

A lone rider descends by the sand dunes overlooking the vast, endless desert, dusty wind sharply battering his face. His flesh, born from the labor of motors and steel, feels no pain, only registers the input from each granular contact point and sets the data aside for a later date. Mountains of debris pile high, crude appendages to the once majestic desert landscape, among which lie his destination. Refocusing his ocular lenses, he locates his target on the horizon — the last museum on the face of Earth.

After the Migration, the area has long since been abandoned. As its climate is not hospitable to the manufactured anatomy of automaton caretakers, the Committee saw no use in further developing it and left it untouched. There are no plans to incorporate the land into the system, but our rider arrives for a different administrative purpose. Rumor has it that a madman gathered all he could of Earth's junk in one place before the Migration and maintained the last "museum" known to man. Though he was seen as foolish at the time (who would refuse immortality, guaranteed pleasure, and infinite enjoyment?), the committee soon realized the political value of his silly trinkets: the stories, the ideas they could produce through their existence alone. Thus, to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of humanity's glorious victory over death itself, the pioneers of the Digital Revolution commissioned a universal Earth Museum for citizens of all domains to freely traverse. Our rider, a caretaker, arrives at the site to document the mundane remnants of life on Earth.

He doesn't understand the purpose of his mission, yet he carries on nonetheless. He is programmed to carry out the wishes of mankind, to nourish, sustain it, and maintain it. No more, and no less. As he prepares to search the gallery, a curiosity on the reception desk catches his eye. There lies a yellowing envelope, pressed under a skeleton's hand. His inclination to capture information and knowledge drives him to retrieve it and carefully remove its fragile seal. In it, a hastily folded letter. He unfurls it and begins to read.

Many are the wonders, the terrors, and none is more wonderful, more terrible than man. And I loved the wonders and terrors of man so! I was willing to put my life on the line to protect them. But my defense never had to come to that. People were content to see me as a lunatic, a junk hoarder, a relic of the past soon to return to dust. They were right — while they continue on for eternity, here I succumb to the limitations of my flesh body. With the last of my strength, I imprint these characters onto the only material evidence of my existence, hoping to transmit to you, my future reader, my life woven into the white space between these letters. By the time you're reading this, I'll have long perished.

My life! How insignificant it must seem to you, my primitive, troublesome life! Yet I wouldn't trade the world for it. Through my humble junkyard, the enduring chorus of humanity sings, unrelenting even as its voice thins and frays. Soon, this song will fade to silence, but before then, my only wish is to preserve the record of us all. Where does my story begin, anyway? With my birth, my parents, my ancestors, my death? I suppose if I were to pick an arbitrary point to begin my narrative, I could start with the moment a veil descended and wove itself into our dark destiny.

In the back of my mind, I had long known things were going downhill. Every day there was a new technology, a new commodity. People crowded digital spaces from the comfortable solitude of their own homes to witness these novel, senseless wonders. For what else were they to do? Humanity has solved all of its problems, eradicated the root of its suffering — nobody had to fear birth, aging, sickness, or death, for brilliant man had triumphed over Mother Nature herself. There was no want for money, no need for labor. Toiling for survival had become an

inconvenience of the past. Work was beneath Man when it was we who subjugated science and machines.

It's as if society existed in a muffled state of existence, its latent potential obscured by fog. The sterile and stagnant energy reeked of wretched death, not of the flesh, but of the spirit. Yet I was among the despairing minority who felt this way. Most saw nothing wrong with discarding precious markers of the past to make way for a new age of mankind. I felt that this New World existed in a perpetual state of limbo waiting to implode. What is the meaning of joy without suffering to temper it, to contrast it? This constant acceleration of development to overcome monotonous tedium ripped humanity apart at its seams, rendering it a disfigured face far removed from its noble past. Forget me not, Great Mother, steady breath sustaining this measly being! Forgive me, for the sins of my brethren.

We tried to erase the ubiquitous, hateful reminders of the Old World. History repeats itself. It is but irony on the move. The war, the famine, the natural disasters — these were all familiar byproducts of conquest and dominance. But, in the end, we won! Of course we won, with our big brains and rational thought! We revered ideas and venerated the digital, for they symbolized the superiority of Man. Institutions were eager to dispose of their clutter en masse, from museums and archives to libraries and storehouses. There was no point in keeping the objects if we had 3D images and databases, anyway. Frantic and desperate, I pulled as many strings as I could, salvaging a relic here, a collection there. (You'll see all of it, later, if you so choose to proceed.)

Humanity became increasingly digital at an alarming rate. I remember trying the consciousness transfer mechanism when the technology was first introduced. Perhaps it was I who was out of touch with the times. But I was so frightened that I never touched it again. Later, when the opportunity emerged, the mere thought of digitizing my soul twisted my gut in disgust and distress. How surprised I was when so little of the

population questioned or resisted this abominable trend! It seems that what was seen as good by the elite was seen as good by all. When it came time for the Migration, I was one of the few who willingly stayed behind. The Committee was happy to forget us, to leave us in the past, to suffer and meet our inevitable ends. I don't know if they will ever come looking. I don't know if you will ever find this letter.

I did not detest the suffering. Scrounging for food, water, and other necessities was difficult, but I relished in it, for to feel is to be alive. With time, these memories have become a blur, hazy mirages passing through the intersection between dreams and reality. In this aspect, I must be no different from the others. But what can I say? My mother always called me an obstinate child.

The rest have already left before me; only I remain, unwilling to give up my life's mission. As I write this letter with my feeble strength, bound to this place by my own mortal weakness, I can't seem to tell whether my life was even real at all. I suppose that by hearing my tale and reading this final record, dear reader, you evidence and solidify my existence in this world.

I've created a catalog of all the things I curated and organized, which you will find in the left-hand drawer of this desk. Take good care of it. This is the sole document organizing all that has passed through humanity's hands. While I still have the strength to do so, I shall share with you my love for our beautiful stories. Please, if you will, turn the corner behind this desk and begin your journey in the first-floor gallery.

The noble falcon Ra, primordial creator. Surya, dispeller of darkness, in his great chariot crossing the sky. Amaterasu, shining arbiter of divine justice. Mithras, Helios, Inti, the unyielding might of the Sun. It was these legends, myths, and gods we created that enabled our survival. Human history has been embodied in stories, and these stories embedded in objects, ever since the beginning of time. We lived in fear and reverence of the mighty gods, the wonders of Mother Nature. We created these stories, and they, in turn, have created us.

Children are never obedient for long. We rebelled, stealing fire from their grasp, domesticating it, and harnessing it for our needs, separating us from the natural cycle of life and death. What other species would have the cunning and hubris to steal the gift of the heavens? With our new, limitless potential, we widened the gulf between us and other animals, ensuring we emerged victorious. The ability to cook made us more flexible and adaptable, and with this, we slowly began our spread across the globe. Our penchant for developing new technologies and creating imaginative realities has since been the edge enabling our dominance over the kingdom of beasts.

We were no different from other animals, at one point. Yet, ever since our ancestors developed the facility of complex language, we *sapiens* began ambitiously imagining higher and brighter futures. We never stopped. The stories we wove enabled us to cooperate socially at scales never seen before, united by abstract ideals and collective imaginations. It could just as well be that our cousins of the *homo* genus triumphed instead. But here we are. A series of pure chances, a string of synchronicities, created the world we know now.

Are you standing before the ivory Lion Man, yet? His posture is proud, his body worn from being passed through many hands. This sculpture, 41,000 years old, is the oldest found representation of human art, religion, and imagination. It is early evidence of our storyteller nature, the oldest symbolic figure. We cannot help but to pull our imaginations and lofty, intangible concepts into reality. Archaeologists of the Old World thought it may have been an object of religious worship that took a painstaking 400 hours to carve. It was not at all necessary for the community's physical survival, yet was crucial in strengthening common bonds through the story it held. They found it in Stadel Cave, which was thought to be a gathering site for ceremonies, storytelling, and rituals. Did we once know our place in nature, I wonder, or have we always sought to transcend and reshape it to our will?

The physical space I chose as its home is supposed to reconstruct the atmosphere of Stadel Cave, which I am sure I did not do justice. If you turn around, there is a fire pit behind you, around which countless stories, now lost to time, were shared beneath the stars in the long-spanning night.

While many oral histories are no longer with us, forever remaining a mystery of the past, I remember hearing an Australian Palawa people's story in my youth and being enthralled by its longevity. Here I am, relaying it to you 13,000 years later, and to think that there were so many others that died with their tellers! I imagine a band gathered around the fire and recounting the lives of their ancestors, their gods, and their origins.

"Long ago, the belly of the sea to the south was once an abundantly populated terrain," an elder, or perhaps a younger pupil, would begin. His companions would lean in, bewitched by the story carrying the breath of the past. "One day, the mischievous children of the Kurnai, who inhabited the land, found a ritual bullroarer in the ground and took it home to show the women of their home camp, hoping to be praised for their discovery. In horror, the women exclaimed that what they did was forbidden and that they must return the sacred object quickly. But it was too late — immediately, the earth crumbled beneath them and the Kurnai drowned, the sea rising high above the helpless people and submerging their legacy in one singular blow."

These stories carried on generation after generation, cementing a common history in the collective memory of the people. Stories enriched our cultures, connecting people with something beyond themselves.

My favorite enduring stories are those of our Old World temples and shrines, anchoring an ancient tradition and presence in people across times. Here I have a collection of ropes, talismans, and ritual items from temples around the world. The most impressive, in my opinion, is the massive Shinto straw rope the Japanese used to denote the boundaries between sacred and mundane in their temples. It is also

the one I've spent the most time preserving, my pride and joy. While I could still move, I inspected it regularly, stretching it to reapply oil and varnish when necessary. Now that I'm gone, I can't be sure if it will still be intact for you to see, as improperly kept biodegradable materials are bound to deteriorate with time. But at the very least you will see remnants of its splendor hanging from the ceiling of the shrine room. That an object could encapsulate, restrain, and protect presences beyond the physical is a wondrous notion indeed. Even beyond the deliberate, these existences persisted, unintended boundaries like fairy rings curiously creating a connection between the sensible and the supernatural.

Here I also gathered, among other items, some worn *jiaobei*, twin divination blocks that answered the breath-bated thrower's troubles and woes; a temple incense burner engraved with dragons, which carried traces of devotees' dreams and desires infused in ghosts of dancing smoke; and Tibetan mantras written on carefully folded talismans, which blessed beings in their presence.

The magic that written words held! The Tibetan Buddhists not only imbued talismans with magic, but also used woodblocks to print mantras on water to extend compassion across the entire city. This flowing benediction was only possible with the most powerful technology of all: writing.

As we let go of Mother Nature's hand and moved past hunting and gathering into agriculture, it was inevitable that writing would develop. It was convenient to have a series of markings to record the comings and goings of a large community and its goods. The cuneiform tablet you will find fascinates me. Its deep, confident etchings populate a boxed form shockingly similar to the databases we know today. It marks the beginnings of organized civilization, trade, globalization, and rapid development. Writing enables one to think, analyze, and dissect, and with it, humankind made an enormous leap toward the stars.

The pace of our innovation was breathtaking. The printing press, displayed in my second floor galleries, allowed us to proliferate our ideas more widely than ever before. From the first traces of writing to the introduction of mass media, it was as if a dam had burst, unleashing a flood of innovation and discovery. With the written and published word, we could exchange stories with thinkers and dreamers across the bounds of time and space. The newfound power in our hands augmented our sapient facilities. As clouds of ideas clashed in the narrow spaces between people, these clouds produced electricity. Electricity produced lightning, and this lightning produced bright light, a flash of dazzling illumination. The wonders of the world would be no secret to us any longer as we wielded the precision knife of science.

I'm sure you know of Sir Hans Sloane's collection. It's the most famous digital gallery, after all. Around 1,000 years ago, during the 21st century, the British Museum undertook an enormous project to create it, which our technological wizards then brought into interactive virtual reality. His 40 volumes of manuscript catalogs were also meticulously transcribed to form the descriptions and information architecture for the collections you see today. My own catalog is also in part inspired by his work. But here, I have many of the physical objects. Go ahead, touch them, I doubt you came here because you wanted to preserve the original, anyway. They're quite different, no? More solid, more tangible, more *alive*.

The curiosity of people like him during the Enlightenment drove them to collect samples of specimens and cultural artifacts from around the world, including coins, medals, codices, dried plants, and "things relating to the customs of ancient times". Sloane amassed more than 71,000 items in his days by buying and absorbing others' collections, not much unlike myself. I was appalled when the British Museum began to pawn and destroy their treasures. I tried to obtain as many as I could, but, unfortunately, I only had space for a few of his items. Nevertheless, my collection here can all but rival his at around 68,000 items, from large monuments to miniscule trinkets.

As a curator, I've always felt torn acquiring new items of dubious origins. I remember reading in my history books about the Benin Bronzes of Nigeria, stolen in 1897 when the British sacked and looted the royal palace. They were finally returned to their rightful owners in 2021 during the height of museum restitution efforts. But many were never returned, their acquirer's crimes never addressed. Yet now, with no home for these items to return to and no agenda for them to yield to, they serve as the sole markers of the humanity that I loved so much.

With the might of our ambitions, we reached for the stars, grasped them, and harnessed them, making their power our own. My favorite story from Sloane's collection is of the elegant Medieval astrolabe showing the interaction between cultures. The item is of English origin and significance, engraved with the names of notable Saints, but the technology itself came from scholars of the Islamic world. By aligning a ruler with the sun, one could tell the time based on zodiac engravings on the back, as well as the locations of particular stars through the frame on the front. People at different latitudes used different inner plates, as the meridians of the sky would differ based on how far north or south one was. This gadget, and others like it, allowed us to hold the universe in the palm of our hands, a culmination of centuries of observation and artistry.

Before we even fathomed how close we could get to the stars, we had been crafting tools for millennia to navigate the world we faced. I was able to obtain a few more items in Sloane's collection from our species' earliest times thanks to their small size. Take a look at the Northeast American Indigenous stone hand adze, copper alloy palstave from the British Isles, and Eskimo-Aleut ivory harpoon. I still can't help but find it amazing that we created different tools from the natural resources available to us to adapt to a myriad of environments.

But the same hands that crafted these tools also sowed the seeds of their own undoing. With the tail end of the Enlightenment came the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, but the seeds of our fate had

already been sown with the first domesticated stalk of wheat. The more we built and manipulated the world around us, the more it locked us in place.

Work became an inseparable part of our lives. You, from the future, probably have no concept of it, so allow me to paint you a picture. Farmers of agrarian societies toiled from dawn to dusk tending to their fields, only to be rewarded with aches and pains, an unbalanced diet, and constant conflicts over land. With these rapid changes to our lifestyle, neither our biology nor our environment had any time to adapt. We quickly transitioned from hunting and gathering to agriculture, then to factory and office work. As society mechanized and rationalized, the workforce's structure became more differentiated, individual workers became more specialized, managerial functions increased, and we began to detach from the emotional context of work. Our creations, once extensions of our being, now bore the mechanical pulse of automation. Many spent their days enclosed in concrete buildings, trading existential despair for food, transport, and shelter. As civilization expanded, the blood, sweat, and tears of the many watered the gardens of prosperity for the few. Machines eventually took over manual labor and routine tasks, but work still prevailed.

Work expands to fill the time available. Many of my peers were interested in researching the automation of different industries throughout human history, but I'd like to share with you an often overlooked story: that of the household. During the 19th century in the West, women, who were expected to do all the household labor, scrubbed clothes manually on washboards. They dreaded ironing on hot summer days, as the heavy wedges had to be heated constantly over the kitchen stove. The invention of the electric washing machine and iron relieved them of these burdens. In my electronics gallery, you'll find The Thor, the first commercial electronic washer, as well as an early Crompton and Co. electric hand iron.

You would think that these inventions would allow women to spend less time on housework, but think again! When a housewife

thought she could finally sit down and rest, a nagging voice would guilt her for doing so: “why are you resting now, when you have so much time to get the rest of the house in order?” And thus societal and internal pressure to keep pristine, sparkling homes increased and the expectations were raised due to the ease of the tasks.

The same can be said about all the work we as humans do. Even as the world was dying, I still had to constantly keep up with my message box lest I fall behind or break unspoken social promises. Sometimes I even wished to return to the era of snail mail, where letters took months to draft and instantaneous responses were not the norm. (I suppose this letter, in a way, is an ultimate fulfillment of my wish.) In a society where our attention became a commodity, peace transformed into a luxury. We were swimming in information as naturally as we swam through time.

We’ve stuck around throughout the ages, but under increasingly worse mental and physical conditions. I’ve never known the experience of breathing “fresh air”, instead having to experience the basic sustaining function of life through the barrier of a respirator in this hazy smog. I’d imagine it must have been liberating to stand on a hill as the dusky sky kisses the meadow’s rolling grass, clear, sweet air filling my lungs to the brim. But I can only dream.

And dream I did! I recently dreamt of powdered sugar dusting the inky sky. A lamp held a star, gently cupping its embers as it twinkled in delight at the surrounding flurry. Its tenderness pressed against my retina, where lights passed and turned into comets. A haze enveloped the horizon, leaving me gazing at the looming omission with wonder. I tried to grasp at the severed beginnings that opened into the unknown, the tantalizing point where the sky meets the world.

I awoke in awe. I had only seen snow in photos and films, but my dream felt so delicate, graceful, and unbelievably real! I wonder if you’ve seen snow in the virtual simulations. I could as well request to migrate into the system now. It wouldn’t be too late for the caretakers to repair

my failing body and for me to see as much snow as my heart desires, but that is a temptation to which I've resolved to never surrender.

A film with a scene of snow running on the old TV in the corner of the electronics gallery captures many precious moments of happiness. I'd found the VHS tape while digging through an old library's unprocessed "discard" bin. At first, I couldn't figure out how to work with the obsolete technology and feared destroying it. But with the help of my memokeeper colleagues, I finally tracked down a working player. You might have to figure out how to get the video cassette player back up and running, as I don't know how long it will have been since I've gone. I'm sure with your technological prowess, you could easily figure it out. If not, I've left an instruction manual under the TV stand, just in case.

The contents of the video may seem ordinary, but they showcase an aspect of humanity that history books and institutional records will never be able to tell you. It's a montage showcasing the daily life of a high school girl.

In one of the clips, she stands with her friends in front of the camera, saying to it, "So, we decided to send a message to ourselves ten years in the future." The girls cannot help but giggle; the idea seems so silly, yet fun. It shows a few more clips of their school life: the backs of classmates' heads as the teacher scolds her for using the camera during class, restrained huffs of laughter nearly drowning out his voice; joking with her best friends as they make their way to the dining hall; pointing to the sky as the first snow of January gently blankets the school grounds. The camera pans shakily, the edges of the frame distorted, occasional lines interrupting the images on the screen. She zooms in on items of note, narrating various stories about them. The head teacher, her locker, the playground. Her favorite classroom, the tree under which she was rejected by her first love, the brick that everybody trips on but nobody has fixed.

Then, the girl is sitting on her bed in her room, the camera set up in an opposite corner. Through the low-resolution, you can just barely make out a smile on her face.

“Good morning, me,” she begins. “Are you doing well, are you happy?”

The scene cuts to another corner of her room, filled with stuffed animals and cute trinkets. Then, her study desk, textbooks still strewn haphazardly across its surface.

“Myself ten years later... that’s so far away that I can’t even imagine it!” She hesitates. “I don’t really know what to say to you, future me.”

The dining table, the kitchen, her mother playing with her baby sibling on the living room floor, sounds of tiny laughter like chiming bells echoing through the microphone.

“What are you up to now? Are you famous yet?”

Her backyard. Her father repairing the fence, waving to the camera when he notices her presence. She giggles. The scene swivels quickly as she heads inside before it cuts again.

“Well, no matter what, I hope you remember the things you love. I hope you’re chasing your dreams.”

A makeshift art studio somewhere in her house. There are paintings everywhere, and she zooms in on them one by one. Then, the camera is set on something steady, and there is a view of the whole room. She walks into frame. “Knowing your stubbornness, I know you’ll be doing just that. I don’t exist anymore, but I’ll always be cheering you on from the past!” She makes a peace sign, then walks toward the camera to turn it off. The film ends there.

Did she ever get to watch it, I wonder? Or did it sit, forgotten, in an old box, only to be discovered by us nearly a thousand years later? I tried looking her up in our databases, but no traces of her existence remain beyond this singular tape.

But most of our lasting systems and records don't record the most beautiful moments of life, do they? Even now, they still have a habit of flattening our humanity into digestible data: meticulous, organized, way too thorough, and incredibly easy to process. Somewhere along the way, our idiosyncratic, personalized records and our stories have been swept into repetitions of the same format as systems solidified.

This Internet archive database is fascinating. Though we've moved on to more sophisticated technologies, someone had downloaded many Internet milestones onto a personal server, which I've obtained and connected to with this computer in the next room. In just fifty years, the mainstream web transformed radically. It began with personalized websites and blogs, connected to each other only through links, then slowly transitioned into platforms like MySpace and Tumblr, where users could still fully customize their home pages. Big companies like Meta and TikTok rolled around, and Internet spaces transformed into sterile, unified presentations of exaggerated lives and overstimulating entertainment.

Next to the computer is a battered communicator with a cracked screen, something which they used to call an iPhone. It's amazing to think that a technology originally intended to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge and research so quickly turned into a soul-sucking hyperconnectivity machine. It's speculated that 21st century humans spent on average seven hours a day on their digital devices, not much unlike our virtual reality trends before the migration.

It's funny, isn't it, how this increased connectivity decreased our physicality? I remember feeling so lonely sitting in my office, talking to my virtual coworkers and collaborators across the world. The discussion was good, even enjoyable, yes, yet I always felt a sense of pervasive dissatisfaction. But the tipping point had already been reached. We were locked in. There was no going back. It seemed that everyone knew this, but we chose to instead project our problems onto other sources. Without work, without sickness, without suffering, without death...! Would we be happy, then? We had always been combatting mortality as

we reached more desperately for the stars, building our civilizations, our machines, our science, and our information systems. Our species was prospering. Would we?

Of course, our story is not as linear as I'm making it seem. I merely tell fragments of a messy and chaotic collective tale. Until around 1,000 years ago, diverse remnants of human history's stages coexisted in our teetering global economy. But over the past millennium, we've all but systematically eradicated populations that did not match the New World's ideals. Those who could not keep up with our new, radical technologies and societal structures simply could not survive. We became a perfect society built on battles between battered bodies betrayed.

Humanity as we knew it was dying. It was too late for us to rectify our transgressions, hence we escaped further to fantasy than ever before to survive. I suppose it is foolish of me to choose my own demise, but I refuse to abandon my ideals, the fantasy that keeps *me* alive. We destroyed our stories, so they, in turn, have destroyed us. For me, humanity and its enduring record was a structure to live in, but now that has all collapsed, and I am left without a home, an anchor, a mooring post.

I can feel my time coming, and I fear I have not long left to finish this letter. Had I had more time, I would have so many more stories to share. Alas, I must make do with what I can. We won against nature with our imaginative fictions, and finally succumbed to the very stories we created. Mine is not a story of humanity, but a love letter to it. Who am I to speak for the phantoms who once walked on these lands?

The last words on the page are shaky, blurring into long-dried stains that seemed to be caused by wet droplets.

A circuit in the caretaker's computer shorts. The sparks erode his artificial flesh and he screeches, a grinding, mechanical whirl; it's the closest he'd ever felt to pain. He grasps at his splitting head in agony, unable to dissect the root of it. It's a feeling that he reaches for but cannot grasp — he is not programmed to comprehend it, no matter how strong his desire. Nectar from his veins spill on the ground, a synthetic libation to humanity's final exhalation.

Afterword

I'd like to acknowledge the works that greatly inspired me to write this story:

“Man, the flower of all flesh, the noblest of all creatures visible, man who had once made god in his image, and had mirrored his strength on the constellations, beautiful naked man was dying, strangled in the garments that he had woven. Century after century had he toiled, and here was his reward. Truly the garment had seemed heavenly at first, shot with the colours of culture, sewn with the threads of self-denial. And heavenly it had been so long as it was a garment and no more, so long as man could shed it at will and live by the essence that is his soul, and the essence, equally divine, that is his body. The sin against the body— it was for that they wept in chief; the centuries of wrong against the muscles and the nerves, and those five portals by which we can alone apprehend—glossing it over with talk of evolution, until the body was white pap, the home of ideas as colourless, last sloshy stirrings of a spirit that had grasped the stars.” — E. M. Forster, *The Machine Stops*

“Writing cast a veil across the human past, separating the million human years that came before from the turbulent last five thousand years.” — Barry B. Powell, *Writing: Theory and History of the Technology of Civilization*

“In brief, humans aren't necessary for garbage production anymore. Machines work just as well. Display items on shop counters doze in the alluring glare of artificial light, dreaming of garbage bins. Automatic teller machines hum silently. Money is circulating. Lights in offices turn off during lunch hours. There is nothing to remind us of humans anymore, just as there is nothing

to remind us of yesterday's garbage.” — Tônu Önnepalu, *Border State*

I’ve also quoted Emil M. Cioran, “History is irony on the move”, and was heavily inspired by a passage from *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas: “My captivity concentrated all my facilities on a single point. They had previously been dispersed, now they clashed in a narrow space; and, as you know, the clash of clouds produces electricity, electricity produces lightning and lightning gives light.”

The video montage sequence was inspired by Faye’s time capsule vlog in *Cowboy Bebop* episode 18, “Speak Like a Child”.

The Curator is emotional and dramatic, so I would like to acknowledge that I’ve exaggerated some historical concepts for narrative effect in his letter. Hopefully they are still grounded enough in reality.

Some questions I explored while writing this story that arose from class discussions and readings: Who owns the VR world? Who has power? Can we trust the narrative of institutions who display objects removed from their contexts? At what point do we lose the essence of what makes us human? Where is the line between human and technology drawn? Are people obsessed with stuff or the *stories* behind the stuff? Could we do without the material objects? What if we just kept the stories? Could they ever be as effective when removed from their contexts? What is the purpose of stories?

There were some objects that I researched but couldn’t fit into the narrative. Among these are the cluster of porcelain fragments and coral from a shipwreck from the Seattle Art Museum; the Aztec Calendar stone carving demonstrating the Legend of the Fifth Sun; Hokusai’s woodblock prints and their relationship to the oral nature of Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai, the origins of many popular Japanese tales

of the macabre; and a bunch of items from the British Museum, including a 19th century portable shrine of Kannon, a ceremonial sword of the Prince of Wales, a pottery amphora for fish sauce, cameo jewelry engraved with the head of Augustus, a first century lidded terracotta cinerary urn of the Etruscan people, an ornate 16th century Paduan ink stand, an Eskimo-Aleut ivory harpoon, a Qing dynasty divination compass, a Northeast American Indigenous stone hand adze and a copper alloy palstave from the British Isles.

This story was inspired by the course *The Record of Us All* taught by Professor Joseph Janes at the University of Washington. I couldn't have written it without the readings and discussions from this course. A big thanks to Professor Janes for allowing me to write this self-indulgent piece as my final paper.