking about what he had for breakfast (roasted beets), sitting on his egg. He must sit on this egg every day for forty-three days (technically 1,031 hours). At the end of those forty-three days (1,031 hours), the eggs will hatch, and Gundeibert will be free.

Gundeibert and his people first started sitting on eggs long before Gundeibert's time. Some say it has been generations. Others say it has been since the beginning of time (others argue about the validity of the very idea of time but concede these people have been sitting on eggs for quite a while). After all, Gundeibert and his people are called Egg Sitters, so it goes without saying they've been sitting on eggs for some time.

To a modern ear, the term *egg sitting* might not sound terribly respectable, but rest assured, for Egg Sitters, there are few jobs as magnanimous as the task their

name is derived from (it is admittedly not a creative name).

Egg Sitters do not *just* sit on eggs, nor is the task of doing so simple. They must keep an egg the right temperature, which requires a lot of shifting around, squats, and occasional twists. They also must speak to the egg every day, teaching it the ways of the world before it hatches. At first, they speak to the egg as you'd speak to a child, but as the days go on, they speak to them more as adults, since by the time they hatch, they are indeed just that, adults.

At the moment, Gundeibert tells his egg about crop rotation. "Beets are heavy feeders," he says. "Follow them with lentils or chickpeas."

They do this in the hope of passing down the entirety of their knowledge before the egg hatches, though no Egg Sitter has ever successfully done this (supposedly someone named Arthur was close once, but forgot to tell his egg about rain).

You might ask why these eggs have no mother or father to sit on them, and the answer is easy, if not gratifying. The eggs simply are. Every so often, with no particular rhyme or reason, the eggs begin existing. When they do, the Egg Sitters do their job.

After those forty-three days (1,031 hours), the egg hatches. What hatches it hard to describe, though the Egg Sitters call them Spectators. They are never the same shape, nor the same gender, nor even the same species, but they always consume the soul of the Egg Sitter as their first act. When they do so, it takes on all (most) the remaining knowledge of the Egg Sitter.

The Spectators then leave to do whatever it is they do, which we can assume involves spectating, since it seems that things here are named after what they do.

OLD WOMAN WEARING WHITE WOOD HORNS

The canyon stretches out before you. Its walls are so tall you see nothing else. Just wall. The *too bigness* of it makes you feel like vomiting.

If you're not careful, the wall takes you. It eats up your consciousness. You look closer, anyway. Time shows itself through small cracks. Little burrows. Minuscule edges hold small plants.

You're making your way through the western slot. Hunting for calm in the chaos. Trying to wrap up rhyme within reason.

You set up camp. As you unload everything, your pots and pans clatter. You spring up the tent on powdered sugar sand. The smell of propane slides underneath the smell of desert dust. You can see other campers doing the same. Quietly making the motions.

At night, you're restless. Through the thin tent layer,

you see a woman enter the campsite. She has horns on her head. She walks cautiously. She peeks into each person's mind, hunting for memories, hunting for sustenance.

She finds the death of a child.

A divorce.

Lost siblings.

Lost loves.

She eats them all. Leaving nothing in their place. Nothing fills the void. But nothing is better than loss. She approaches your tent. You feel a weight lifting.

In the morning, you look up at the canyon walls and feel something other than dread. You feel, almost, comfortable.

You continue on.

GOLD MAN WITH MIRRORS

The duke stands in his room, surrounded by mirrors. He turns, paying close attention to how the curvature of his spine affects his doublet. Too loose, and the doublet bunches up unnaturally, accenting his bulbous figure. Too tight, and his figure is shown for what it is, a marshmallow with two toothpicks for legs.

Today, he feels fine. He is comfortable. He looks acceptable. The duke fakes a smile at the mirror, his thin mustache curving into an elaborate sideways E.

The duke's day consists mostly of staring blankly into the middle distance while people talk at him. He's too important to do anything for fun, but not important enough that his decisions matter. He must sit quietly, not seen as eccentric, not power-hungry, but still wealthy, still powerful-enough.

He is bored.

The duke spends his time thinking about what he'd do if he wasn't a duke. He'd hunt, perhaps. He'd build his own house. He'd be alone. He desperately wants to be alone. The duchess is fine as a person, the duke thinks, but he wouldn't spend time around her if he didn't have to. He'd rather live on a mountaintop, avoiding the world entirely.

In his room, before bed, the duke often writes for hours before falling asleep. He'll paint, too, occasionally. Sometimes, he'll just stare out his small sliver of a window, wondering what people are doing. He destroys everything he creates immediately. He tosses it into the fireplace and lights it, even on hot summer days.

Everyone thinks the duke is a fine ruler. He is neither liked nor disliked by the people around him. His personal purse is neither extravagant nor empty. Everyone around him describes him as acceptable, fine, nice enough, okay.

After a particularly normal day, the duke sits in his room, painting a portrait of golden apples. As he bends back to look at his painting—it is quite acceptable and fine—he knocks over his paint. He kneels and dips his hands into the spill. His hands look foreign to him. He undresses and covers his body in paint.

Covered in gold, the duke stands in front of the mirrors. Proud, finally. A barrel-chested golden nude man stands in front of him. His stomach leans over the edge of his pelvis like a slug making its way down a staircase.

He leaves his home and makes his way to the forests on the outskirts of the city.

PEOPLE GROWING FUNGAL FIGURE

"We must time this perfectly," the teacher says. "If the molds don't fruit at the right time, this entire experiment is pointless." She looks on at her students, gathered in a small clearing in the forest.

The children nod, but they don't seem to put as much weight into this idea as the teacher. For the past decade, she's brought students here. Not her best students, by any stretch. But the ones who follow orders.

The teacher sighs, then walks to a wireframe body. "We'll wrap this with the bread," the children each seem to suddenly notice the bags of bread in front of them, "then spray it down with these water bottles. When we're done, we cover it with this, and wait." She flicks a large plastic bag into the air, gesturing like a magician revealing her latest trick.

The children moan but get to work. The white bread

is easy to manipulate, and the kids cover the wireframe completely in less than an hour. When they're finished, they each smile and look on. These kids aren't used to succeeding. It feels nice.

The teacher grabs a water bottle and demonstrates the amount of sprays (two) to give each piece of bread. The children follow suit, mostly following her advice.

When they're done, they all look on together. Covered in wet bread, the wireframe appears more lifelike. It resembles a person, at least from a distance. The students seem proud.

The teacher covers the bread figure with the bag and ties it tight at the bottom. "Okay kids, we'll come back in two weeks to see what we've created!" She's bubbly now, proud, too, of the accomplishment. It doesn't take much these days.

In two weeks, the group returns. The teacher gathers the kids around the breaded statue, still covered by

the plastic bag. "Are you ready to see what you've created?"

The children seem happy and attentive. She pauses, wanting them to enjoy this brief moment of purity. When the excitement feels too unbearable, she pulls off the plastic bag to reveal the figure, now covered in a dark green mold.

The children suck in a joyous gasp. "It's beautiful," one mutters. The rest look on, quietly.

The mold-covered figure begins to move. It's so subtle it seems like an optical illusion at first. The children aren't sure how to react. "Where's the teacher?" one asks. The kids look around. The teacher is gone.

A sound similar to laughter surrounds the group, originating from the molded figure. The kids can't move. They're not strapped down by fear, it's something else. Something physical. The laughter echoes across the clearing.

A year later, the teacher returns to the area. She doesn't even bother looking at the wireframe, just squares herself to address her students. "We must time this perfectly," she says.

LARGE FIGURE IN TREE HOLDING PORTRAIT OF BUTTER

Three children—two girls and a boy—make their way along a dirt path. The path is clear, well-maintained, and surrounded by small trees. The children move at a reasonable pace. They are not frightened nor in a hurry.

The boy clutches a picture frame to his chest. We can only see the back, and the frame looks old. A rusted metal wire dangles on the back of the frame, and the boy fidgets with it.

The girls each hold a small container. One looks like a miniature-sized cauldron, the other one is a saucepan with the lid taped on.

All three children smile. None of them talk. They continue to walk.

If you look closely—why don't you lean in and look a little closer?—you can see sweat beading up on each

of the children's foreheads. What do you make of this? To me—and let's be clear here, I don't know a thing—it looks like they're worried about something.

Sure, they have these cool exteriors, holding their mystery pots and secret picture frames, but when you look up close, you can see they're frightened. Why don't you just take a look? They can't see you, don't worry, and you can move as closely as you like. Here, take my hand. I'll guide you there. Do you see? The sweat? It's a dead giveaway, if you ask me, but nobody really asks me anything.

The three continue to walk, resolute, with clear direction. Where do you think they're heading? My guess is we'll find out soon enough, but if you look at the title of this story, we can surmise they're heading to meet the large figure in the tree. That's how titles work, you know. It's not like titles come out of the air. They're purposeful. They're meaningful. They're...well, let's just get back to the kids. I think they're getting close.

The children slow as they approach a large tree. The largest tree we've seen yet. It towers over the rest of the trees alongside the path, which are tiny and weak compared to this tree. To be clear, the small trees are large enough to block our view of what's outside the trees—that way I don't have to describe what's beyond the trees—but they're small compared to this one big tree, which is very large!

In the tree is, you guessed it, a large figure. It's human-shaped, all black but, well, that's interesting, it's not holding a portrait. I suppose we can surmise what's in the boy's hand, but what's the deal with the cauldron and the saucepan? Let's watch and find out.

The girl with the cauldron steps forward first. She bows to the figure, then gets on her knees. She prostrates in front of him, then takes the lid off the cauldron. Inside is a stick of butter. She waits in this position.

The second girl does the same as the first, stepping

forward, bowing, kneeling, prostrating, then she removes the tape from the saucepan to reveal another stick of butter.

The boy follows the same motions. He ends his routine by turning the picture out so the figure in the trees can see it. It's a portrait of butter, painted in oils, looking as majestic as the type of painted portrait you'd find in a bank owner's office.

The figure smiles a big smile, then turns into a cloud. It flies through the two sticks of butter, evaporating them, before returning to its human shape and picking up the butter portrait. It smiles again at the children, butter glistening off its skin, dripping from its mouth like an oily sweat. It nods to the children, then floats back to its spot in the tree.

The children stand, the girls gather their now-empty containers, and they turn on their heels to leave.

The figure smiles wide again, then roars—like a lion? Do you think that sounds more like a lion or a bear?

I'm not sure how to describe it. It's certainly not the sound I'd expect from looking at the thing, though.

So, after the roar, the children's shoulders pitch up, and they freeze. The roar continues, and the children's heads shrink down, like turtles trying to cower deeper into a shell. We see the figure drop the portrait—the children just hear that part, since they're looking the other way—and, in an instant, the figure is gone, the portrait broken in half on the ground. The children run.

MIME IN SKINS SEATED AT RIGHT, LOOKING AT SOLDIERS

A mime stands in the center of a half-circle of soldiers. She motions unbuttoning her blouse, then pretends to remove it. She moves her hands across the zipper of her pants, then motions her legs up like she's stepping out of them. The soldiers hoot and holler.

She saunters up to one of the male soldiers, seduction in her eyes. The mime straddles the soldier. He blushes. The rest of the soldiers continue to holler in excitement. She puts her arms around the man, pretending to undress him. The hollering is unbearably loud.

She steps away, puts her hand on her chin, and stares.

The men yell loudly now. Their faces are red.

She closes the distance between the soldier again. With her hands, she motions grabbing a knife from

an imaginary belt. She pretends to slit the man's throat, then slices downward, halving him like a piece of meat. She does the same to the legs and arms.

Then she pinches her fingers around the soldier's shoulder and pulls down, like she's peeling off the plastic wrapping from a new window. She pretends to pull all the skin off this way, from the shoulders down the feet. With the imaginary skin in hand, she shakes it out like a rug.

She holds her hands up, like she's inspecting the skin. The men are silent.

The mime bends over, lifts her leg, and pretends to climb into the soldier's skin. First the right leg, then the left. She pulls up the skin, like she's putting on a wet suit.

The mime moves to the right of the soldiers, then bends her knees as though she's sitting. Sitting, wearing the skin of the soldier.

SMALL BOYS DECORATING GHOST

Every year, the boys of New Hash are charged with decorating the ghost in the town's lodge. The event, known as The Festival of Lucidity has been a tradition since the town's founding.

This year, Octavio, Hernando, and Luis are handling the decoration. They've been working all year on their planning, and the festival is just days away.

The three boys sit beneath a decayed veranda, surrounded by the handcrafted decorations donated by the townspeople.

"If we use the white paint and coat the box in memory tint, we can lock the ghost down for *decades*, according to this book," says Octavio, his head buried in a copy of *The Ancient Hermetic Order of Stillguard*.

"I don't think they want us to lock the ghost down for that long," says Luis. "This whole thing is just a trick to keep the town under control. It's a tactic, man, and

we have to fight against it."

Hernando rolls his eyes but says nothing.

"I'm just saying," starts Luis, before Octavio cuts him off, "we've heard it Luis. We *get* it. But we're in charge of decorating the ghost, and if we don't do it, we'll be in some serious shit."

The three boys sit in silence.

"So, I think we should still do the decorations but hide the white paint," mumbles Luis. "That's what I was trying to get at."

"What do you mean?" asks Octavio.

"I mean like, we use the white paint as a primer. Then do the traditional decorations on top. Like the best of both worlds, y'know?"

"Why would we do that?"

"Because like, look," Luis is frustrated but continues, "If we can shut the ghost down for decades, the lodge

won't have to do this stupid shit every year, but like, they don't want that. But like, we do, so like, I don't know. It might work. I just don't trust this whole thing. I don't trust the lodge, and I don't trust the ghost. Not after—"

"Nah, I get it," interrupts Octavio. "We do this without telling anyone, and maybe the town can finally move on."

"Yeah, man."

Hernando nods his agreement.

"But what if the lodge just...keeps doing the festival?" asks Octavio. "If they don't know we bound the ghost, they won't know they don't have to go about this ridiculous festival every year."

"Yeah," says Luis. "But like, look, if the ghost is bound, there's no *worry* anymore. It can't..." Luis trails off.

"Okay, yeah, I get that. Like, when the seniors last

year fucked up the decoration and it consumed..."

Octavio stops. The boys can't bring themselves to talk about what happened to the last group in charge of decorating the ghost.

"I don't think we should do the memory tinted paint," says a boy.

"Why not?" screams another. "It will lock the ghost up for decades, and we won't have to go through this stupid shit ever again."

"But it's against the rules. There must be a reason it's against the rules."

"Who says it's against the rules? It doesn't say that anywhere in our guide."

"It's just assumed, man."

"Whatever. I think we should do it."

"I disagree. If we mess it up, it'll just make everything worse."

"So what? How can it be any worse?"

"Let's take a vote."

"Fine."

"I say we use the paint."

"I agree."

"I disagree."

"The yeses have it then."

"So, now what."

"Get the book. We have to get this right."

It's the day of the festival. Octavio, Luis, and Hernando enter the lodge, wearing their ceremonial gowns. Luis looks sick to his stomach.

The lodge is a large open room, built out of logs. It's the type of place that makes you feel older when you walk inside.

"Do you think we did the right thing?" Luis asks

neither boy in particular.

Hernando frowns and lowers his head.

"It's done," says Octavio. "Now we see if it works."

A priest instructs the three boys to sit on a platform behind him.

"It is my honor to introduce the ghost decoration committee this year," announces the priest. "These boys have been exceptional students of the lodge, brilliant in the community, and excellent studies in school, and I cannot think of anyone better suited to take on the ceremony after the issues last year. Boys, stand up, and let's all give them a round of applause.

The boys stand. The onlookers in the lodge clap politely.

"Bring out the ghost," says the priest.

A man wheels out a large coffin-shaped box adorned with handcrafted decorations. It looks almost like a Christmas tree. Glittered skulls, laced devils, and

symbols constructed from popsicle sticks dangle off the box. The boys tense up.

"Welcome, ghost, to our annual feeding!" the priest exclaims. "I trust the boys have treated you well."

The lodge grows cold as the box opens. Sound stops. Not as though it's silent, but as though the world is suddenly incapable of producing sound.

Luis is the first to get it. His vision blurs. The world flickers out of three dimensions and into two before his sight goes parallax, and he collapses.

Hernando and Octavio drop to the ground.

Sound flushes back into the room. The temperature rises again.

"Success for another year, then," says the priest.

A loud sigh echoes through the lodge as the onlookers gasp. Boys are nothing if not predictable.

MAN STEALS BUCKET OF TEETH

An unemployed Egg Island man stole an official ritual bucket of teeth from a cave outside the town of Sed yesterday. The theft was immediately noticed, but the pursuit lasted for several hours before he was chased down and arrested.

"He walked in and grabbed the bucket like he knew what he was doing," said Carlos Coleman, spokesperson of the Official Ritual Teeth Conservatory. "None of us would have thought much about it if he hadn't run off like he did. You see, around this time of year, someone always comes to clean the teeth, so we all just thought it was cleaning time."

The suspect, Richard Mitchell, 67, reportedly walked into the cave, grabbed the bucket, then ran away just after 9 a.m., right after the ritual breakfast. He was eventually caught by authorities at 11 a.m., near the center of town, where authorities surrounded him.

According to reports, for the two hours in between, Mitchell had run over to the water wheel, ate a small breakfast at Dot's cafe, and possibly taken a nap underneath the old bridge on Toll Road.

In the town's center, Mitchell took the opportunity to explain himself publicly before authorities captured him, yelling to the crowd of people, Mitchell claimed, "These teeth have kept our town down for long enough. They are not a blessing but a curse, can you not see that? They are teeth! How could teeth be a blessing?!"

Mitchell seemed to want to say more, but as authorities closed in, he visibly panicked, kicked the bucket of teeth away, then curled into a ball. Authorities walloped him a few times before growing bored, then picked him up, still curled up into a ball, and placed him in the back of a truck.

This is the latest in many anti-teeth bucket protests, which started last year in town, when author

Marianna Ericks came to town on her book tour, extolling the virtues of living free from threats, rules, and boundaries of buckets of teeth. She claimed she'd seen other towns across the land prosper after destroying their buckets of teeth. The majority of townspeople found this absurd, but Ericks was able to convert a few to her side.

Aside from Mitchell's attempt, we've seen attempted thievery or destruction of the teeth from four people, Oscar Dest, Lori Aster, Christina Marx, and Lawrence Grandfield.

"The destruction or theft of teeth will be met with the full force of the authority," said spokesperson Rachel Newing, "We will follow the rule of law and take these cases to their lawful conclusions."

Conclusions, in this case, mean public execution with tooth extraction pre-shows. Mitchell's execution is planned for tomorrow, by fire, with resident dentist Jennifer Masters extracting Mitchell's teeth for the

bucket at 10 a.m., with the burning starting at 11 a.m. Father Roberts will preside over the bucket, and security is expected to be on high alert.

TIME FLYING TRIANGLES AROUND GEOMETRY

It's no secret one of the most common uses of time flying triangles is to wrap them around geometry, but have you considered making your own time flying triangles instead of buying them? It's not nearly as difficult as you might think.

Rolling your own time flying triangles (TFTs for short) takes just a few materials you might already own, and once you've made the TFTs, wrapping them around geometry is easy. For this project, you'll need:

1. Time, preferably partially used but not wasted
2. (Six) fly wings
3. Chalk
4. Whatever geometry you want to wrap,

though I do caution against using handheld geometry, as it tends to collapse when surrounded by time.

5. Wood glue or a similar adhesive

Once your materials are all handy, it's time to get started.

Step one: Filet and Oxidize Time

If you've never fileted time before, the process is pretty straightforward: slice the amount of time you have in half, remove the bones with tweezers, and let time rest for at least an hour before moving onto the oxidization. For TFTs, I like to do about four hours of time, because it gives the triangles enough time to solidify around whatever type of geometry you decide to use.

Once the time rests, set it on fire to oxidize it into more manageable chunks. You'll use the chunks in the next step to create the triangles.

Step two: Assemble Triangles

Next, find a large space, preferably a concert hall or basketball court, and use the oxidized time to draw at least three triangles on the court, arranged side by side like this:



Next, draw the following symbols on each triangle using your chalk (*do not* use the oxidized time, as that will cause the portal to open too soon) so they look like this:



When you draw the inner symbol on the third triangle, you *will* feel a slight burning in your heart, but push through and finish it because stopping in the middle will ruin the time around it.

When you're finished, step back, clasp your hands together and say, "flying flying triangle, flying triangle

triangle, triangle triangle triangle."

If you do this right, the room will grow a little warmer while the heart in your chest fills with the fear of perhaps never beating again, only to be relieved with every passing thump.

Step three: Attach Wings to Triangles

Now, it's time to attach the wings. This is the fun part. Simply attach each wing to the triangles, so it looks like this:



As you attach the wings, the triangles may try to fly away. Don't let them! I like to tape them to the floor, but I've seen others use a combination of skull powder and the dreams of an unborn child, instead. Either works! Give the triangles an hour to acclimate to their new wings.

Step four: Arrange Geometry

Once the triangles are capable of flight, let's get the geometry arranged. I like to set my geometry out a few feet away from the triangles to make it easy to do the transfer, but it's up to you how you want to do it. I'm going to use a simple phase of the logistical spirit geometry as an example because it combos really well with the time triangles to create an extremely spicy worldview that shakes your trust of reality to its absolute core. Often, I find myself, months later, in a new place! Set the geometry up, then surround it with the triangles. It will look something like this:



Once that's set up, adjust yourself thirteen degrees off the most northern facing triangle, and commit an act of yearning. Touch each triangle once, turn nine degrees to your right, then rotate around the whole

symbol. With any luck, you'll see a portal of blue flame engulf the whole thing, and the next few months will turn into a complete blur while a spectator controls your every moment.

GLASS BONE PEOPLE, HOLDING A JELLY FIGURE

Far away from land, just underneath the surface of the ocean water, sits a small village where the people have weak, glass bones. This is the only place these people can survive because, on the surface, their glass bones would break apart at the slightest contact. But here, just barely under the sea (in what some people like to call the sunlight zone), they can live without the threat of breaking into a million pieces when they take a step.

The glass bone people live generally simple lives. In the morning, the men scour the sea bed gathering seaweed. The women hunt small fish, usually anchovy, but occasionally a sardine. They combine and cook these over volcano vents near the village.

These people are led by Ewald and, before her, her mother, Wulf, and before her, her mother, Exuperius, and before her, we do not have records. The records,

in case you're wondering, are etched into stone, then stored inside bottles and other land people trash found near the village.

The glass bone people do not communicate with those on the surface directly, but they leave records, histories, and notes. It is in our nature to record our existence, whether we have solid bones or glass bones, or we live in the ocean or on land.

The glass bone people are generally peaceful. After all, they have no major threats. Only a handful of surface people know of their existence, and those who do tend to let the glass bone people be. They could be turned into a sideshow, but that's a fleeting thing, and beyond that, they don't have resources or scientific knowledge, so it's best to leave them as they are.

The glass bone people are fine with this and keep to themselves. They tend not to quarrel with each other, as even a slow-moving punch underwater would result in a broken arm or leg, and what's worth

risking such a thing, anyway?

Under the sea, there isn't much in the way of an economy. They barter, occasionally, if you want to call it that, but the very idea of ownership in the underwater village is non-existent. And without ownership, an economy is pointless.

Hunting, gathering, and cleaning are the main activities. It isn't easy to keep the village clean under the sea. Lot of random trash drifts in throughout the day and, occasionally, a whale carcass will force an entire neighborhood to take weeks off from their basic duties to clean everything up. But everyone does their part, not always out of some selfless desire for the wellbeing of the village but because, if you don't, you end up with a stinky, gross house, and nobody wants that.

The glass bone people do a lot of storytelling and, naturally, that often leads to religions and myths. The jelly figure tale is one of the most popular such myths,

especially amongst the children. In fact, once a year, around this time, the village throws a large festival in honor of the jelly figure.

Imagine a person with no bones, who can float and live in the sea, unhindered by the worry of their glass skeletons shattering into a million pieces. This jelly figure travels around the ocean, exploring every depth, meeting new people and creatures at every turn.

One day, the jelly figure came across a mad angler fish. The angler fish was upset because it was ill. The only way to cure its illness was by eating the male genitalia of a shrimp. "But I can't find any shrimp here," said the angler fish to the jelly figure. "You must save me and capture a shrimp! I have but one week left to live."

The angler fish threatened the jelly figure, saying it'd eat it instead of the shrimp, even if it didn't cure anything. Fearful, the jelly figure agreed to find a

shrimp willing to help.

Floating through the ocean, the jelly figure came across many shrimp and frantically asked if any might be willing to give up their genitalia for an angler fish. The shrimp laughed at the request. "Why would we help that old codger out? He's rude, mean, and eats us up!"

But one shrimp wasn't paying much attention and agreed to the jelly figure's request because it was bored living in shrimp town and wanted a reason to see the rest of the world.

The two traveled back to the angler fish, filling time with small talk. In a moment of quiet, the jelly figure, uneasy with silence, thanked the shrimp for being willing to sacrifice its genitalia to the angler fish.

The shrimp, startled, said, "Oh, I didn't realize I needed to bring that with me. I left it back with the rest of my shrimp friends. We'll have to go back." The jelly figure, annoyed, relented, and the two

returned. "I just have to go get it," the shrimp said, then wandered off underneath a rock.

When the shrimp returned, it smiled at the jelly figure and apologized.

"Why are you apologizing, little shrimp?" asked the jelly figure. "It turns out I'm a female shrimp now, and cannot help you. You should have paid more attention to shrimp biology in your travels." The jelly figure frowned and left. It could hear the laughter of the all the shrimp behind it.

The jelly figure returned to the angler fish and apologized, telling the angler fish it needed more time. But the angler fish, even though it was near death, had enough strength left in to give the jelly figure a good beating. Of course, without bones or much a form, the beating didn't do much good.

Every year, the glass bone people tell this story and celebrate the stupid, but lucky, jelly figure with dolls, statues, and a parade.

MAN FEEDING FRACTALS

On top of the kitchen table we see an apple, rotten, a half glass of milk, curdled, and a bowl, crusted over with the remnants of an oatmeal breakfast. Beneath that table is Octavia, huddled, murmuring to herself. The scene, something like a still life of the mentally damned.

To be honest, the whole house is in disorder. The sink overflows with dishes. The bed is not only unmade, it doesn't even bother with sheets or blankets at all. The mail is impossibly piled up in front of the door, as though some type of portal exists, allowing the mail carrier to slide the mail through the door's bottom gap to the top of a two-foot high pile.

The paddle of tiny feet catches Octavia's ear, and she seems to snap out of whatever fervor she'd been tied up in. Oscar ballet steps his way under the table, leading with a meow that causes Octavia's right eyebrow to rise into the sky.

"I fed you this morning, young man," she says, giving Oscar a pat. "Or no, that's not right at all." She climbs out from underneath the table. "I suppose that must have been yesterday."

Clumsily, she tumbles toward the pantry and pulls out a can of food. Oscar follows, making clear he'll eat as much as she's willing to give. Octavia opens the can, drops the entire thing onto the floor, and idles out of the room, already returning to her previous thoughts.

A knock at the door jostles her back to reality and causes Oscar to temporarily perk up, making him choose between flight or food. He chooses food.

The knocking continues. Octavia opens the door.

"Yes?!" she says before the door's even open.

"Octavia! Dear!" a man says.

"Oh, Frederick." She pauses. "Why are you here?"

"You haven't taught your class in over two weeks,

Octavia." He looks concerned. "People are worried."

"Oh, that." She shrugs. "I'm fine, the students are fine." She gestures for Frederick to come in. "Here, here, let me just show you what I've been up to."

Octavia crosses the room's clutter as though she's hopping between exposed stones in a small stream.

Oscar eyes the whole scene suspiciously.

Octavia shuffles papers around before pulling out a small metallic triangle. "Frederick, remember my lecture, Portals into the Contextless Space in a Visual Transference of Disturbed Plains? I've figured something out since then."

"Octavia, no." Frederick frowns. "You're not still working on that portal theory, are you? It's insanity."

Octavia barely flinches at the word. Oscar, finished with his food, circles the two as they stand.

"Here," she says, forcing the triangle into Frederick's hand. "Don't let your mind wander too far."

The triangle folds open, repeating itself, surrounding Frederick. "Don't let your mind wander, Frederick!" Octavia shouts, but Frederick doesn't seem to listen.

The triangles feed off Frederick's thoughts and continue to repeat, surrounding him. Time stretches out as Octavia looks on. She leans into Frederick's face, looking for something. Oscar watches from a safer distance.

Frederick's eyes finally lock with Octavia for an instant, and then he disappears.

"Well, that's new," Octavia says, looking to Oscar, "and interesting."

She walks over to Oscar and pats his head.

STREAKS IN FRONT OF SKULL

As always, the skull is set up in the middle of the field. The skull is large, about thirty-feet-wide and forty-feet-tall. The skull was found by the town's founder and, every year, the townspeople lug it out to the field for the annual games.

Carlos sits on the sideline, waiting his turn. His too-large-sweatpants bunch up at his ankles. He can't tie the drawstring tight enough, and he has to hold them up with his left hand. His mind is an anxious mess. Turn your anxiety into excitement, his friends would say, but he couldn't. It was just anxiety.

Nobody knows where the skull came from, or what type of creature it belonged to. It's generally human-shaped, but the jaw is sharper, and no ear holes seem to exist. Scientists from around the land used to come to study the skull but, these days, it's just a town prop. But don't let a diminutive word like *prop* make you think the skull doesn't have power. The only thing

that keeps the town from being destroyed by the skull is these games.

It's almost Carlos' turn.

The skull is still of interest to the scientific community. But it's much too dangerous to test, and the world's too hazardous as it is to put oneself into an unnecessarily treacherous situation. It allows itself to be moved back and forth from the field to the cellar below town, but that's only so it can feed.

It's finally Carlos' turn. His fear overtakes him, making it impossible to move. But he slowly gathers his courage as the townspeople cheer him on. He drops his sweatpants to the ground and runs, naked, across the field in front of the skull. The eye sockets in the skull light up, and Carlos' eyes light up in unison. Fire erupts from the skull's mouth, charbroiling Carlos before the skulls sucks his body into its mouth. The remaining townspeople sigh, and the fireworks go off.

CUBE LOOKING DOWN TO FEED

My powers come from feeding, you know. I like to eat, and I can eat a lot because I'm rather large. I eat anything! Some creatures are picky eaters, they'll just eat one type of cricket, or they hate onions, but me, I'll eat anything that comes around. Today, it seems like it's people.

I like the taste of people for a number of reasons. They are filled with a variety of flavors, like rage, melancholy, and guilt. A little bit of guilt goes a long way, though, and if there's too much, the flavor is overwhelming and bitter. Some people are too spicy, like those with a lot of anxiety or grief, but I'll eat them nonetheless. The only one I'll avoid completely is grief, which tends to cause heartburn.

Perhaps my favorite human flavor is passion. Not arousal! Arousal is too sweet, and the flavor quickly turns sour. Passion lasts much longer and tastes like a blend of tart and sweet. When a human is filled with

passion, the flavor lingers for days.

The worst flavor, aside from grief, which I would like much more if not for the heartburn, is loathing. It is not the flavor of loathing alone, but also the texture. It is bumpy and grinds awkwardly against the tongue. It gets caught in your throat. And days, sometimes weeks, will go by and you'll still taste it in your mouth. It's a most unfortunate flavor, and I wish humans would be better at showing it so I could avoid eating them.

I don't *think* any of these humans standing oddly by the fire are showing signs of loathing. I might as well eat them and see. Oh! Two are mostly passion, what luck! One is a little filled with grief, but I don't see it becoming a problem. I can't decide if I should eat this last one. They're looking at me a bit oddly. Oh, what the heck, you only live once!

Oh my! That's a surprise, schadenfreude! I saved the best one for last. A complex flavor, schadenfreude is

uncommon, and like a mystical truffle, it only comes about at the end of a meal. A wonderfully bitter flavor, it has shimmers of tart and sour but goes down as smoothly as a good passion or anger. What luck I've had today!

CHILDREN SEATED IN A BOOK

Six children, all about the size of a thumbtack, sit arranged in a circle inside an open copy of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. It is open to a page which reads: Will it ultimately reach the clear surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the magnetism of an identical moment has traveled so far to importune, to disturb, to rise out of the very depths of my being?

There is Antonio, who was once Charlotte, who was once Toni. Antonio is the leader of the group. He pushes the others to do their work, to remember what needs remembering, and to move on with things. When he is not working on his administrative duties, logging the memories of each other child, he works on his own, though he doesn't get enough time to do so.

Frank was once known as Francis, but if he's honest, nobody really called him that. It's always been Frank.

Francis is not a name people use these days. Frank is working on his personal timeline. He is reconstructing, through linear time, his life, from Francis to Frank, with as much accuracy as he can recall.

For example, he got his cat, Marvel, at age three. He originally named her Lightning, but the name didn't feel right. He then changed it to Cat, but that felt silly. With some help from his older sister, he decided Marvel was the right name. This naming of the cat happened between two other events: when his father pushed him into a wall, and when Marvel, after weeks of caution, finally hopped up onto Frank's bed and slept alongside him.

Carol has always been Carol, for better or worse, she'll say. Carol thinks Frank's linear timeline is ridiculous, as time is a pointless construct our memories don't naturally adhere to. Instead, much to the frustration of Antonio, Carol writes her notes anew every day, free form, starting from whatever she

thinks about in the morning and moving to whatever she thinks about next.

Her most recent notes reads: It was a cold morning with a foot of snow on the ground. We took the sled out. The sled was a gift. Gifts are what I remember most, like the pack of batteries I once opened first, before a larger gift that needed batteries. Parents think they are funny when they do these types of things, but they're not. My parents were especially annoying with these types of ideas, constantly teasing and toying with me.

Her mind, she'll tell you, is wrapped up like a pile of cables, disorganized and chaotic, different every day.

Stefon has toyed with the idea of being known as Stef but is unsure who their true self is. Stefon struggles with memory, to the point that Antonio often scolds them for not doing enough work each day. Stefon remembers things in bits and tends to record each memory onto an index card.

These are short thoughts, like "The time I flipped over my bike and had to walk home with blood on my face," and, "When the older boy at school made fun of the music I was listening to on my Discman even though he didn't even know what it was." Stefon shuffles and reshuffles these every morning, trying to recall more pieces, but he usually ends up adding more index cards with more thoughts disconnected from the rest.

Angela, who goes by Alaska now, refuses this exercise altogether. Antonio pleads with her every day. "Just a sentence or two," he'll say, but Angela will do no such thing.

"I refuse to take these ideas out of my head and put them into the world," she says. Instead of remembering like the rest of the children, she spends her days thinking up new things but keeps it all to herself.

Finally, there is Sean, who remembers everything

perfectly and clearly. Sean took to the exercise on the first day, recording each thing he remembered, and has not stopped since. His notes are meticulous, abundant, and filled with the minutiae of life.

"Picked up stick, the sun was setting."

"Sat on a hill, pulling up grass and tossing it into the wind."

"Held sand in my right hand and watched as it slowly dissolved away."

Sean never attaches emotion to his notes, instead, relying on the physical acts of being.

It is said that once the children finish their work, they can move along with their lives. When they were brought here, Antonio was told to keep the children on track, to finish, but he has found it hard. He still hopes they're growing closer each day.

PORTRAIT OF A MAN SEATED ON A RAINBOW

"Move to your left a little. No, sorry, *my* left, move to your right. No, look, just hold, no, okay, stay right there, I'll move."

Regina's frustrated with me, I can tell. These portraits always bring out the worst in both of us. There was a point, not long ago, where we'd do these sorts of photos with special effects in apps. You remember the ones, I'm sure, where you point the camera at yourself and a silly animation or sponsored brand message pops up over your head. Those were the good old days, when this was all so much easier. God, I feel old saying that, but it's true. Things were easier back then.

There's a tendency to feel like things changed suddenly, but when I think back through the evolution of social presentation, it moved more like a glacier, inching itself deeper and deeper into our lives

as automation and government subsidies freed us to spend more time on ourselves.

I can vividly remember the pitches of this new world, "when money and wealth become meaningless," they told us, "you'll be free to cultivate talent and intellect and make the world a better place." Of course, that's not what happened. Without money, people found new ways to show off their wealth, and social presentation became the new gold standard.

"Okay, I'm going to try and snap a few from here," Regina calls out. I can barely hear her over the buzzing of the rainbow. I remember as a kid being told rainbows were just tricks of light. It's funny how wrong we can be, sometimes. "Smile!" Regina yells. I smile. I assume she has the telephoto lens on me, but I can't quite make her out.

As more people learned and grew their minds, it became difficult to assert social and political dominance. For a while, this seemed to work in

everyone's favor. We all worked together to create new technologies, to tamp down and improve on long running issues, and give everyone in the world a baseline living standard. But in doing so, strands of our old world were never totally destroyed.

As leisure time increased, we spent more time documenting our new lives of doing less. Someone smarter than me can probably detail this better, but for my own part, I felt a deep loss when I'd lost my job and turned to social to feel better. I never knew how to fill my time, and the constant pursuit of bettering humanity was emotionally taxing, if I'm honest. We like to think, when given unlimited resources and opportunity, humanity will create great things, but it turns out that's only partially true.

"Okay, just one more angle and we're done!" Regina yells. I wave back in acknowledgement, trying my best to hide my annoyance.

I'm starting to feel a little woozy up here. I've heard

you shouldn't spend more than a few minutes sitting on a rainbow. Something to do with the stability of the waves. They can only exist in our world for a set time even if you're observing them. They used to up signs that read: Don't take your eyes off them unless you have a parachute!

At some point, we all grew bored with the digital special effects of photos. People started recreating similar pictures in the real world. It started innocently enough, with detailed face painting or props. But these types of things are never good enough as they are. People will push and push and push.

Soon enough, social presentation became a commodity. It was a way to show how much better you were than others. Whether that was through pure artistic talent, engineering, or, in some cases—perhaps even this one right here—guts.

And then here we are, I guess. With me sitting two miles in the air, my feet dangling off this highly

unstable, buzzing death trap, just so Regina can snap a picture that hopefully improves our social standing.

"Okay, Lamar! I think I got a few good one!"

I flip my legs over the rainbow and slide back to the ground.

MAN WEARS GEOMETRIC OUTLINE OF WOMAN'S HEAD

Two people sit on a bench, underneath a gazebo, waiting for a storm to pass.

The person on the left is dressed conservatively, wearing a sweater, jeans, and a pigeon-faced mask.

The person on the right wears a pink button-up, purple pants, and their face is obscured by a geometric outline of a woman's head.

The two sit quietly for a bit. Both stare straight ahead.

The one with the geometric outline of a woman's head breaks the silence. "Such an odd storm," they say, outwardly—not directed at the person with the pigeon-faced mask—but out into the world. The voice comes out harmonizing with itself, a low tone and high tone, like two people speaking at once. A silence weighs between them, briefly.

"I remember seeing something like this a few years ago," the one with the pigeon-faced mask says.

"Lightning clusters in the city, electric hail in the mountains." The pigeon-faced person's voice is muffled, like an anonymous whistle-blower on the nightly news.

The voice doesn't suit the pigeon aspect of the public persona but customized voice alteration takes some technical know-how. The modding community is out there and offers hundreds of voice settings, from cats meowing to gender swap to Russian accents, but most people don't bother to change their settings from the defaults.

"Ah," says the one with a geometric outline of a woman's head. "I stayed inside up until about two years ago, so I must have missed it."

The one with the pigeon face finally turns to look at the one with the geometric outline of a woman's head. Behind the mask, right above the beak, eyes

move up and down, taking in the whole picture of the one with a geometric outline of a woman's head.

"You're lucky, you know," the pigeon-faced one says. "It was really miserable for a while there." A lightning ball cracks behind the gazebo, and both of them glance over at it, briefly. The ball spins in place, electricity popping and whizzing around it before it disappears with a loud *pop*.

"I've been outside my whole life," continues the pigeon-faced one. "I worry a lot of about what they know about me from my youth, before the masks were popular. You know, when I was a kid, we'd just wear surgical masks to hide our faces. How naive we were thinking that would work!"

The one with the geometric outline of a woman's head leans over closely to the pigeon-faced one. "I'd be lying if I said it didn't get a bit lonely, though. Everyone in my block was a bit boring. That's why I ended up leaving, to see who else existed."

"A good approach," says the pigeon-faced one. "I met my partner outside in a park just like this, on the other side of the city, Benedicia Nuka Gardens. Have you been?"

"No," says the one with a geometric outline of a woman's head.

"It's wonderful," says the pigeon-faced one. "If you like this park, I highly recommend it, especially once the electric storms calm down. It's amazing seeing so many people gather at one spot. Sometimes dozens, I've heard, but I've never seen so many people in a single place at once."

"That does sound wonderful. I'll make a note to go there. Finding new people outside your block is so hard."

"Don't I know it."

The two return to silence. The storm continues, seemingly disinterested in slowing down. "I'm going

to miss my transfer, so I guess I have to go out into this," says the one with a geometric outline of a woman's head. "It was nice meeting you."

"Likewise," says the pigeon-faced one. "Go to that park sometime."

"I will."

The one with a geometric outline of a woman's head nods and gives a slight wave before jogging out into the storm.

DOORS IN DISTANCE

Almost two-hundred-fifty years ago, Archibald Winter was out for his evening stroll when he discovered the first doors. Initially, Winter, a roofer by trade, was flummoxed by the fact the doors were, by all appearances, just floating in air. But we've gotten used to those sorts of things.

Winter may have been a roofer, but he was a man of many talents. After spotting the doors, he writes in his diary, he simply, "went through the first one." He continues, "the world on the other side was, for as far as I could see, identical to the one here, yet felt different. I could walk back and forth between the door with my eyes closed and know which side—that is, this one or *that*—I was on."

Nowadays, few of us even notice the doors, or the people who temporarily pop through them. Just the other day, I saw a confused woman clear a doorway while holding a donut, only to widen her eyes in fear

and back through the door where she came. I didn't bother to slow down from the rapid pace I walked. I'd argue the only reason I even noticed was because I was doing research for this very article.

We haven't learned much about the doors since Winter's initial discovery. Scientists prodding and poking hasn't gotten us anywhere, and Winter's first act of walking through the door is the best form of testing we have even today. The doors go *there*, or they stay here sometimes, but it's thought that, perhaps, even when they stay, they have indeed gone *somewhere*.

A skewed plane the researchers like to call it, a term coined by Winter in his diary. "When you're on the other side, everything is just a little bit different, the same, you know, but different, like a skewed plane, where you know you are wrong but can't say why you feel that way."

Of his fifty-six years of life, twenty-two of them after the discovery of the doors. Winter traveled through

the doors over four hundred times. Yet his notes were never more complex than the first sentences he wrote after the first door. The discovery was enough to pull Winter away from roofing, at least, and the government was happy to set him up with a small financial stipend to cover his continued trips across the threshold of all the doors as they appeared.

When Winter died of a heart attack earlier this year, it felt like we'd lost one of the last great explorers. By the time he died, Winter had tagged nine-hundred-forty-three doors across the world himself, though he'd only been able to walk through around half of those.

According to the Threshold Binding Agency, TBA, which was created to track the doors as they appeared, 8,503 doors have appeared since Winter walked through his first door. Nine people have been lost after walking through them, forty-three people emigrated here after the doors closed behind them, and four cats have wandered through the doors and

never returned.

The next time you see those doors off in the distance, spare a thought for Winter and his pioneering spirit. And let's not forget just how strange they truly are.

SLUMS OF GOLD FULL OF CREATURES WITH METAL HANDS

Arthur enters back into the neighborhood on the bridge side. Ever since the bombings, the main gateway's been closed, and it's much easier to get in this way. It's nearly dawn as he makes his way down the narrow alleys back to his house and walks in the front door.

Arthur used to have to sneak carefully when he came home but, nowadays, nobody pays attention. Arthur's dad is fighting on the front lines on the other side of the city. His mom, once a doctor at the hospital, is stuck taking care of the injured fighters. His older sister, Toni, delivers food and water every couple of days. Sometimes, she stays and chats with him, but even though the city is crumbling around them, she's still a teenager with better things to do than hang out with her younger brother. So, Arthur is mostly left to do as he pleases.

Arthur spent last night at his friend Devin's house, which is why he was making his way back home so early. Devin lives on the north side, colloquially known as Slums of Gold due to the gaudy gold trim that adorns all the buildings there. At some point in history, some point very long ago Arthur imagines, Devin's neighborhood much have been considered elegant.

Now, the gold trim, broken chandeliers, and marble floors are signs of poverty, reserved only for those who can't afford to insulate their homes themselves. Devin's place, like Arthur's, is freezing most of the time.

Arthur visits Devin almost every day. He doesn't have much else to do and there's no fighting over by Devin's house. Arthur is too young to take care of himself and not old enough to fight. The best time to travel between the neighborhoods is at night, when the fighting stops. It's not totally safe, as the metal hands positioned around the city are capable of

catching you at any time of day.

Arthur's dad used to tell him stories about the hands. How once, long ago, people feared the metal eyes that watched over them. But as time went on, people grew used to the eyes. Since the eyes could watch, but not act, they weren't threatening. Then the metal hands showed up. The hands worked together with the eyes. The city was given a body.

The eyes watched over the city while the hands operated faster than any police force could. Eventually, the system also operated as judge and executioner, often carrying out a sentencing before human authorities arrived. The machines were better at policing than any human police force ever was.

But the people of the city noticed issues with the system. The metal hands would injure people for minor infractions, like when a small child dropped a candy wrapper and the wind took it away before he could pick it up. Littering, the citation said, as the

metal hands crushed the bones in the child's hands into dust.

As people started to get worried, the weather turned, and everyone forgot about the hands and eyes. That was three years ago. The sun has only broken through the clouds a couple of times since then. Temperatures haven't risen above ten degrees Fahrenheit. The neighborhoods began to fight over supplies until, eventually, the whole city seemed to erupt in chaos.

But the eyes still watched the streets, and the metal hands still grabbed anyone who broke the law. In most of the fighting zones, the equipment was destroyed, but not in the Slums of Gold. Nobody goes there. So, the machines continue to watch and rule, untethered from human supervision.

Arthur has memorized where the hands and eyes are. When you know that much, it's easy to avoid them. You can do whatever you want and watch the hands

grasp at the air, attempting to grab onto whatever they can. With a strong mechanical grip, a shirt sleeve is all they need to hold you down. But Arthur has a good memory, so he plots his way through the hands elegantly.

The machine remembers everything. At some point, the eyes saw Arthur break the law, and they'll never let him through the neighborhood, even though no human police care anymore. There are no politicians. No judges. If he's caught, he would either be crushed by the hand immediately, or held until he died of exposure.

It's worth the risk for Arthur. His other option is to sit home alone, lying awake as gunshots ping off walls.

STEAMING SPHERE INSIDE CITY

Aldi sits inside her sphere, eating a sandwich. She thinks about Marcus, sitting at home on his day off, probably watching a movie.

Outside the sphere, the city vibrates with action. As people blur past her, Aldi sets the sandwich down, turns a few knobs, and the people outside click into a normal pace. She returns to her sandwich.

She's not supposed to eat on the clock. In the manual, it specifically says: Set Sphere to Idle when taking breaks. But Aldi forgot her book today, and with nothing else to look at, she might as well get some work done while eating.

According to the sphere's chronometer, it's sometime between 2044 and 2056. When it comes to time observation, these things are never as accurate as you think they'd be. Aldi eyes the passersby closely, paying attention to their fashion and the technology they

wear.

Aldi writes down a few notes in a small journal, then pulls out a massive book. She flips through it for a few minutes before finding what she's looking for, a pair of headphones she spotted on a passerby. They were released in 2052.

A couple minutes later, she sees a boy wearing special edition sneakers she recognizes from the 2054 Olympics. That puts her sometime between 2054 and 2056. Close enough. She writes it down in her notes.

Aldi leans back in her chair, and the sphere rotates to better accommodate her. Her job is to sit and watch. It doesn't matter *when* she lands, so much, as long as it's a time she hasn't been before. The sphere is invisible to those in the present she's observing. It's only visible in her current time, where it sits, aflame, in a city colored in the permanent sunset of a world on fire.

When humans figured out time travel, it felt like a monumental discovery, but we quickly learned it wasn't as useful as we'd hoped. But it was profitable.

The first time machine is nearly identical to the Aldi's sphere, only lacking the comforts and nice-to-haves of hers. Like Aldi's the first machine was limited to space but not time. So, it can move backwards and forwards through time but cannot move even an inch to the left or right. If the traveler steps out of the machine, they, along with the machine, are instantly returned to their present. When the machine moves through time, it only moves the person inside's *observational* abilities. Which is to say, nobody else can see the machine when it stops.

Because the machines were limited to observational space, the company who invented them, Astral Projects, sold millions. If you can only observe time through a small port hole in a single space, the best way to see all of time is to put time travel units all over the world. Unfortunately, when they're moving

the travelers through time, they burn a bright orange flame. As the units got more popular, the skies of the world turned orange, regardless of the time of day.

Aldi continues taking notes in her journal. Her job is to record what she sees, a historian of sorts, though it doesn't come with the prestige we'd usually associate with that title. As the machines grew in popularity, Astral Projects realized they could profit both on tourism and data collection.

The tourism was easy. There were only so many historical hot spots worth enough to justify the cost (and lines) of a specific location. For everywhere else, Astral Projects developed a system to tap contract workers to hop in a machine, record their findings, and get paid. "Work anytime," Astra Projects, says in the tagline for its program.

A man passes by, arguing loudly with another man about a stock price. Aldi notes the stock, cross references it in her book with The Crash, and puts a

checkmark next to the name. A group of teens talks about a band Aldi hasn't heard of and doesn't appear in her books. She writes down as much as she can before they pass, noting their excitement and their description of the sound, celestial hardcore noise wave. She pulls out her personal notebook and writes down the band name there, too.

A timer buzzes inside the sphere, and Aldi stops taking notes. It's time to go back. She flips a few switches, turns a knob, and presses the Return button on her keyboard. Thankfully, the return trip is more accurate than the initial launch backwards.

CHILDREN SEATED IN FRONT OF BOMB

1. Nigel, Erica, and Bernadette sit in front of the bomb on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.
2. Jose, Cary, and Oscar sit in front of the bomb on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.
3. Sundays, nobody sits in front of the bomb, as per rule 49.998-3(b).
4. Each of the bomb sitters are under ten years old, as per rule 248.3490-88.
5. There are three self-identified male bomb sitters, and three self-identified female bomb sitters, but all three of each gender cannot sit together on the same day, as per rule 340.349999-(c).
6. Each familial house must donate one child every sixteen years, as per rule 2344.44-N.

On Mondays, I wake up around 6 a.m. My mom is usually already awake making my breakfast. On Mondays, I get a special breakfast—pancakes with chocolate chips—but every other day I just get cereal, or sometimes granola. I don't know why Monday is so special.

After breakfast, my dad takes me to the bomb. My dad says I have to sit here three days a week until it happens. I don't know what *it* is or what happens, but I do know that, at least, I don't have to go to school until it does. I sit with Nigel and Erica. I don't really like Nigel because all he wants to talk about is video games, but Erica is okay. She likes the same movies I like and, sometimes, we read the same books.

We read a lot of books because there's not much else to do while we sit in front of the bomb. We have to sit from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. while our parents are at work. When it's 5 p.m., we get to leave and go home. I get to bring my own sack lunch and, sometimes, Erica and Nigel and I trade snacks because Nigel's

mom always gives him pudding, and my mom only gives me an apple. But, sometimes, Nigel *wants* an apple, so it's okay.

Anyway, on Mondays, my mom always makes the three of us tacos for dinner. I think since we have to sit together all day that we shouldn't have to eat together, but I guess that's just how it is. On Wednesdays, we go to Nigel's house, and his mom makes us spaghetti, and on Fridays, we go to Erica's house, and her dad makes us hamburgers.

I like Mondays the best because of the pancakes and the tacos. But also because Erica and I have our book club. We invite Nigel just because my mom tells me we have to, but he only likes adventure books, and we don't usually read adventure books because Erica and I think they're boring. I like murder-mysteries, and Erica likes scary books, so we usually switch between those. Last week, we read *Haunted Signs on Tranor Manor* and, this week, we're reading *The Look of the Past*.

When it's not a bomb day, I just go to school like normal. Sometimes, the teachers are really happy to see me for some reason. But, sometimes, they look annoyed. Especially Oscar's dad, the gym teacher. He always looks both mad and sad to see me. But maybe that's just how he looks.

In our class, we have a live feed of the bomb. So, I see the other kids sitting there. It's weird because that means when I'm there, the class can see me there. My teacher says that's because of the rules. She says watching the bomb is just part of life.

In my history class, we're taught that the bomb is important because of the cycle. If the cycle is broken, then it will be bad for all of us. Nobody talks about what that means. I don't know if the bomb has ever been bad for everyone before, but I guess that's why we watch it.

When I'm older, I won't have to watch the bomb anymore. Or if it's bad for everyone. Or if it's only

bad for the other three kids. That's what my dad says. He says that because of numbers, it'll probably be fine, and I shouldn't worry. Instead, I should focus more on my schoolwork when I'm at the bomb. I guess he watches the live TV, too.

I hope that whatever happens with the bomb happens when I'm there because I want to know what my parents know. I think if I'm not there, then maybe I'll miss it, and I won't know, even with the live TV.

Sometimes, I also have trouble understanding what happens on the TV, and it's easier if I can be there. So, hopefully, that'll happen soon because I'm almost ten years old, and the rules say I can't be that old.

HUMAN FIGURE WITH LARGE BABY MODEL

Hello, sir! May I come in? No? Well, that's okay. I can do my pitch from right here on your porch. Sir, please, I don't mean to be a bother, but if you'll just give me two minutes of your time, I'll be sure to make it worth your while. Yes sir, just two minutes, I promise. Why thank you! I do appreciate that.

Now, sir, what you'll see behind me here is our newest baby model. It's rather large, yes, quite large indeed. And, friend, I'm here to tell you it's the best thing we've ever made. Now, what's that? Oh, yes, we have small and medium sizes, as well, but the large baby model is the best of the bunch, I promise you that.

If you'll just step forward a bit. Yes, friend, just like that. Now, why don't you lean in and take a look at the baby model. You can't tell the difference between a real baby and this, right? It's perfect, and here's the kicker, this baby model doesn't need to be fed or have

its diaper changed. It's the perfect accessory to a day out in the park, and it doesn't create any waste.

It'll give your partner the satisfaction and comfort of a real baby, but you won't have to worry about it turning into a horrible person when it grows up. Plus, and this is the real kicker, friend, it doesn't use up any valuable resources.

Now then, let's just take a second here and appreciate this on a technical level. It's a full 300 mAh battery, with carbon skeletal structure and full waterproofing if you get caught out in the rain. This baby will last the day, and more if you disable GPS.

The large baby model also has all the features of the small and medium models, which includes the mute function many of our customers love, but it also comes with, and I'm not going to lie, this is the big selling point for me, a hidden touchscreen. Yes sir, just go ahead and push in the button on the baby's eye, and the stomach flips out like so. This way, you can

load up the baby into a stroller, but still keep an eye on the game.

That's my favorite feature, but a lot of people really like the built-in voice assistant. Here, listen to this, "Hey, Baby, what's the weather going to be today?" See, and just like that, you have access to a world of knowledge. You can change the name, of course, as you see fit. Baby is just the default.

Now, what do you say, sir? Can I put you down for one? Two? Maybe your partner is home, and they have an opinion? Sir, please, that's very rude. Sir, no, well, okay then, you have a great day. Goodbye.

CHICKEN TUBE IN FRONT OF MUSICAL MEAT

"Charlie, can you see?" asks the man.

"Yes, Dad!"

Charlie and his father sit in their seats, left center, on the balcony level. It's the boy's first opera. *The Magic Flute*.

The orchestra is set up in an exposed pit. To the father and Charlie, the orchestra appears tiny, like little plastic army figures holding instruments instead of weapons.

The father points. "Charlie, can you see? Stage right we have the 1st violin and cello, stage left, viola, 2nd violin. Bass, clarinet, bassoon, harps in the middle, with percussion, trumpets, piano at the back, hidden behind that little wall."

The boy is fascinated, not by the instruments but the

players. "Are those people?" Charlie asks.

"Yes!" the dad replies, maybe a little too excitedly for theater patrons nearby, who give him snooty scowls. He continues, "The Musical Meat Orchestra. One of the only human orchestras who still perform."

The boy looks sad.

"It's okay, Charlie," says the dad. "The synthetics do a better job, but I think it's important, historically, for you to see this once. So, you know what it was like before."

Charlie nods and asks, "How long ago were the human orchestras?"

"Oh, I don't know." The man pauses. "They were pretty common when I was a kid, so maybe thirty years ago or so? It wasn't until I was a teen—just a bit older than you—they started to phase out completely after the tech breakthroughs of the geometric era."

Charlie frowns a little, squinting to see the front of the stage. The father follows Charlie's stare.

"Oh," the father says, "the chicken tube, as usual, operates as the conductor."

Charlie gives his dad his best critical eyes.

"The chicken tubes aren't just for managing home security, they power almost everything," the dad says.

"Can you see how it moves inside the tube?" He points.

Charlie squints as hard as he can. "Yes?"

"That's the cooling system you can see moving. The chicken tube itself is always obscured."

"Oh," says Charlie, clearly confused. "But why is it in front?"

"Tradition," the dad says. *Tradition* being the father's codeword for "I have no idea."

Charlie leans back in his seat, guarded, suspecting his father of tall tales. Before Charlie can think it through, the lights go down.

The Magical Flute begins. Charlie relaxes into his seat. The father wonders how he'll explain the suicide scene when it comes up.

GHOST WITH THREE EYES BEARING TIME TURTLE

Argenti stands on the outskirts of the fabric of reality, wondering what it was exactly he'd gotten up to do in the first place. He knows there was some purpose, at some point in time, but what was it? And why is he holding a time turtle?

This would take some detective work.

Stepping back through his newly developed third eye, willing the time turtle to drive him into the past, Argenti pictures himself as he was ten minutes ago.

Argenti stands on a cliffside, looking out over a vast land of rolling green hills. He senses someone is near him. He turns to find his son, Alandi, facing him with a weapon in his hand.

"Father."

"Son."

Alandi looks at Argenti squarely, sizing him up. Questions roll down his face. "You're here then, again," he says, not a question, but not quite a statement either.

"I am," Argenti replies. Right. Now he remembers. Did he remember this the first time? Or is the memory of what he's thinking in the next ten minutes new? He'll need to get ahold of the time turtle to know for sure.

"We don't have to do this," Argenti says, a stern fatherly warning with a hint of pleading.

"We do, though," Alandi says. "It's already the case."

"Hrm," Argenti says.

"Hrm," Alandi says.

"Is it possible I can make a request?" Argenti asks.

"Of course, Father," Alandi says.

"I'd like to take a turtle with me, so I can remember this moment again."

"Sure, Father." And Alandi drives a spear through his father's eyes.

The world turns white for Argenti, then fades to a purple and sits there, threatening to go black, but being unsure of itself. Argenti feels his body ease into place as the hole from the spear mends itself into a small painted eye. He's standing now, or perhaps he *was* standing before, but now he's sure of himself, standing. Will the boy deliver the turtle?

At his feet is a turtle. Argenti leans down and picks it up.

GHOST BELLS BELOW METAL MOON

A man stands on a small pedestal. Children circle around him, sitting cross-legged. It's dark out, but the light of two full moons is plenty for everyone to see the man as he speaks. One moon is a bright white, the other, a deep silver.

"When the bells ring," the man says, "you'll know the time has come." The man points to the sky. "You'll hear them ring no matter where you are, and they'll be loud enough to wake you. When they do, the metal moon will hang low, and we'll be able to leave."

The children get excited by this idea.

"Yes, children, we're close. I know you are anxious to leave, but we must wait for the right time." The man pauses. "Do you remember what happened to Ariby when he tried to escape early?"

The kids whisper to each, "he fell off the side," one says, "he was eaten by the machine," another mutters,

"there's no air outside so he suffocated," said a third.

After the children calm down, the man continues, "Yes, outside of this place is dangerous, and none of us would survive. Ariby knew better but chose death because he'd lost hope. I still have hope, and I believe you should, too."

The man steps down from the pedestal and walks through the children. "We were trapped here five years ago," he points to a wall with daily markings on it, "yet we survived. We have no food, no water, and no contact with anyone, yet we persevere. I do not pretend to understand how this works, but I do know it is a blessing to us."

The children shuffle around, rocking back and forth, eyes wandering. They've heard this before—hundreds of times at this point—and they're ready to get back to their duties. The only part of the story they want to hear is about the bells. Beyond that, they'd rather live in their doldrums.

"We have not aged, nor have we progressed," he grabs his face, showing the lack of progress on his beard, "yet we carry on." He trails off. The children aren't paying attention anymore, and why should they? He's delivered this speech every day, trying to keep their hopes alive. Trying to keep them occupied. Trying to keep himself from losing hope.

Five years ago, the man, a scout leader, took his pack into the local state park for a weekend of camping. They set up camp in the same place they did every year, ate, then fell asleep. When they woke up, they were in a new place. This place felt like a void, with two full moons hanging low in the sky. The moons never moved. The days never progressed. When the man walked the perimeter of the campsite, he found nothing. Not nothing as in nothing useful, but nothing as in *nothing*. Beyond the camp simply *wasn't*.

Within the first few days, Ariby, a boy with the hubris of a Victorian explorer pushed outward into the void and never returned. He told his friends he was, "fed

up with waiting."

After that, the man had to create hope for the kids because, otherwise, they'd follow Ariby. He remembered reading about how coffins once had bells inside of them so the coffin's occupant might ring for help if they turned out to be alive. So, he mythologized the bells. He made it their rescue story. The bells ring, and one of the moons descends down, revealing itself as not a moon, but a spaceship. It carries them away, back home, safely to the right time and place.

He's told this story every day since Ariby left. Nothing has changed.

The children disperse from their circle. The man continues muttering, walking between the kids as they draw in the dirt or play cards. He pauses at the edge of the campsite. Looking at the nothing. His head aches. His ears ring. He steps out into it.

MAN WITH ROBOT IN BEET CAVERN

The man waddles into a cavern, arms filled with the beets he harvested early in the day. As he gets to the back of the cavern, he drops the beets and lets out a sigh.

Bzz bzz bbb bzzz bbb bbzzz bb

"No," the man replies.

Bss bbb bbb bzz bzzz bzzz bzzzzzz

"Yes," the man replies.

He sits down by the fire. He's been moving the beets into the cavern for hours, preparing for the winter. In just a few weeks, it'll be too hot for the vegetables, and everything he doesn't bring into the cavern will shrivel and die.

In the back corner of the cavern, covered in beets, is a small robotic head. It once had arms and legs attached to it, but those were destroyed long ago.

The head can predict the weather. That's it. But it's enough for the man. The head warns him of heat and cold waves. The man prepares for each season as best he can.

Every four or five months, the world burns. The heat waves spread across the land, burning everything. Beets seem resilient enough to be replanted, so he lives off beets. During this time, he stays in the cavern, with the head.

"How much time between the next two seasons?" the man asks.

Bzz wbbb bbb zzzzzz wwwwbb

"I see," the man replies. "Not enough to go searching."

Between burns, the man goes looking for others. He doesn't find anyone. With planting and harvesting the beets, he doesn't have much time. Survival takes a lot of work, it turns out.

"Any word from anyone?" the man asks.

Nbdb jdjjj bzzz www

"Of course," the man replies. The head either can't get access to the wider network, or there's no wider network left. The man always asks, anyway, hoping something has changed. He's not sure the head would tell him if it did connect to someone, so he has to ask.

Cccn bzzz bbbbbb

"Yes, yes, I'll get back to it," the man says. He pauses and looks at the head. "Thank you."

DECOMPOSING LITTLE MOUNTAINS

I used to be a lot larger, you know. But time has a way with mountains like me. It shrinks us down, slowly. Every day, I'm smaller. I'm tired and worn.

My body is still large compared to most, mind you. And I contain multitudes. Caves twist through my body, cluttered and backed-up like the intestines of an aging cow. Trees grow on my back like little hairs, thinning out on the top before finally disappearing entirely across my bald crown. I wake up each morning with a quiet groan and a shudder, shaking away the dew collected on my body overnight.

My life has been mostly uneventful, at least until the time of humans. Before humans, time moved much slower. Climates changed, sure, but it all took a long time. I was taller then, you know, much taller. My back wasn't bent in the awkward ways it is now, and the trees were much thicker, even up here at the top. But I can't be too nostalgic. I looked and felt better,

yes, but time happens to all of us. Reminiscing about old times just makes us hostile to the present.

At first, I'd get just a few humans walking over me, perhaps with a horse or two. It felt pleasant, like to the light massage of a hail storm. Humans were much louder than the animals who'd lived alongside my body before, but I didn't mind. At least at first. But then they started trying to change me into something I wasn't.

If you look here, you'll see a scar across my belly where humans made a railroad. It was a tourist attraction, if you'd believe that. The Mountain Railway Company came and started carving into me. Nine years and seven miles later, the railway attraction opened up. Many bodies are buried in shallow graves along that line.

Now, take a look here, at the end of the line, do you see the circular scar? That's where they put a hotel. It operated for a scant twelve years. The hotel had

eighty rooms and looked as though someone plucked a building out of another country and plopped it down on the middle of my stomach. It never seemed that popular, but it's difficult for me to judge those types of things.

One day, a wind blew through and took the roof off. Something inside sparked a fire, and it didn't take long for the entire building to burn down, leaving the scar you see now. These winds are pretty common around me—they're part of the reason I'm smaller than I used to be—but the humans fail to account for such things with their flimsy buildings.

With the hotel gone, eventually, humans came back for the steel railroad lines. I'd overheard something about a war and the need to scavenge metals. It all sounded boring so I didn't pay much attention.

I liked that the war was quiet for me. Humans typically left me alone. I thought they were perhaps gone for good, that maybe their war had gotten rid of

them all.

That didn't turn out to be the case, sadly. And when their war ended, they came back with their shovels and their trucks to dig even deeper than they had with the railway. They started with a highway that dug across my entire body. They sliced into my peaks and left missile silos behind.

When I thought the worst of it was over, the tourists came in their cars. Every day, they'd drive across my body, stopping to take photos of themselves in the morning light.

Time has a way with us, though. My body is smaller and older, yes, but the world around me is aging, too. As it does, the winds dig deeper into me. The winds cause sparks, which create fires, which gets rid of my few remaining trees, which means when it rains, it floods, and when it floods, my body falls away in landslides.

Humans do not get to see themselves decompose in this type of detail. Their lives are too short. They cannot see the context of their existence. I was born in a rupture of fire and chaos and began dying immediately. But I cannot complain.

My life has been good, overall, even with the rough patches. My scars have made me stronger. Or, at least, that's what I tell myself. I try not to think about it too much. But as my body erodes, the scars seem to get more vibrant. The scars gain importance with time, morphing from a small memory to defining feature. I try and tell myself they're not important. I've lived a long and interesting life defined by more than these few moments. But the tolls of that long life have eroded away.





