

Fish doorbells! Historic sandwiches! 50 of the weirdest, most wonderful corners of the web – picked by an expert

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Author: Emma Beddington

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I must be about 1,000 years old in internet years (which are even shorter than dog years). I remember doing a summer job as a student in 1995, being instructed to research something on the computer and sitting in front of AltaVista (a primitive search engine, young folk), with absolutely no idea what to do. I was supposed to press some buttons? Information would come out? What? As a digital migrant rather than a native, I also remember how amazing it felt to stumble my way around the internet in the 90s and early 00s, uncovering its unexpected nooks and crannies with astonishment and delight; it was an exciting and genuinely joyful time. Now I watch other people shout at each other, assailed by news of catastrophes and bombarded with adverts for horrible trousers and cryptocurrency for the further enrichment of billionaires. I scroll, jaded, trying to recapture that sense of wonder I used to feel. Thankfully, there are still off-the-beaten-path pockets of astonishment out there and I thought it might be nice to gather some of them together. So, here is a selection of online things I love, and that other people I asked love – old and new stuff that is fascinating, beautiful, edifying and, above all, fun. Maybe one or two of them might give you a bit of internet joy back, too. Dogs in Elk Do me a favour: Google “dogs in elk”. Perhaps one day this post on a long-defunct forum will vanish into the ether, or perhaps it’s sufficiently beloved to survive, but either way you need this hilarious shaggy (bloody) dog story in your life. It was written by Anne, whose dogs discovered an elk carcass, got inside it and refused to leave. Anne and I once exchanged emails, so I can assure you that she exists and that this really happened. The Fish Doorbell There is a dam in the Netherlands where migrating fish get stuck, since it rarely opens in spring. The solution: an underwater camera linked to a website where viewers can press a button when they spot fish. That notifies the lock operator, who can open it up and let the fish go on their way. Ooh, I have just seen two! Press the button! @crescentshay Shay Rose is an effervescent and endlessly inventive costume-maker who shares her projects on Instagram. Nothing is too bonkers for her: a “social distancing” dress that enveloped her in a 3.7 metre (12ft) circle of pink tulle, anime cosplay or a fancy-dress costume that turned her into a perfect lifesize version of one of those stocking-filler wiggly worms on a string. Strange Flowers In his Wordpress cabinet of human curiosities, the Australian academic James Conway writes potted biographies of daring, transgressive, dangerous-to-know eccentrics of the past 200 years. Choose at random and you are unlikely to be disappointed, but how about Violette Murat, the fin de siècle lesbian who kept a decommissioned submarine in which to smoke opium, or Marchesa Casati, who, naked beneath her fur coat, wore a necklace of live

snakes and paraded a cheetah on a lead? Radiooooo Pick a country from the world map, pick a decade and Radiooooo plays you music from that time and place (refined to slow, fast or “weird”, if you want to be more specific). I am writing this to a soundtrack of 1960s Morocco and feeling more cosmopolitan than I have any right to: “Oh, you’re not familiar with Abdelwahab Agoumi? You should check him out.” More seriously, Radiooooo gives you that expansive feeling that the world is vast, various and infinitely creative. That’s nice. Crime Pays, But Botany Doesn’t This YouTube channel describes itself as “a low-brow, crass approach to plant ecology & evolution as muttered by a misanthropic Chicago Italian”. A gruff botanist called Tony tells you about esoteric plants, and it is exceptionally soothing. Kottke Sifting through the internet to provide a miscellany of interesting stuff is a real talent; Jason Kottke’s magpie eye has been reliably curating interesting stuff – short, long, funny, serious, totally out-there – since 1998. Recent highlights include the best visual illusions of the year competition, Japan’s decorated manhole covers and stunning photos of the Milky Way. Weird Medieval Guys Check out the titles of some of these Substack posts by the historian Olivia Swarthout and tell me you don’t want to read more: “What does a biblically accurate angel look like?”; “No, the king doesn’t own all the swans in Britain”; “Do you have less free time than a medieval peasant?” Clickbait, but medieval (and highly informative). Mimi Smartypants The consistently hilarious Chicago-based medical publisher Mimi Smartypants has been blogging since the internet was just fields of billowing unspoilt html and her riffs on whatever amuses or outrages her – public transport encounters and the general absurdity of life – are endlessly delightful. Her newest entry describing the deficiencies of linen sheets made me laugh out loud (“Would you like to take a nap on Nan Pierce?”). Sandwiches of History An American man called Barry delves into old recipe books and then taste-tests the sandwiches he finds in them on YouTube. They are usually an affront to God and man (ironed bread and mushroom soup, condensed milk, flour, egg and vinegar) but Barry gives each one a fair go and a generous assessment. We should all be more Barry. Closer to Van Eyck This incredible site is dedicated to Jan van Eyck’s much-stolen Ghent Altarpiece, featuring the 15th-century Flemish master’s deeply weird Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Zoom in on every brushstroke and piece of craquelure, check out the X-ray and infrared imaging, delve deep into the strange history and iconography and pretend you are one of the posh experts on Fake or Fortune ... hours of fun. My80stv Whatever year you are nostalgic for, scratch the itch here with a compendium of TV clips that you can channel-hop through as if you were watching telly in, say, 1989. It is very US-centric, but it gives me the time-travel feeling I crave. Other decade versions are also available. David Rumsey’s Map Collection Cartography enthusiast David Rumsey has put his entire collection of more than 150,000 maps online, from 16th to 21st century, terrestrial, maritime and celestial. It is the perfect place to get lost (sorry). Found in a Library Book The Oakland public library uploads the things people leave behind in library books (usually as bookmarks) to its website: it is a gripping, often touching collection of photos, drawings, sugar packets, letters, shopping lists and more. Marine Traffic There are a mind-boggling number of ships in the world and on this site you can watch them going about their business. They are colour-coded by type (cargo vessels, tankers, fishing boats) and you can find out where they have come from and where they are going. Laura Ramoso There is a lot of so-so observational comedy on the internet but Laura Ramoso’s Instagram and TikTok imitations of her German mother and Italian father have the ring of extremely funny truth. The National Grid Live Hear me out: this site lets you see how much power is being generated from different sources – watch as solar rises on a sunny day – and how much Great Britain is importing and exporting. It is weirdly compelling. Tradle Guess a place based on its exports: you get six chances, narrowing it down, thanks to information on how far off each wrong guess was. Warning: they are not all countries despite the game description: 77.3% “processed crustaceans” and 0.4% compasses is Saint Pierre et Miquelon, one of France’s semi-autonomous “overseas collectivities”. Nerdy but entertaining. Forvo A guide to pronouncing anything, including proper nouns and names in any language, Forvo has the power to save you significant embarrassment. Lightning Maps Follow storms erupting in real time. Yellow dots represent lightning strikes, and a white expanding circle shows the thunder sound movement. This is good for impressing kids, says a friend, because, like an omniscient weather god, you can “predict” when thunder is about to erupt. Useless Farm Karen the murderous emu, Brad, a furious fluffball cockerel, and several dopey alpacas live on this Canadian smallholding absolutely failing to earn their keep, other than on TikTok and Instagram. This kind of stuff can swiftly become annoying or samey, but useless animal wrangler Amanda has funny bones, and pretty much everything she posts is entertaining. Messy Nessy Chic I have no idea how Vanessa Grall comes up with the cabinet of art, design, fashion and historical wonders that have filled her website for the past 12 years; I just know she has better taste than I ever will. Dip in for the likes of a guide to Swedish islands, intimate Victorian portraiture by a viscountess or 1920s matchboxes. Ridella For Wordle addicts hungry for more once-daily stimulation, this site offers a riddle – the kind of thing a troll would make you solve to cross a bridge – one line at a time. @dusttodigital This Instagram music account is a celebration of the human desire to make sound in all its lovely diversity, from virtuoso to amateur and everything in between. I especially love the posts that showcase videos people send in of music they have encountered across the world, in the streets, in classrooms, rehearsal halls, fields ... Global Wind and Wave Patterns You don’t have to have a clue what is going on to enjoy this site that lets you watch mesmerising animations of wind, wave and current patterns wherever you like on the globe. The Worst Cat This is a single-joke site – the joke being criticising baby hippos for being moist, ugly, frequently straw-covered cats – and has not been updated for years, but returning to it, I still laughed, again and again. It might work for you, too. My Noise My Noise feels like a gift to a fractious world: your choice of hundreds of customisable soundscapes, based on your needs (focus, sleep, stress, “pet comfort” and many more). There is an incredible variety – everything from “calm office”, to “European primeval forest” – and you can play around and mix your

own blend based on whatever elements work best for you. My husband has found “rice field” with extra cicadas provides real relief from his tinnitus. The Marginalian The site formerly known as Brainpickings is a compendium of philosophy, poetry, visual arts, literature and other mediations on the business of being alive, collated by the author Maria Popova. Recently, I enjoyed 19th-century naturalist Jean-Baptiste V  rany’s chromographs of octopuses and Magritte’s exhortation to celebrate “joy for the eyes and the mind”. One Zoom Pick an animal, plant, or other living organism and, via this site, explore visually how it fits into the tree of life. Mesmerising. Listen to the Clouds On this dreamily weird site you can listen to live air traffic control chatter from a variety of airports across the world, against a background of ambient sound. Library of Congress The US Library of Congress has digitised big chunks of its collection – incredible photographs and early daguerrotypes, baseball cards, cartoons, maps and historical documents. It is overwhelming, but brilliant for a lunchtime browse. How Many People Are in Space Right Now? This site does exactly what it says on the tin (with details of who they are and a link to their Wikipedia page). GeoGuessr This quiz gives you a picture of somewhere and you have to put it on a map accurately. For an additional layer of complexity, try TimeGuessr, which asks you to identify the correct year as well as place for a photograph. I have just narrowed down a pic of an Edinburgh festival street performer to within 163 metres, but my guess of 2013 was four years out. Curses! Play again. Martin Critchlow The TikTok adventures of a scaffolder from King’s Lynn and his tiny mouse, Mr Jingles (the successor to Mrs Jingles, sadly deceased of natural causes). Mr Jingles really likes prawn crackers; Mr Critchlow really likes tiny harvest mice, I guess. Wholesome. Explore webcams There are an overwhelming number of wonderful wildlife cams out there but, for a sure bet, head to the “featured” camera on the Explore homepage. I just got bald eagles feeding their chicks, which proved very unhelpful for finishing this article. The Lucyverse I am torn about including writer Lucy Sweet’s brilliant newsletter because I’m sure she will end up getting my job, but I can’t in all conscience leave it out. Sweet reviews stuff: herbal teas, B&Q, Soreen mini loaves, Christmas decorations she finds in Home Bargains. The magic is in her forensically accurate skewerings. A taster: “Ugh, the Toast catalogue ... Like a Guardian article on the dangers of foraging.” If you sign up, the newsletter arrives every Monday morning precisely when you most need a laugh. If the Moon Were Only 1 Pixel Space is terrifying – my tiny medieval peasant mind can’t begin to comprehend its vastness. This site, which describes itself as “a tediously accurate scale model of the solar system” is such a good way to understand the vastness, through scrolling – something I am very good at – with manageable little nuggets of info along the way. Mondo Mascots Japan’s mascot culture is a repository of intense oddness, and the British writer and illustrator Chris Carlier gives an enthusiastic account of them on his site (in more detail than on his laconic and equally unmissable Twitter account @mondomascots). Discover, among others, an extinct river otter with a bowl of noodles as a hat that represents Susaki City, an “armless, dancing character based an ancient roof tile” or “Colon-chan, an intestine-haired lady who encourages colon cancer screenings”. Post Secret Post Secret predated Fesshole, the popular Twitter feed where people confess their sins anonymously and receive internet absolution or condemnation (more likely both). It is a combination of confessional and art project, since contributors send in their contributions on a postcard, sometimes elaborately decorated. “The day I leave this city I’m asking Tim for a kiss”; “Somebody else’s 23andMe DNA test destroyed my life”: each one is a baby-shoes-length short story. Wikiloc Wherever you are in the world, find a user-tested walk or cycle route. You can filter for distance, difficulty and for circular walks only. It has taken me to some spectacular spots (and trudging along a few A-roads, too, but that is mainly my incompetence). Kingdom of Loathing I don’t really understand what is going on in this long-running gentle, funny game full of stick people yet, but on my first try, I apparently gained “the patience of a tortoise” and a “liver popsicle”. Tell me more. The Deep Sea Scroll down, down, down this metre-by-metre graphic of the sea and discover all the weird stuff that lives at various levels, with cool facts along the way. It is a good site for a “tag yourself” game with the creatures you encounter: I think I’m a headless chicken fish. The Met’s Artist Project Take a couple of minutes to watch a contemporary artist react to pieces in the Metropolitan Museum’s incredibly eclectic collection. Edmund de Waal reflects on why a 500-year-old Chinese jug was left white and Kehinde Wiley discusses class in John Singer Sargent’s portraiture. There are 120 entries in total. @museumoflostmemories There’s something really poignant about this Instagram account, which seeks to reunite photos found in junk shops and flea markets with their subjects (or subjects’ descendants): so many forgotten smiles and poses. The hit rate is low, but if you click “Returned!” you can enjoy some really satisfying success stories. Antipodes Map A simple site to answer that perennial question: where would you end up if you tunnelled right through the Earth and came out the other side? Kids Favourite Jams By Their Dads’ Favourite Bands On TikTok, songwriter Kevin Scott Rhoads spins a wheel to choose a band (Mumford & Sons, Bon Iver, The National) and a nursery rhyme and then produces pitch-perfect parodies. I particularly enjoyed Baby Shark in the style of Radiohead. xkcd I don’t understand all of Randall Munroe’s often science and tech-themed stick-figure web comic (Munroe is a physicist who worked for Nasa), but the bits I do get tend to be clever and very funny. Things Magazine This densely packed, very plainly formatted compendium of links to interesting things was created by a group of writers and historians with an interest in objects and what they tell us about the world. That doesn’t exactly narrow their remit and it can feel overwhelming, but there is so much delight and interest packed into every post. The newest one has links to a playlist of classic tracks from 1994, royal doppelgangers and a Museum of Failure. Just let your eye wander and alight on whatever link catches your attention, you won’t be disappointed. Surprised Eel Historian You may never have thought “I’d like to know more about the history of eels”, but that was a mistake, as this Twitter account full of fascinating eel facts demonstrates. Owl in a Box I had to include this, the OG of internet angry birds. There is not much to it: six photographs of a great horned owl found by the side of the road,

absolutely furious to be rescued. The photos, in which only one giant yellow eye is visible, glaring balefully through the flap of a cardboard box, make all the years I have wasted on the internet worthwhile. Sort of.