

Into The Wyrd

Charles Gebbia





Into the Wyrð

By Charles Gebbia

Written as part of the Architecture (and Creative Writing)
Directed Research and Honors Thesis entitled:

Explorations in the Familiar and Unfamiliar: A Study in Narrative Architecture

Candidate for Bachelor of Architecture Degree
and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2025

Thesis Advisor: Britt Eversole, Assistant Professor of Architecture

Thesis Reader: Sarah Harwell, Associate Teaching Professor and
Associate Director of Creative Writing



The Road

When driving the backroads, highways, and parkways of the deep woods, it is very common to find a figure walking alongside, be it dilapidated concrete, freshly paved, or dirt and beaten. Our Observer was wandering along one such dirt path on a cool crisp morning just as the sun rose over the wooded horizon. They did not have their thumb extended at their side, waiting and expecting for any oncoming traffic to stop, speak with them, and take them to their next location like others might. One reason was that there was no traffic or any forms of vehicles on this particular road, but the true reason was that our Observer enjoyed the walking and would not accept a ride even if it was offered, having spent much of their time in recent years alone.

Our Observer was one to find their own path, and liked to stumble into discovery on their own two feet.

It was always a firm possibility that they would find something this deep into the woods, this far along the winding roads. Occasionally an old home, or an old business would remain with little to no explanation or understanding of how. Other, even rarer times, they would find a few structures strung in a row, typically too old and too desolate to glean much of a real purpose from.

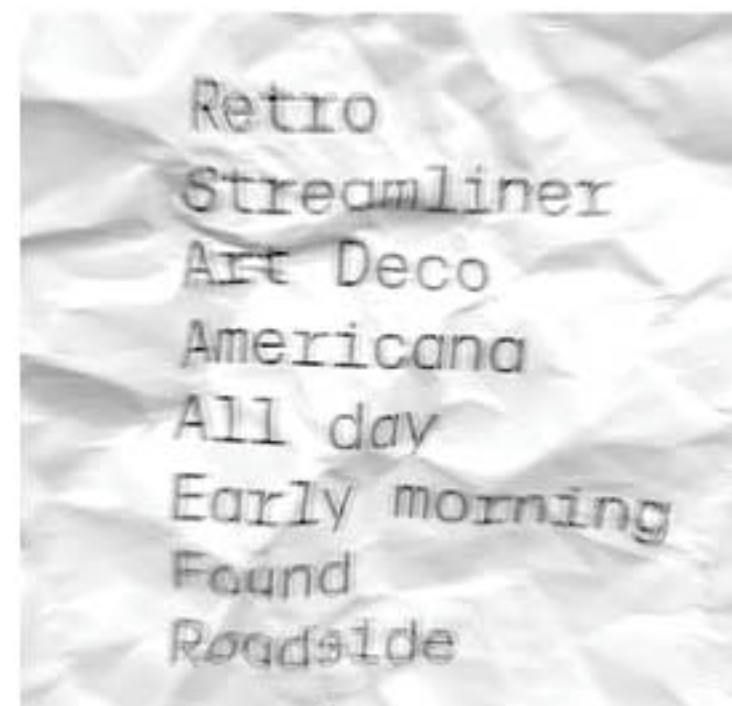
On this morning, however, they did discover a few houses as the road transitioned from dirt to pavement once more. Just a few solitary homes, poking out from among the trees. They each sat rather far back, rather well obscured by the foliage. It would be reasonable to assume that such homes were abandoned or left in disrepair, but our Observer noticed fresh paint, clean cut lawns, and new cars in the drives.

Further along, a few more houses cropped up, this time side by side, with less distance between, and less foliage to obscure their view. The trees parted for their structures, the yards touching the trees and pushing them further and further back, the homes closing in on one

another one by one, with dirt and gravel drives infected by similar pavement to the road.

Next, the dewy grass underfoot became a sidewalk, and the road they had been following became a true street. Although our Observer was confused by the sudden settlement that appeared on no maps, they found themselves glad to have something new to see, rather than the endless woods from the days prior.

What our Observer did not know was that they had found a small overlap in things, as one corner of Nowhere, Anywhere unfolded before them.



Patriotism
Tacky
Seating



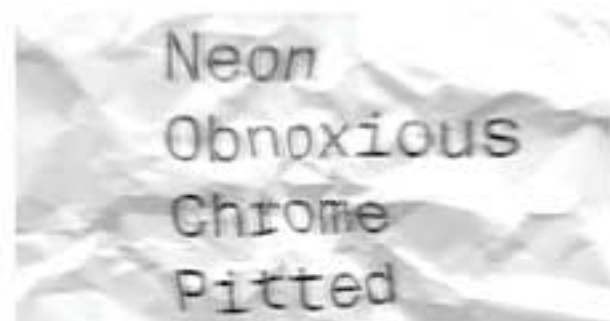
Glossy
Tinted
Paved



Plated
Glaring
Frosted



Overgrown
Outdoor
Appointed



Cracked Porcelain
Checkered Linoleum
Heated Display Cases
Aluminum Doors
Tucked Booths

Cushy
Greasy
Homestyle
Convenient
Sticky





After a long morning of walking through Nowhere, Anywhere, our Observer grew weary and hungry. The streets of the small town had started to loop back on themselves, returning to the same central square of stores over and over again, and they thought it best to find some food before they continued their journey.

They walked along the cracked sidewalk, careful not to trip as they searched the storefronts for something worthwhile, a place they could rest and feel refreshed, when a small glint caught their eye from the treeline.

Just beyond the stores and the road, set back among the woods that surrounded the town was an establishment with a chrome plated and pitted roof sitting on an elevated foundation. Its outer walls were encompassed in three stripes, the first of yellow, the second of red, and the third not of paint but of glass, a series of windows that appeared a dark and shaded blue and black due to the angle of the midday sun.

They approached and noticed the standing sign at the end of the street, a tall pole with a series of polygons overlapping behind the neon script words reading:

"The Snake Tail Diner."

The same script was written across a sign on the chrome roof of the establishment, just above another line in block text reading:

"Breakfast - Lunch - Dinner."

With the long edge of the building facing the street, our Observer had to walk the length of the diner in search of its entrance, and in that found two other painted messages hidden along the yellow stripe. The first read, "Parking nearby," which our Observer thought was incredibly unhelpful, and the second read, "NO Booth Service," although the "NO" looked to be in a different font than the rest.

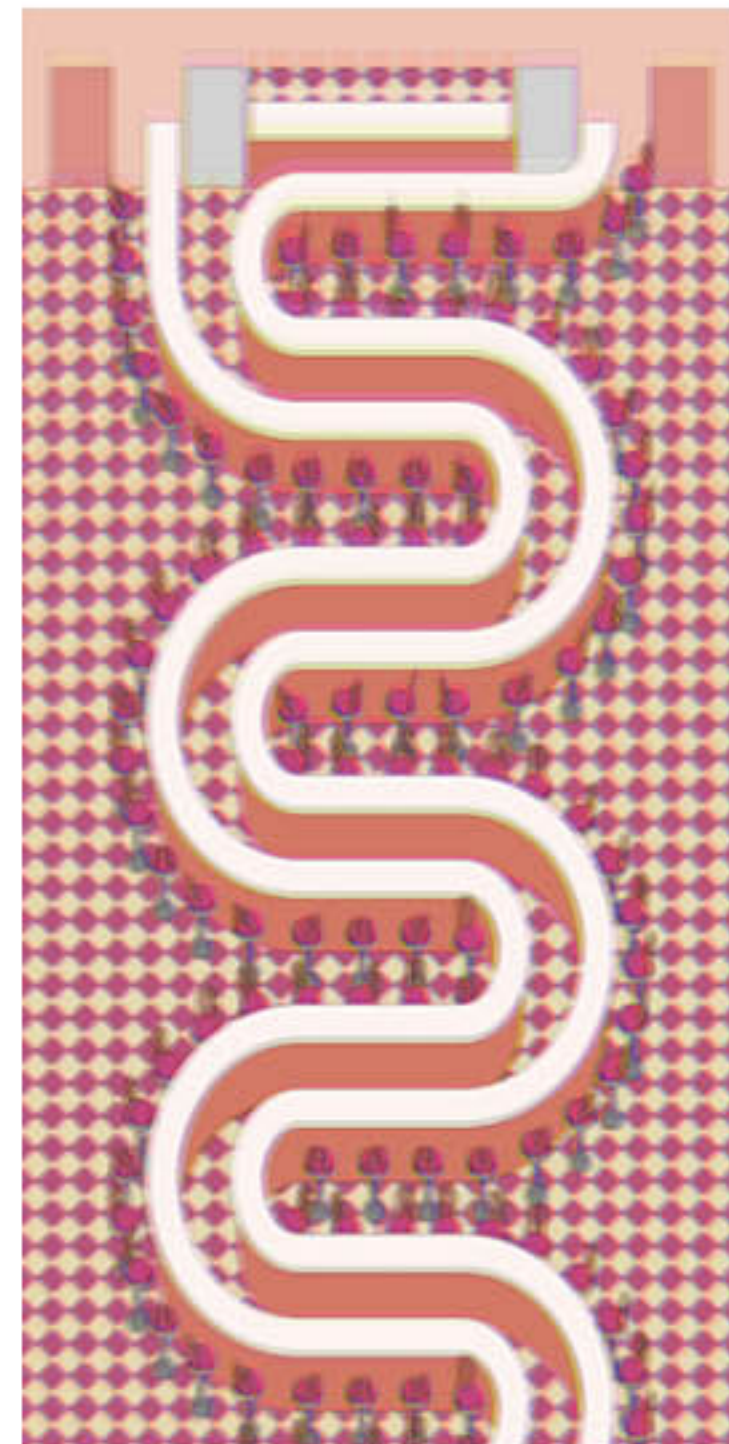
Our Observer assumed that it must have been a mistake, or some form of graffiti, and

looked forward to resting for a time in a plush booth that is commonly found in establishments such as this. They were picturing such an experience and bracing to enter a new environment as they found the entrance on the far end of the building, several concrete steps up with a wrought iron railing, hidden beneath an extended overhang of the curved chrome.

They pushed through the glass doors of the diner bearing its same design from the street sign, and entered onto the familiar bustling sounds of a midday lunch rush. The chatter of dozens of conversations, orders, and clattering dishes and utensils wafted through the air accompanied by the smell of all ranges of greasy or pseudo healthy meals, although the bustle seemed...

Contained.

The writing had not lied, there were no booths at the edges of the dining room, as our Observer had eagerly anticipated. There were no tables at all, although they could see the swinging doors and window of a kitchen at the opposite end of the long room. What instead filled the space between kitchen and entrance was a long, snaking lunch counter. It was one continuous path, just wide enough for the servers to walk along, with serving space on either side of them, and stools just



outside that. It looped back and forth on itself, maintaining its singular tight route, with its only outlet being that of the kitchen doors at the far back.

There was no hostess waiting near the door, and as our Observer stared at the seething serpent before them, one server at the final turn of the counter peered over the head of his patron and shouted out:

"Sit anywhere, love! I think there's still a seat down by Bobby's bend, two or three back!" then promptly returned to his own conversation with the person whose order he seemed to have already taken.

Our Observer repeated the instructions under their breath with their head low as they slowly made their way around the edge of the room. They kept their eyes up and watched as several servers crowded the interior of each bend of the counter, bumping into one another as they passed dishes and drinks, taking orders and talking to customers.

"Right over here!" called a woman as our Observer approached a bend near the middle of the room. She waved a pad of paper and pen in the air and motioned to an empty stool near the center of a straightaway between two turns of the counter, "I'll be there in a second!"

They carefully took their seat, swiveling the red rubbery cushion so that a wooden frame back would stay at their back, and allowed them to be situated between two strangers, each was in turn engaged in conversation with their own neighbor on their far side, leaving our Observer wallowed in between the backs of each chair.

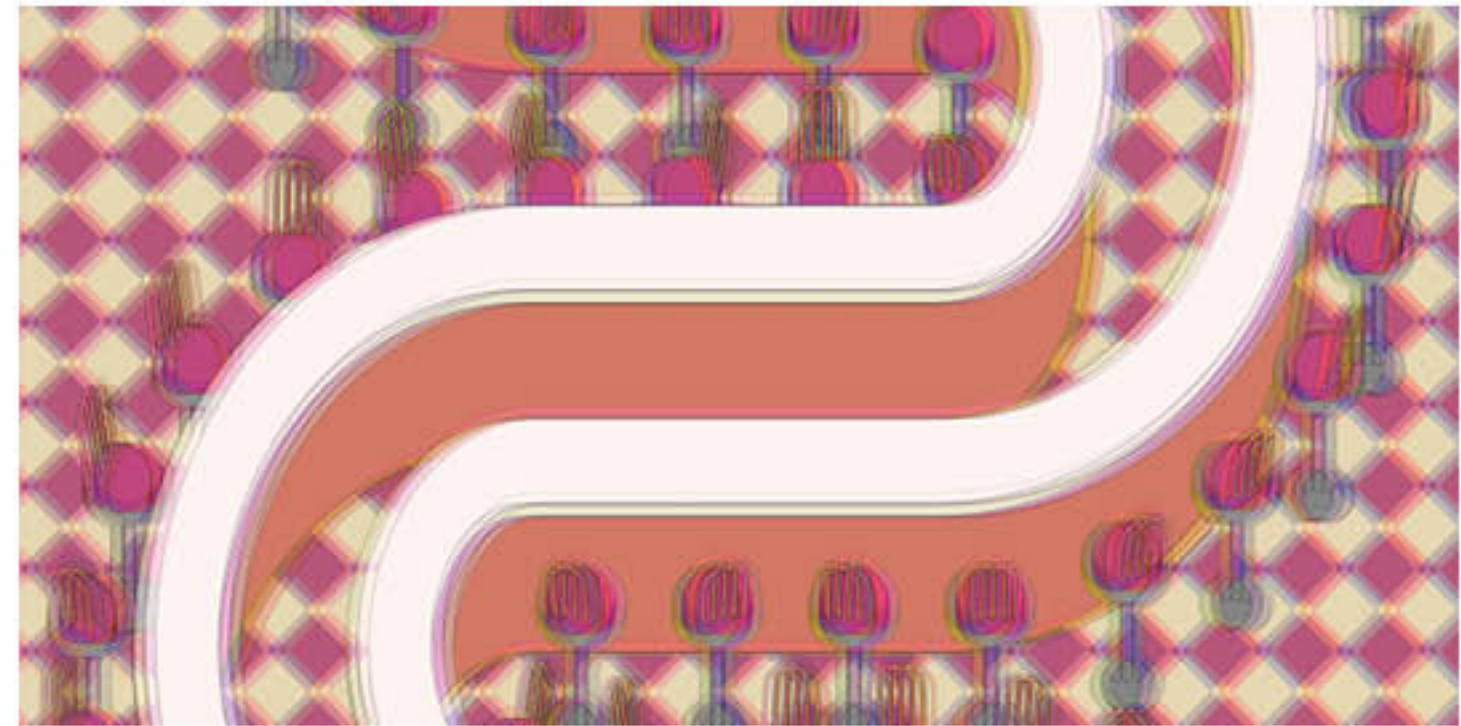
It took a moment before the woman rushed to stand across the counter from our Observer, pad and pen in hand.

"Bobby, right?" they asked, glancing up and down the row of seats.

"Nope, Bobby's called out so I'm covering his section. I'm Joan," the server answered, flipping open her notepad and flashing an ingenuine and bright smile, "The usual?"

Our Observer tilted their head, "I've never been here before."

Joan laughed, pulled a spiral bound menu out from under the counter and slapped it down, then rushed down the bend to another customer attempting to get her attention. Our Observer watched after her, tentatively opening the menu as they peered over at the rest of the dining room and its patrons. The stool was nicely placed at the center of the snake, facing the swinging kitchen doors again, but with several rows and bends layered between. The roiling mass of customers winding around our Observer held some familiar faces that they had come across throughout their travels already: joggers from early in the morning,



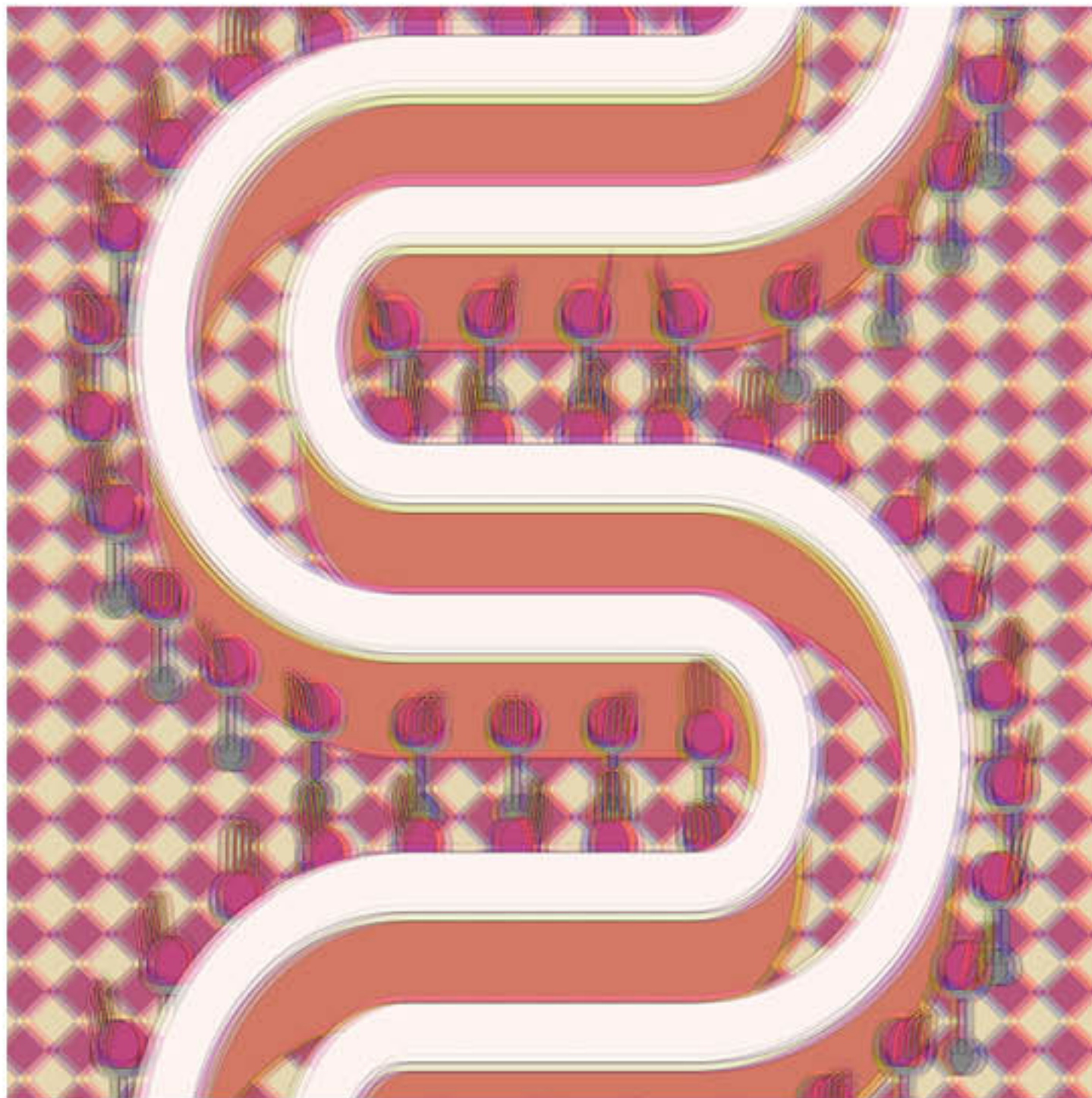
shoppers from the other businesses, even truck drivers who had passed them days prior on the road. Each and every one of them was engaged in another matter entirely, so much so that their eyes never landed on our Observer and even looked past them, the customers either engrossed in the food being served to them or in the lively conversations next to them.

Our Observer's eye did drift downward but never quite reached the menu in their hands, instead landing on the counter itself. Their brow furrowed as the material eluded them, a stone of some kind with an off white hue, glossed and laminated but sometimes speckled or otherwise marbled, dependent on the bend in the snake. They tried to find a point where the counter may have been cut or sectioned, but as far as they could tell it was all one long and continuous surface.

Our Observer was still deep in their consideration of the counter's possibilities, in particular of some of the various stains whose origins they could not identify but knew would never come out, when Joan returned to her place in front of them.

"So, ready to order?"

Our Observer startled in their chair and quickly thumbed the menu for the first time.



"No worries if not, how about I start you off with something to drink. Water? Coffee?" Joan pressed on with a break in her false smile, indicating a more genuine twinge at the edge of her mouth.

"Yes, yeah," our Observer stumbled, "Coffee, please."

"How'd you like that? Black? White? Decaf? Espresso? Something else with way too many syllables?"

They tried to keep up with her constant flow of options, but settled for safety, "Black, please."

"Right away," Joan said, jotting something down on her notepad and flipping it closed before heading down the row.

Our Observer took a deep breath and looked at the menu for the true first and final time, reading the options to themselves. The pages were separated into three major sections for the three main meals as the sign outside had initially indicated, and based on the times listed our Observer had arrived at a point where both Lunch and Breakfast were being served. They passed the various pancake, french toast, and waffle combination plates, complete with various sides of meats and styles of eggs, although a few stood out. These included additional types of eggs and specifications of sausages that made our Observer's skin crawl so badly that they moved quickly to the next part of the menu.

They did linger in the Lunch section for longer, eyeing the various degrees of salad, ranging from warm to cold, lettuce to mayonnaise based, although they found a mixed ice cream bowl listed in the category. Upon further analysis of the other item's ingredients, all of which consisted of different temperatures and consistencies mixed in a large bowl, they came to the conclusion that the ice cream still technically followed the criteria of a salad, at least based on this menu's specifications. They then moved onto the sandwiches, with the classic options like a Grilled Cheese, Burger, Patty Melt, Reuben, among others, but also had some stranger specialties listed like "Big Mike's Masher" or "A Squashed."

Our Observer was still trying to understand the ingredients on some of these options when Joan returned, placing a mug of coffee down in front of them.

"There you are," she said, then reached under the counter and produced a metal tin of creams and sugars, "In case you feel like customizing."

Our Observer thanked her, then pointed to the menu, "There are some interesting additions to the menu."

"Additions? It's always been like that," she responded, "We like to be very thorough about

our selection, but I bet we can whip up something else if you have something you want that's not on the menu."

"No, no, that's alright," they said, holding their tongue about some of the more pointed menu options they saw in the Dinner section (some of which included tongue), "Do you have any suggestions? I'm looking at the sandwiches."

"That's a fine choice," she said, leaning on the counter and lowering our Observer's menu with one finger so she could read it alongside them, "See, some of these are a bit overrated, while some are very popular and rightfully so. Any allergies?"

Our Observer shook their head.

"Great. What do you say to a game, and I surprise you?"

Our Observer looked over the section again, then sighed, "Why not. As long as it's within reason."

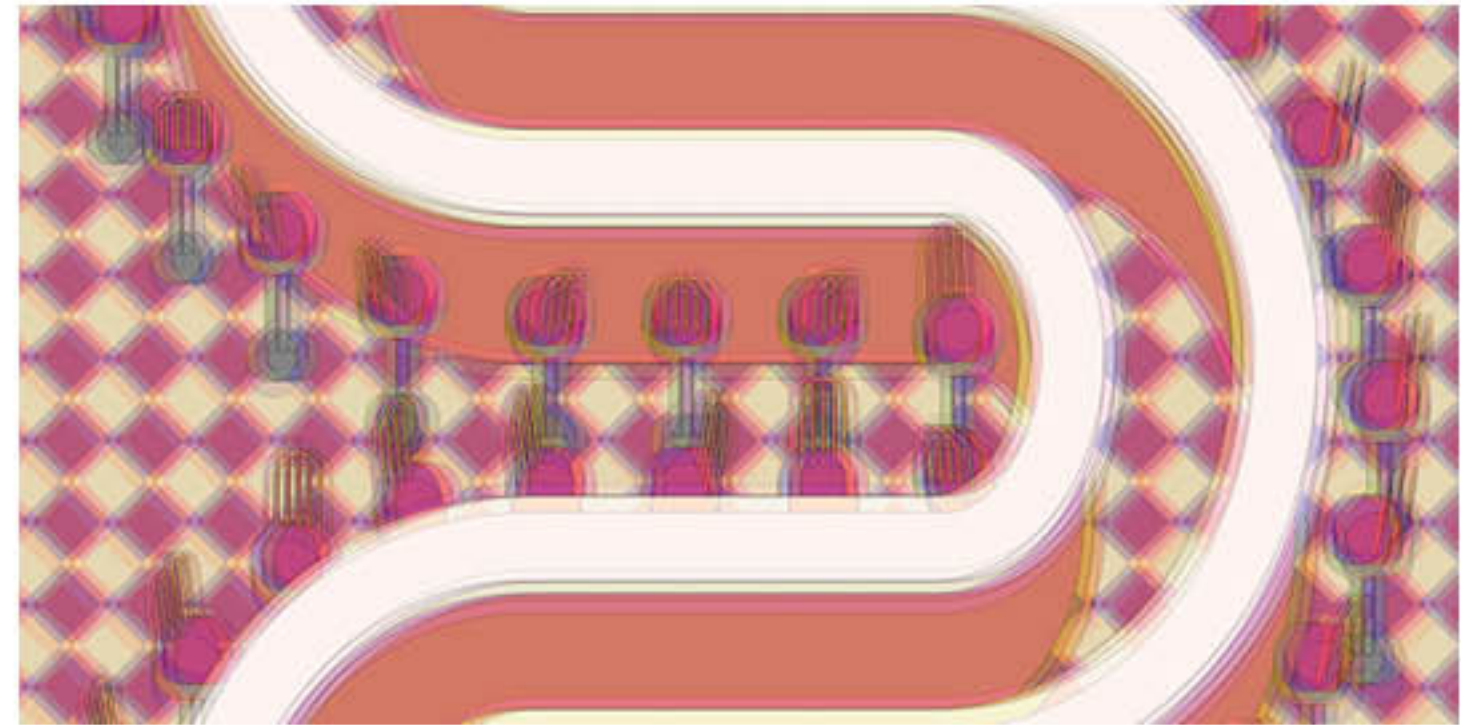
"It absolutely will be," Joan said, taking the menu and snapping it shut as it disappeared below the counter, "Absolutely within and without."

She then jotted something else down in her notepad, tore it out, and reached up. It was here our Observer noticed the clothesline system that ran along a continuous loop of pulleys that followed the counter's path just over every server. Joan clipped the ticket onto the line, then gave it two quick tugs, prompting it to cycle over everyone's heads.

"It'll be right out. Enjoy your coffee," she said, flashing the fake smile again, then moving back onto another customer. Our Observer ignored the small tin, and instead drank from the burning mug as they watched Joan walk away, noticing the diner's logo plastered across the back of her black T-shirt. With a quick glance, they confirmed this to be the same uniform of every other server: a black shirt with the logo, an apron, and a small paper hat. Joan completed her outfit with running sneakers and jeans, while another had on boots and another some kind of clog.

The group of servers seemed all equally as frantic in their movements, each jumping from customer to customer along their stretches of counter just like Joan. There was the constant chatter between them and customers alike, the clashing of cutlery and dishes as food was passed and eaten in a symphony of movement.

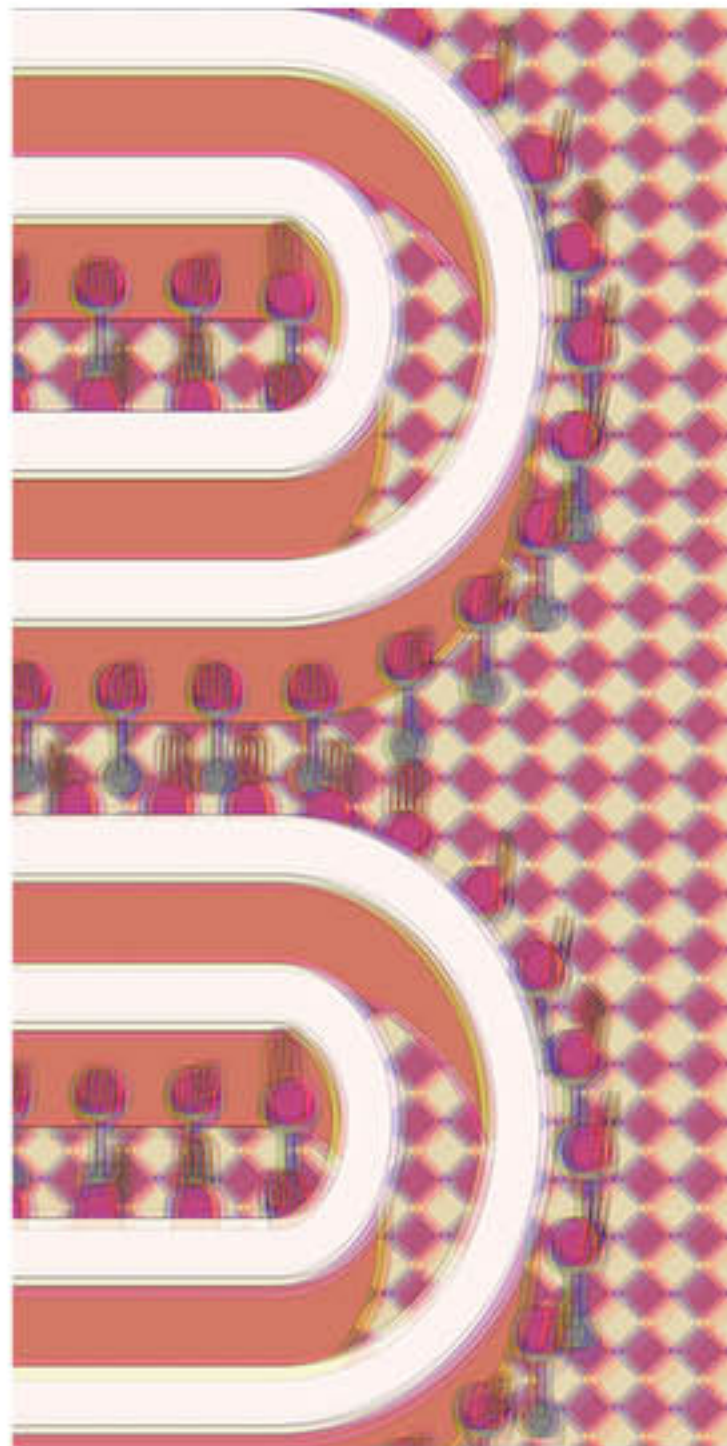
What our Observer had initially seen as chaotic, however, now appeared to be more... choreographed. The more time they spent watching the movement of the servers, not individually but as a whole, the more a pattern began to appear. Like the ebb and flow of



a river and its current, as one server moved along the winding path, another would follow behind, and another would rise to meet them in front. The path they walked was still only wide enough for one at a time, so there was no passing between the servers and instead resulted in this constant back and forth along their designated stretches of counter. They never spent more than a short few minutes with each customer, constantly looking for the next person to question or answer, and were almost never entirely still. They constantly flowed against one another, brushing the sides of the counters to grab extra silverware and condiments from under the counters to pass along the surface to customers or between servers.

The food itself followed the movement of the servers, starting from kitchen where it was passed to the first worker, who rose to meet the next and pass it along, who then walked their path to the next and crest again, and again, until the wave of service crashed on the shore before its recipient, delivering the order accordingly.

They continued this dance of handing food, condiments, and quick comments to one another as they floated through the straightaways and bends of the snake, moving back and forth along the counter. Along the outer side of the counter, though, the customers stayed



put but also never still. Each was bent over their food, turned to their neighbor talking, or calling for a server. Next to our Observer was a man loudly discussing a game with his friend, and based on the shaky details that either man remembered it must have occurred some years ago. To their right was a group of women whose hushed tones were drowned by the rest of the diner chatter despite their close proximity and fleeting glances.

Our Observer turned their eyes further down the snake and saw similar conversations occurring, a family taking up both sides of a straightaway and yelling across the server, intimate dates along one bend, or individuals stuck between such groups. One such individual was a young woman near the kitchen with a book laid out in front of her and her hand hovering over a plate of untouched and cold fries. The markings on the book when she shifted the cover to turn the page implied that it was the third in a series.

A louder sound caused our Observer to turn their attention over their shoulder towards a bend closer to the door, where raucous laughter had erupted amongst a group of men, one of whom was absurdly tall and was being referred to as Big Mike. It was hard to make out exactly what the cause of the laughter was, but the man's

eyes were closed from the strain, and as he bucked in his chair it seemed that the current of the servers was carrying a plate to him. On it must have been Big Mike's titular sandwich, which was a large and indiscernible concoction of mashed food between two pieces of bread.

Unfortunately for Big Mike, the plate was still being placed in front of him when his uproarious laughter resulted in a swinging arm that knocked it across the counter and onto the checkered linoleum floor.

The crash was louder than the rest of the chatter, and halted his and his friends' laughter, but did nothing to impact the rest of the patrons' experience.

"Oh no," Big Mike was saying, going for the plate, "My Masher, I am so so very sorry."

"It's no worry," answered the startled server who turned towards the kitchen, put two fingers to his lips and emitted a loud, sharp whistle. Our Observer redirected their attention back to the kitchen just in time to catch a glimpse of someone through the window bursting out the back door. They tracked the person to the windows lining the wall, running around the building, and re-entering from the front door with a mop and a bucket.

"We'll have another Masher for you in just a minute, sir," the server was assuring Big Mike, who was nearly inconsolable as the kitchen worker mopped up the avalanche of a sandwich.

"Order up, sweetie," Joan's voice rang out behind our Observer, as the serving wave crashed behind them, "Oh, don't worry about all that. Big Mike just gets like that."

They then turned around to see their own sandwich being placed next to a stack of extra napkins.

"So, what is this?" they questioned.

"A BLT of course."

"Are you sure?"

"What else could it be?"

Our Observer tilted their head and lifted the bread a bit, "I mean, I do see the Lettuce."

"Right, right between the Berries and Tongue."

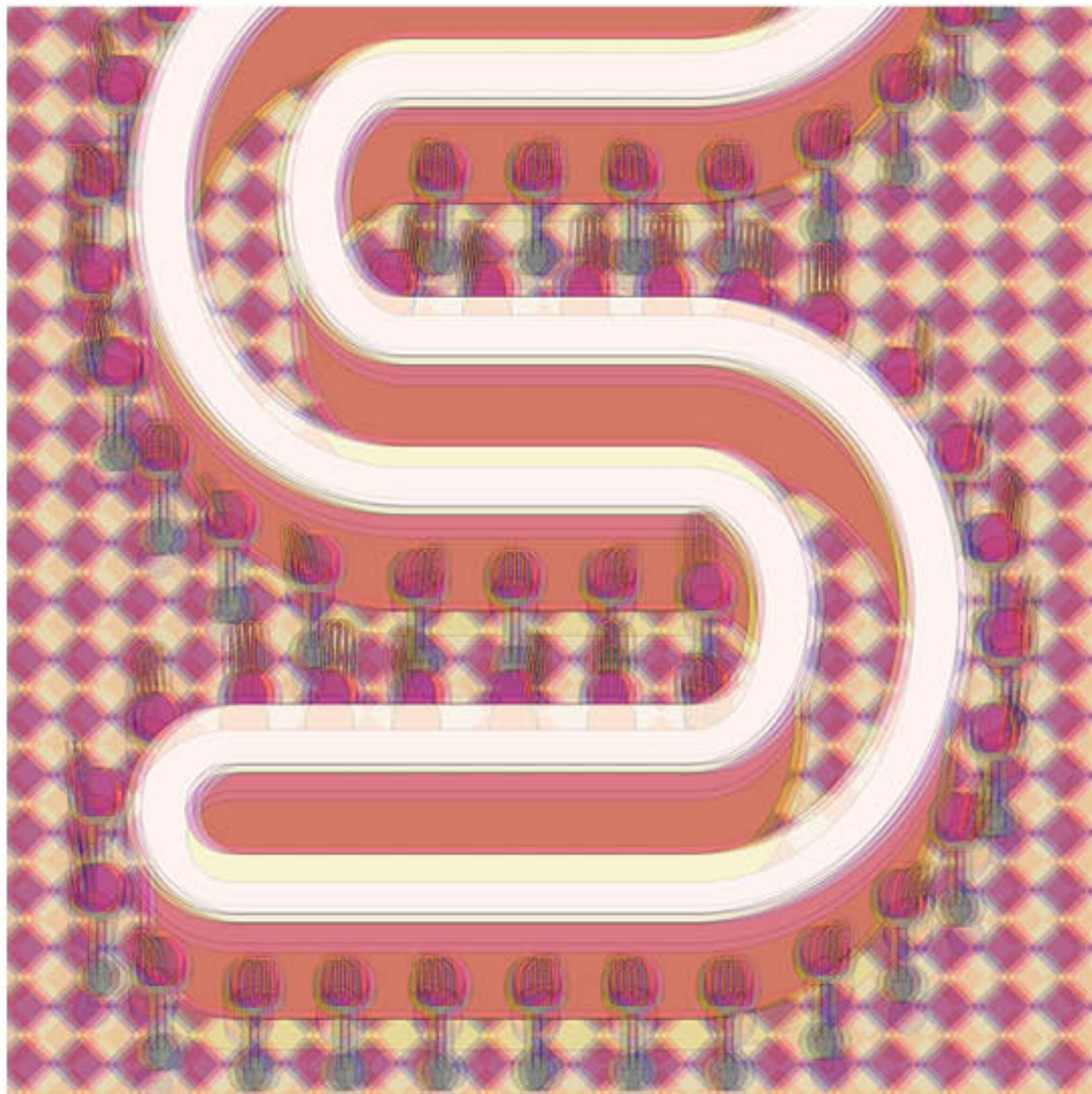
"Tongue? Whose Tongue?"

Joan laughed again, "Enjoy!"

Then she went on away. Our Observer was skeptical of the sandwich, but did not want to be rude, and had eaten stranger things in the past.

It would be best not to relive the experience, though.

By the time they were done, Big Mike had a new sandwich, and his friends were chanting to



see how fast he could finish it. The family on the next straightaway had finally received their food and were politely eating in silence, and the girl reading in the back had remembered she had fries to eat as well.

Our Observer finished their coffee and cleaned their plate, leaning back into the seat as Joan approached once more.

"What'd you think?"

"Definitely a different BLT than I've had before."

"Really? I haven't heard that," she said thoughtfully, "Can I get you anything else?"

Our Observer shook their head, "Just the check please."

Joan nodded, reached under the counter and retrieved a clunky, metallic register, heaving it out in front of her and hitting a few buttons. After the initial thud and shock of the machine, our Observer paid and tipped well.

She looked over the bill one last time and flashed her serving smile one last time, "Well, thank you for joining us today. I hope you come back again, and if you need the restroom before you leave, the men's room is there and the women's is there."

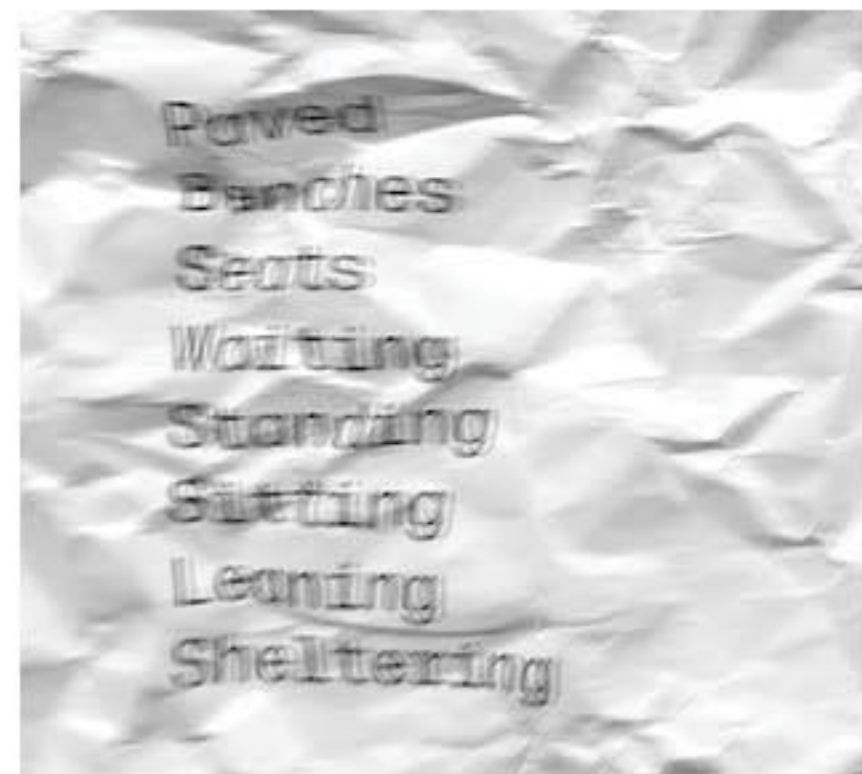
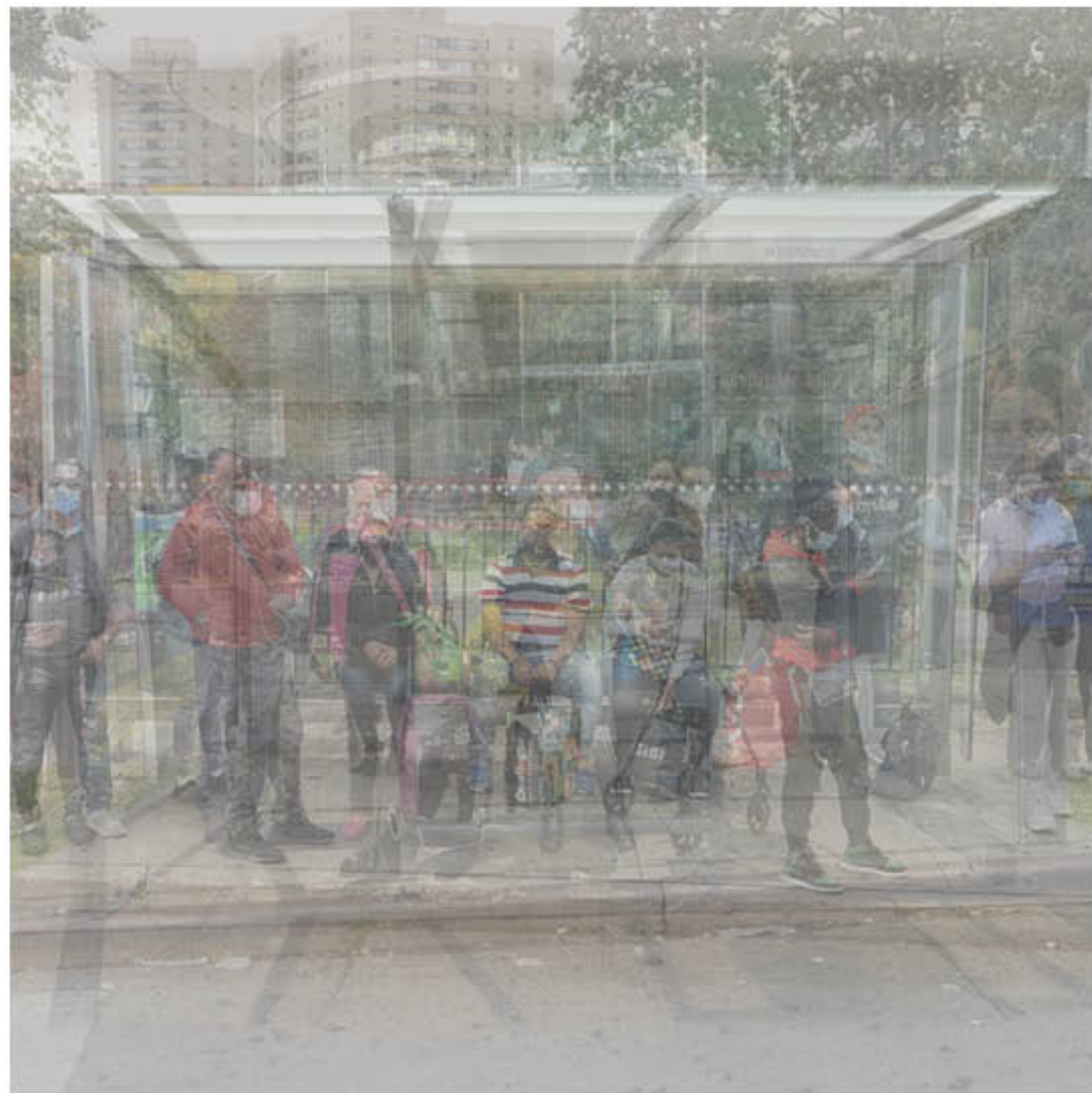
She proceeded to point to the very clearly labelled bathrooms on either side of the restaurant, just next to the kitchen but completely separated by the snake up the center of the room, where our Observer still sat in the center.

They furrowed their brow at the suggestion and answered, "I think I'm alright, thanks," and began to leave.

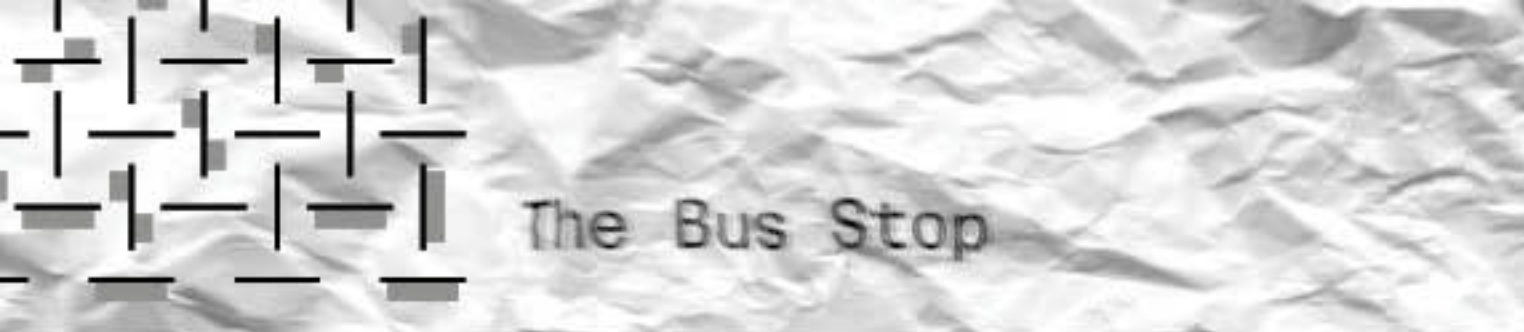
On their way out, they did hear the server on the last bend calling out with a wave, saying:

"Come back soon! See you soon! See you Tomorrow!"

Our Observer gave a small wave back as they exited The Snake Tail Diner and returned to the streets of Nowhere, Anywhere, their stomach gurgling still from the meal.







The Bus Stop

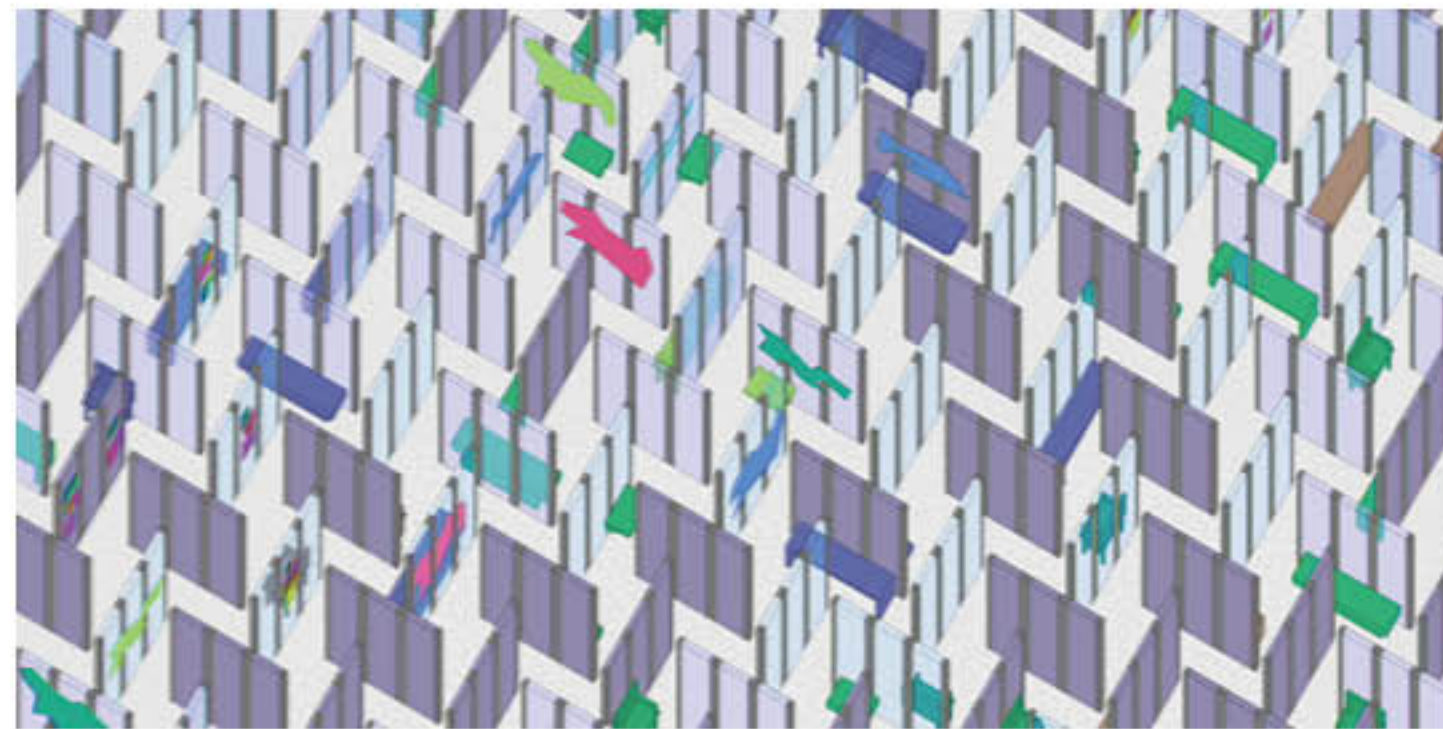
Our Observer had tried to explore the far reaches of Nowhere, Anyway several times over. They wandered every street and path, searching the various lengths of stores and buildings, each suburban and rural neighborhood, and through each of the overlaps and transitions between these spaces. They kept exploring further and further through the expanses of the township, constantly seeing the woods from which they came off in the distance but were never quite able to reach them. Whenever they would move closer, they would turn and find another street, another block of homes, another stretch of town in their path. The road they had initially taken into the town seemed to have been lost to the neverending roads interconnecting within itself.

Our Observer had decided in this time that their explorations may be over and wanted to leave Nowhere, Anywhere, and in turn thought that it may be best to abandon that pursuit, at least in their preferred manner. They were having no success in their attempts to leave the town on foot, and instead needed to find another means to exit.

Along their path to the outer edges, our Observer did encounter many more of the town's residents. Many of them our Observer had passed earlier today, such as the joggers or patrons of various businesses. They would pass our Observer and wave or give a small nod and smile, others would shout a friendly "Hello!" or "Wonderful weather we're having!" but the niceties tended to stop there.

Other residents, however, were less friendly. Many would shout other words at our Observer, some they had heard on the road before or even back home where they came from, other words were nearly unintelligible but filled with the same malice. Other people would tell them to get out of the town, that they weren't wanted here.

The worst of them would just stop and stare, mouths either agape or in a sneer of distaste. They made our Observer's skin crawl the most.

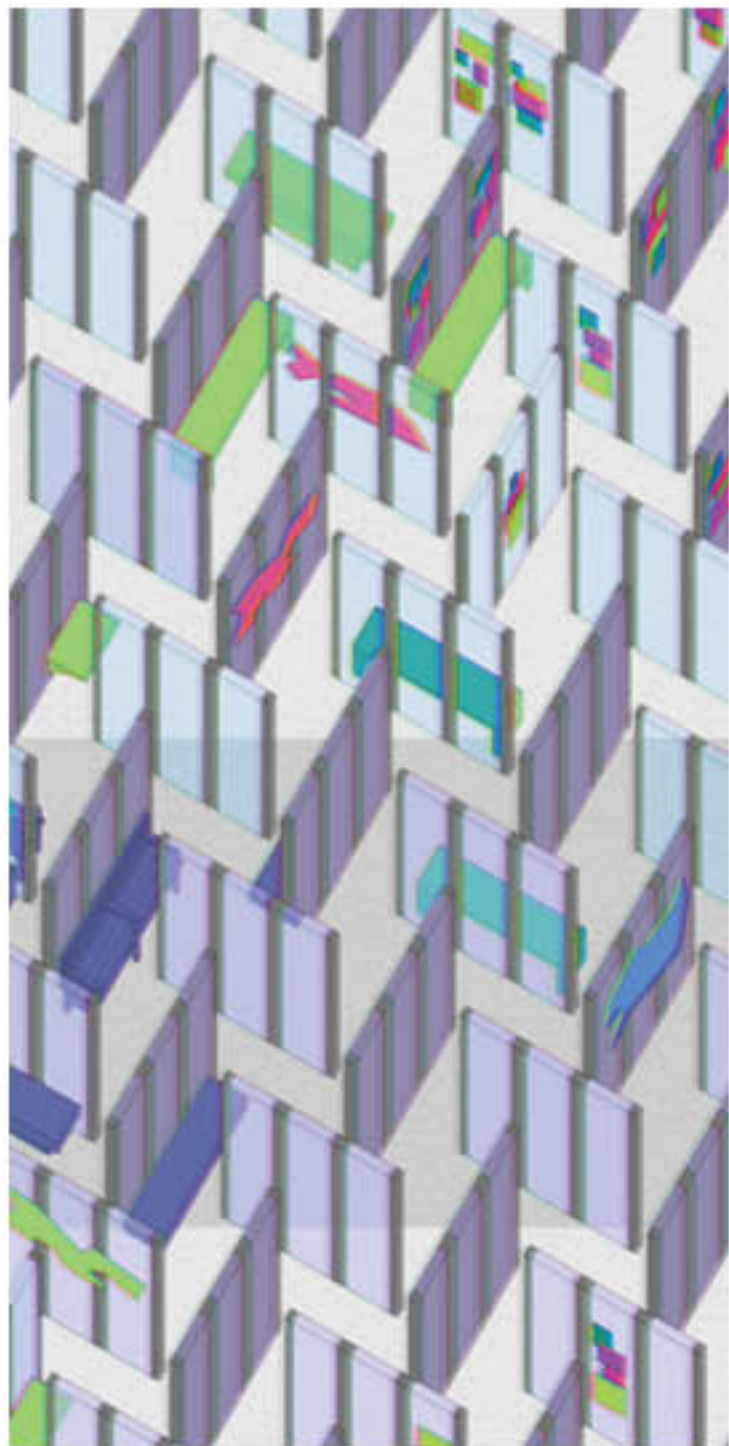


They did take their advice eventually, and attempted to leave the town. When they failed, they approached and asked some of the more friendly residents for actual directions on how to do so. Despite their initial shock that, first, our Observer was talking to them, then second, that they wanted to leave, they would provide some useful advice. Namely, all the residents recommended that our Observer visit "The Bus Stop off Main."

Unfortunately, in their explorations, our Observer had found a "Main Avenue," "Main Street," "Main Drive," and several others all in different parts of the town with no intersections between them. It would take a while before our Observer made their way back to what they believed to be the center of the town, and while walking along the stretch of establishments they had seen previously they found a small metal sign that read:

"Main Square."

It was there that they raised their head and saw what could be defined in simple terms as a bus stop, but was much, much larger. The next stretch of street was abutted by a concrete sidewalk that expanded into a plaza filled with various seatings and walls made of a combination of various plastics, glasses, and metals. The walls sat in a grid perpendicular to



one another but never touching, creating very small physical gaps between them and many visual overlaps that obscured them from one another. Our Observer approached and found there to be some coverings over sections of the walls, but primarily could not see further into their arrangement until they entered into it.

As they first started in, our Observer started to notice the difference in the pocket spaces made between the walls, moving along between them carefully. The perpendicular nature of their arrangement created very narrow gaps and walkways between the walls, and our Observer had to be careful not to trip or get caught as they squeezed through over and over. The concrete sidewalk did continue through most of the areas they found, although some of them were newer or made from different compositions of pavement, the coloring and amounts of aggregates left in the ground indicating different pours and ages of the ground. The seams in the pours were obvious, with occasional names or dates written in alongside handprints and messages, although some expanded into cracks, while others were filled in. The cracks were a bit of a problem in some pockets, making the terrain rougher and harder for our Observer to navigate, with large chunks of the concrete missing or

with plants pushing their way up from underneath and overtaking the area.

While first focused on their footing, our Observer eventually analyzed the structures themselves. In different areas they found a variety of seating arrangements, some empty, others with seats facing one another or perpendicular like the walls, some that paralleled the gaps between walls while others interrupted the gaps and made them even harder to pass by. The seats ranged from benches to singular seats, typically made of metal with slats or full slabs, some with backs and armrests the separated seats, others that were simply solid chunks of concrete protruding out of the ground.

None of them looked very pleasant to rest in.

Then there were the walls. Primarily, they were made of glass or plastic, with a metal structure holding up the material panels and bolting them into the ground, occasionally linking them to the seats resting before them. The real difference was in their opacity, many of which were solid or frosted plastic or glass, even perforated metal grating, creating different views through or around the interruptions forming the pockets. The occasional roof covers were a similar system but they were only made of the opaque materials, although they tended to span a section of the dividers while others were left open to the sky above.

As our Observer traveled through the space, they noticed that many more of these more translucent walls allowed for them to gain an impression of what may be on the other side. Many times as they moved through they would see shapes, silhouettes really, of figures moving beyond. Often it was small wildlife scurrying along or branches waving overhead from trees that had sprouted through the concrete in some pockets, but there were times that the figures were larger. In particular, they looked almost like people pacing or sitting in seats, waiting, but when our Observer rounded the corner they usually found nothing on the other side besides another squirrel or rogue plastic bag.

The opacity of the materials themselves weren't the only aspect that shaped the interruptions, they were simply the base. Some of the interruptions were better characterized by what had been placed on them, such as advertisements. Many of them were official posters placed within the glass to advertise upcoming events and performances, others were of various high end products or medications, but they tended to fill the panels of the wall and prevent our Observer from looking through. There were smaller papers and fliers tacked onto the walls or glued repeatedly as well, usually torn or peeling back to reveal former, more weathered advertisements below, like those of common brands our Observer had

purchased from earlier in the day or from smaller events that had long since passed.

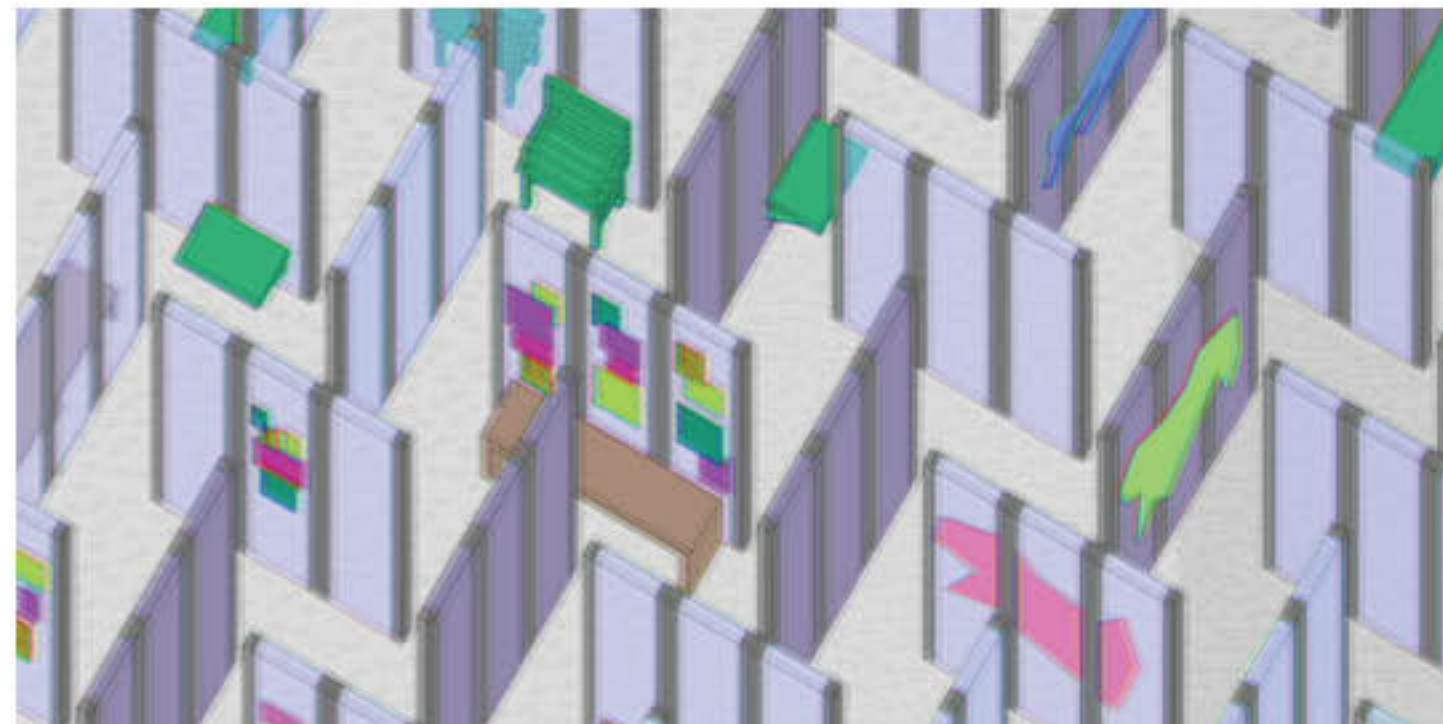
There were less official forms of decoration as well, the kinds that were left behind by the people who had passed through this stop. They started as small markings indicating someone's past presence, although our Observer did stumble onto full murals that covered entire pockets of space. All of this did count as graffiti, at least in our Observer's understanding of the term, and they enjoyed taking the time to read through what they could. Some of the markings had clearly suffered the passage of time, fading in the sun or washing away with the rain, but others were etched into the very material of the bus stop itself. Some of the writing was obscene descriptions of body parts or acts involving someone's mother or father, others carried heartfelt words and messages of love, more were in languages our Observer could not speak, although most of them simply stated that a person was here.

Particularly, "Big Mike was here" was written so many times that our Observer lost count.

Our Observer did find some of the more detailed murals of interest. Some of the paintings, which appeared to be made from spray paints based on the smell coming off of some of the fresher and brighter pictures, were simply names and tags of locals. Others were crude images as people practiced their craft, or simply wanted to leave a mark. But again, there were some that portrayed greater skill and greater detail. Our Observer found pictures of animals running through fields, detailed depictions of the stars, the woods from which they came complete with creatures they didn't recognize, endless flames, the road they had come down, many of the stores they had visited overlaid with themselves, a door filled with light, and many others. One such pocket seemed to recreate the entire town in a perspective that made it hard for our Observer to exit the area.

Our Observer had always appreciated art but hadn't had much opportunity to do so, and never street art like this. They were always told it was immoral and wrong despite its possible beauty, so they found it freeing to be able to walk among it here.

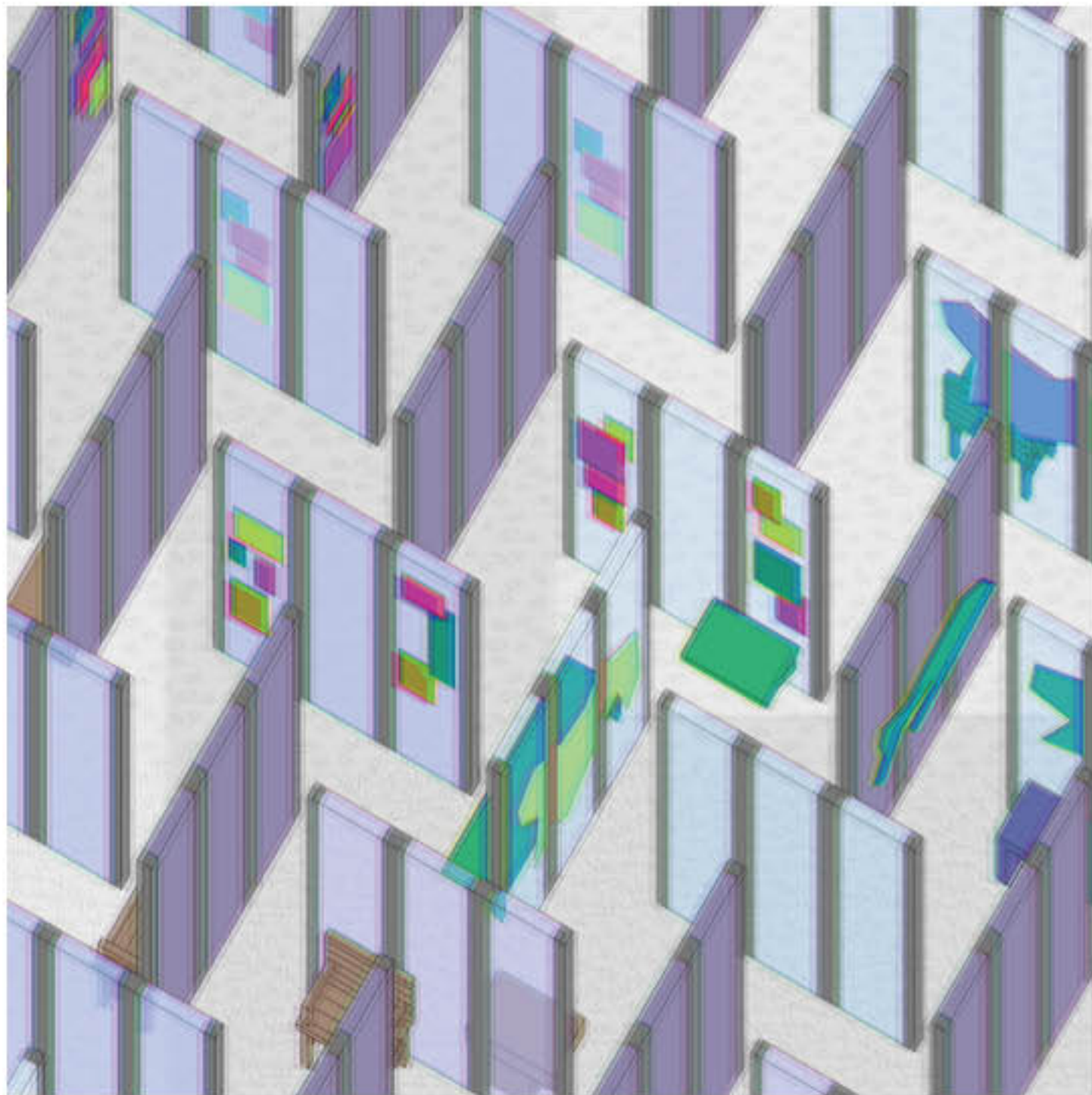
Despite their wanderings alone in the bus stop, they did eventually find a few other people there. Occasionally the figures from beyond the walls were actually people, sitting and looking at the art, sleeping along the longer benches, or just waiting in anticipation. They did find a young girl lounging across one of the concrete benches with a book in hand, with a very abstract mural painted behind her. Our Observer felt it rude to interrupt her ongoing reading binge in order to look at the mural, but as they looked back at it as they left, the angle of the image seemed to align the shapes in such a way that they created the number five.



Eventually our Observer found their way back towards the edges of the bus stop, and along the stretch by the street they recognized a young couple speaking in low tones at a bench. It seemed their conversation was becoming heated as they both whispered harshly at one another and gesticulated aggressively at the various travel pamphlets they had laid out between them.

Our Observer moved on from them quickly as well, and wandered along the stretch until they heard a slight flickering noise down the way. They followed the sound and found that one of the panels near the curb of the street was slightly thicker than all the others, not due to any change in material, but instead due to a split flap display set into it. The bottom part of the display was cycling through various words, numbers, and symbols, until it came to rest on a new phrase. The overall board appeared to be a list of locations and times, at least from the parts that our Observer could understand. Some parts of the display seemed to have gotten stuck between numerals or symbols, creating strange combinations that they couldn't begin to decipher, while others were fixed but simply unintelligible.

This didn't matter much, because as far as our Observer could tell, a bus out of Nowhere,



Anywhere, should be arriving soon.

They found a bench nearby that could still see the street and the board, one made of metal slats that were angled just a bit too high with handrails between each seat that were just slightly too close together, causing them to squeeze to fit in it. They set up in this seat, taking out the book they had purchased earlier in the day and the snack they had been saving for such a time.

As they ate and read, our Observer did find their attention drifting once again, now to the street in front of them. They had walked similar ones all day, and had seen stores and small apartment buildings like those that they faced many times throughout the day, but they couldn't help but watch as people continued to walk by. None of the people walked on our Observer's side of the street, and no one else had ventured over to check the board for times or to wait at the bus stop.

Our Observer did see cars of various sizes and forms of fueling, even a horse drawn carriage, all slow down on the street as they passed by to look at them as they simply sat there waiting. They noticed people shooting glances as they exited stores or strolled by, and at one point saw some kids playing with the ball in the street and making hand gestures at one another then at our Observer before running off.

Our Observer had been receiving similar looks all day and tried not to think too much of it. It wasn't the first time they had to deal with people taking offense to their being or the way they lived, and as unfortunate as it seemed, they didn't believe it to be the last.

After a while, as the streets started to clear, an old man exited a store from the opposite side of the road, approached the curb and leaned heavily on his cane.

"Hey, you there!" he shouted across the way, "What are you waiting for?"

Our Observer looked up from their book and looked around to be sure the man was talking to them. They then answered:

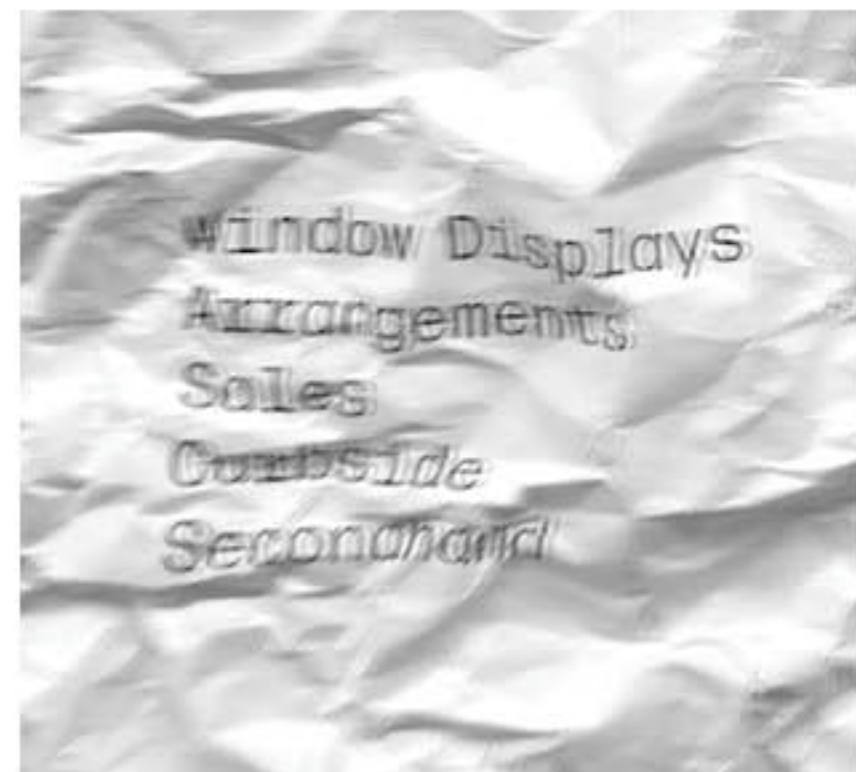
"The bus! The board says it should be coming in a few more minutes!"

"Those times are for tomorrow," the old man scoffed, "They're always for tomorrow!"

As he started to walk away down the street, he yelled back at our Observer one more thing:

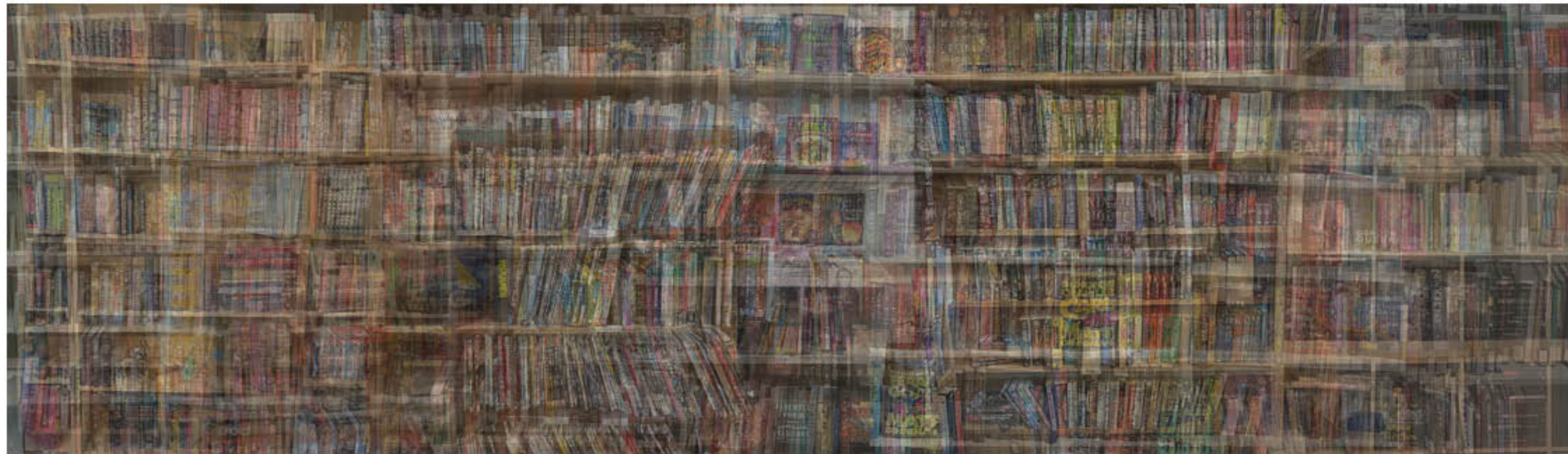
"The bus never comes today!"

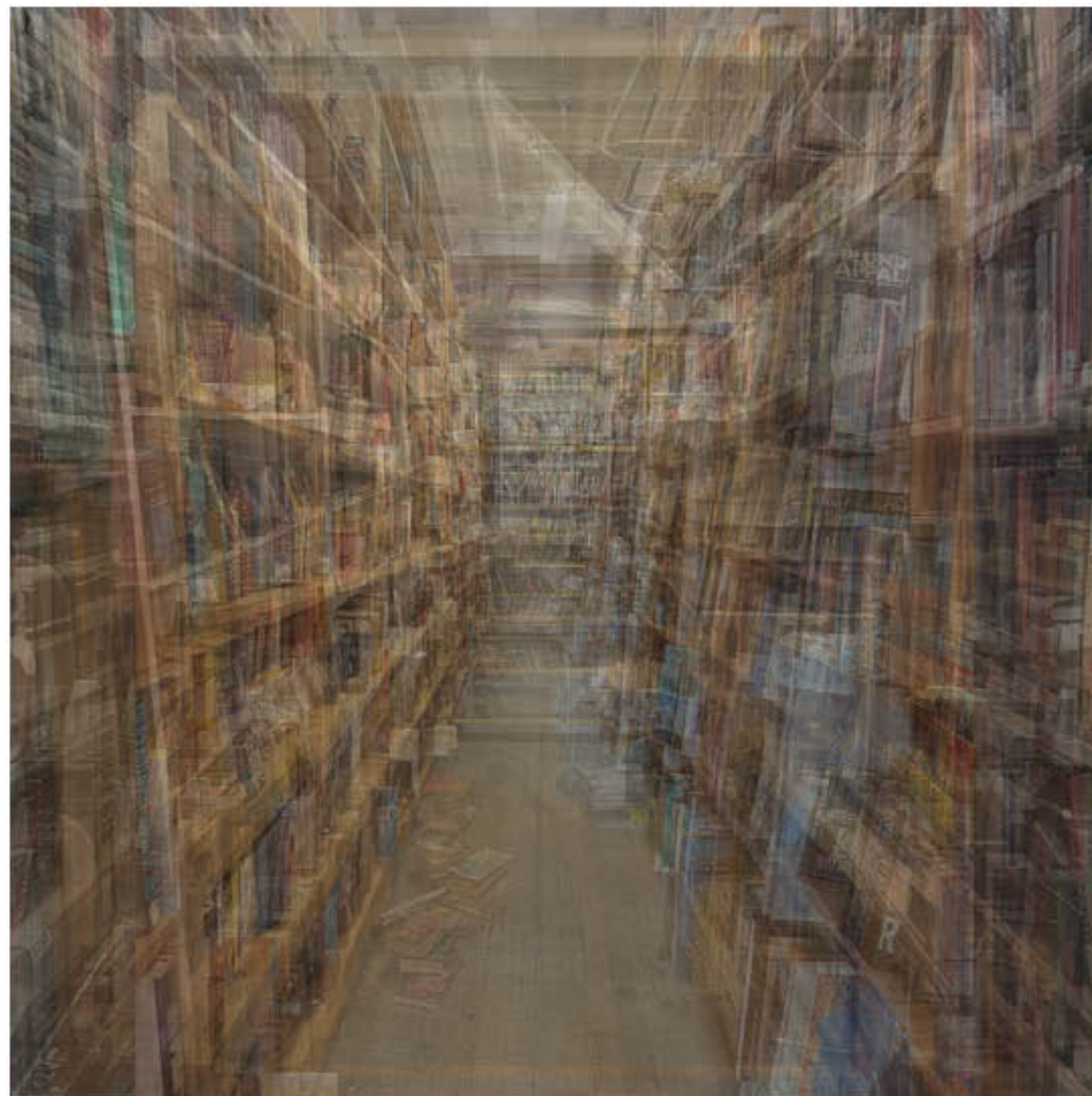
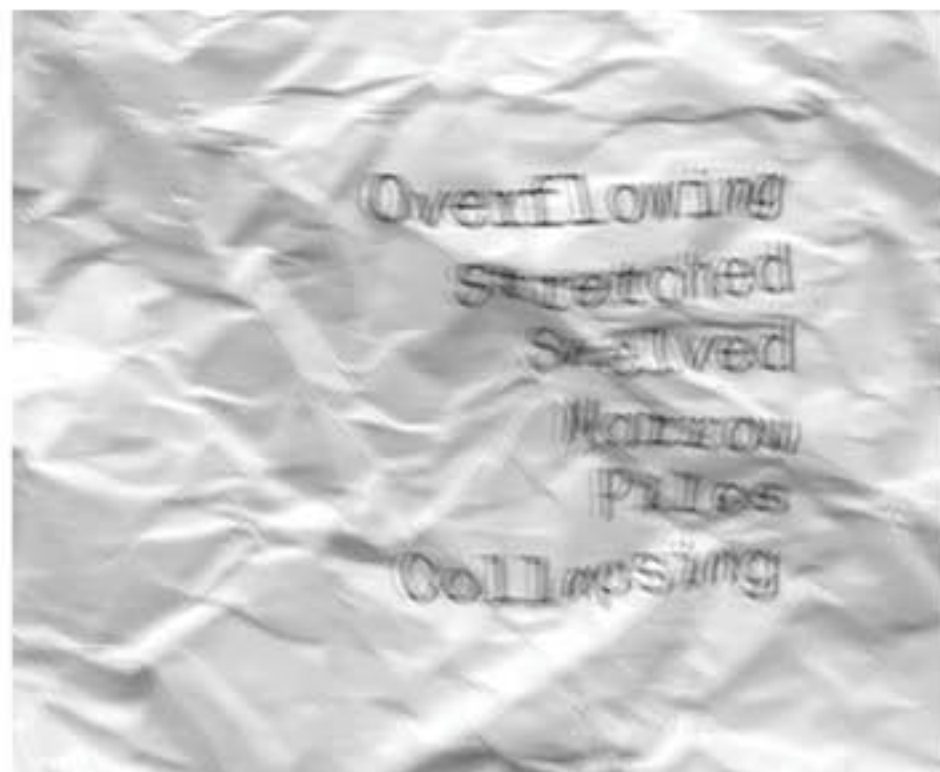
Our Observer watched the man until he turned a corner and vanished, contemplating his words. They then finished their snack, and wandered off to find a trash can.



Warm
Labelled
Cluttered
Arranged
Cases

Sectioned
Aged
Stacked
Organized
Shifting





The Bookstore

After sitting on the curb for likely too long, our Observer decided it was time to find something else to do to pass the time for their day in Nowhere, Anywhere. They knew they would need some form of extra entertainment once they started back on their journey out of the town, and had already walked the main streets several times over and taken stock of its offerings. Our Observer decided that their next stop should be their final, and that they should use it to venture somewhere they might have enjoyed when they were younger.

With a slap of the knees, they stood up off the curb, and proceeded down the street towards a storefront they spotted between what appeared to be two small apartment buildings, with a sign reading:

"Short Story Long."

The windows of the storefront were obscured by shelves of books that spanned various genres and styles, while a glass door sat closed at the center with a tiny bell hanging over it. The sign over the display that bore the store name in swirling calligraphy was accompanied by the same name on the door, while the windows had small handwritten signs describing various deals and descriptions of popular books accompanied by instances of the titles themselves.

An old woman was hobbling up to the store as our Observer approached, so they quickly reached over her hunched form in order to open the door for her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, looking up at our Observer and squinting through her reading glasses that rested at the edge of her nose, "How very kind of you."

"Of course," our Observer answered, feeling their cheeks grow hot as the tiny old woman smiled and entered the store. They then quickly followed after her as the door jingled closed behind them both.

Inside was a small room with tables on either side and pushed up to the outer walls, creating a small pathway between. Each table was laden with stacks of books and blocked

some very full and very unreachable shelves behind them. With another glance around, our Observer noticed a sign hanging at the center of the room over the path that read "Bestsellers."

As our Observer looked over the tables, they noticed the old woman walking to the back of the room where a thin hallway continued off of the directed path. She then stopped at the entrance, waiting behind another person who was already there.

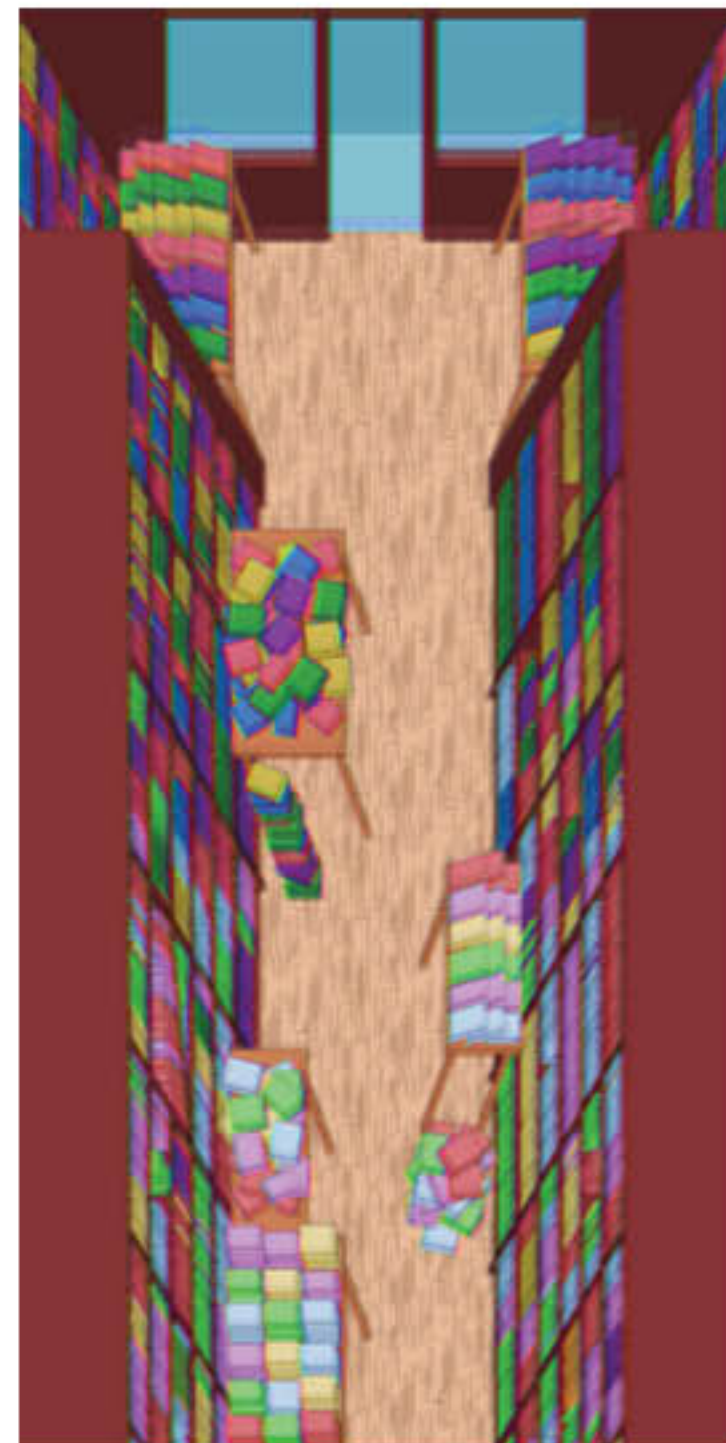
Our Observer put down the book they were examining from one table and followed the woman, trying to get a better look at the hall, when the front door to the shop slammed into one of the tables. The bell nearly fell from its hook as a distraught man in a suit rushed in and over to our Observer, shouting:

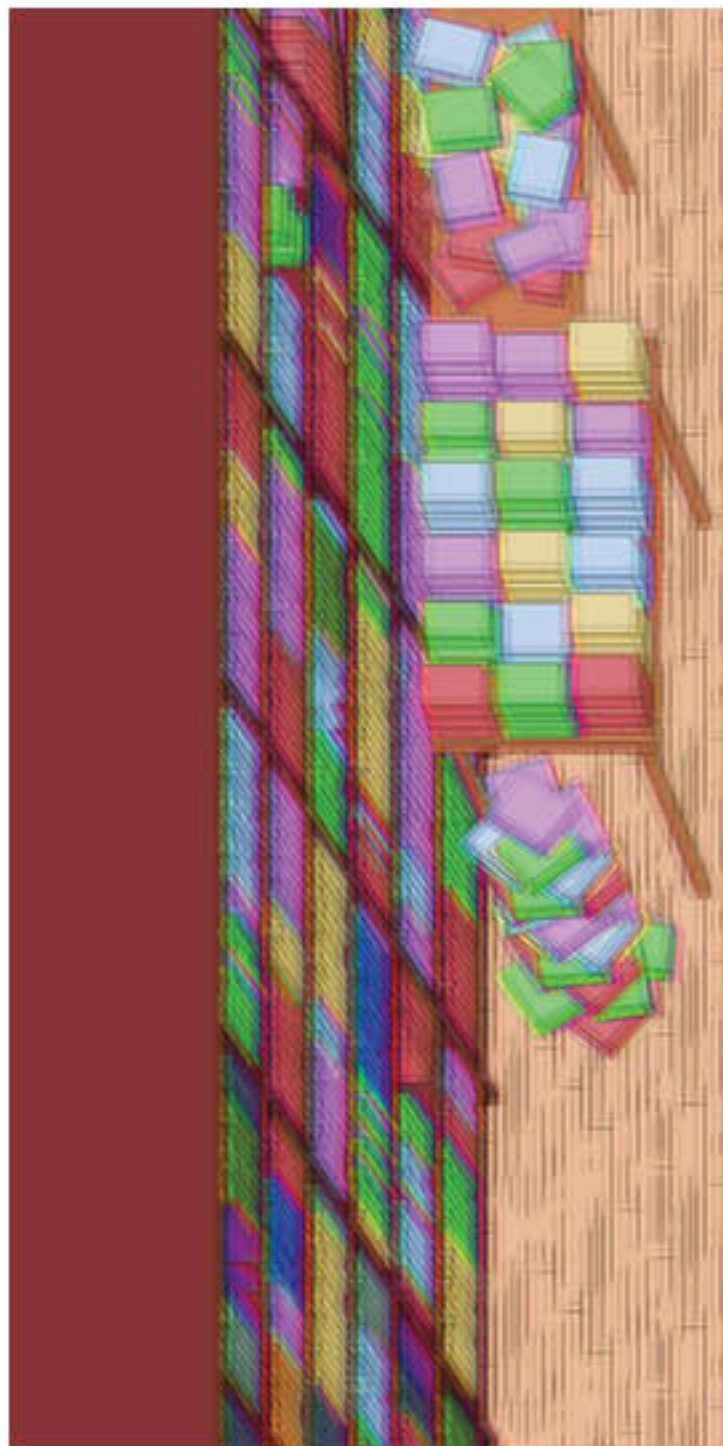
"Hey, you! Are you in line or not?"

Our Observer was taken aback and tried to stutter out a reply, but the incredulous look on the businessman's flustered face forced their words to catch in their throat. Fortunately, the small old woman in front of them answered.

"Why, of course you are," she said, addressing our Observer, then smiling up at the businessman, "You'll just have to wait your turn in line like everyone else."

The man snarled at our Observer then crossed his arms and grumbled





a few curses under his breath before stepping back. Our Observer smiled at the old woman who also spoke a bit under her breath before turning around again, although they couldn't quite hear what she was saying.

Our Observer finally looked over the short woman's head to see exactly what was in the hall before them, and found there to be a line. It was a singular line of customers waiting down a long hallway of bookshelves, interrupted with the occasional table or stack of books, forcing a more ambling path and obscuring the line's end from its start. Each person was waiting and perusing the books near them in sections marked by hanging signs similar to that of the "Bestsellers" in this entrance, although no one was moving past one another. They were all just waiting, but as the line did begin to move forward and our Observer moved up along with it, they realized that there was simply no room to skip sections and passing the line was impossible.

Our Observer heard the businessman behind them groan again and mutter, "I can't believe I have to wait like this again, especially behind someone like them."

Our Observer felt the weight of his words on their shoulders, weighing their posture down and decided it was best to distract themselves, and turned to the bookshelves

on either side of them. This first section of the hall was still the "Bestsellers" section, with many repeating books from the tables in the entryway and marked with handwritten signs of deals and descriptions in the same manner as the front windows, but as the line slowly progressed forward the genre began to shift. The titles began to describe people and names, specifically those of biographies and autobiographies, although many of them weren't... real. At least, our Observer didn't recognize them and many of them sounded very made up. As the line approached a table, they began to notice that books about political and religious figures, activists and wars, and other historical topics were interspersed with well known fantasy and science fiction novels.

Our Observer looked up at the sign above and saw that it read "Fiction."

The line passed the overcrowded table and allowed our Observer a different vantage of the hall, and just ahead they saw a young girl closing a book in her hand and starting to collect a pile of similar books to move up with. The one she closed appeared to be the fourth of the bunch, but all of them were of a similar style and series.

"Oh, it looks like that one found something she really likes," mused the old woman in front of our Observer, tilting her head, "How nice."

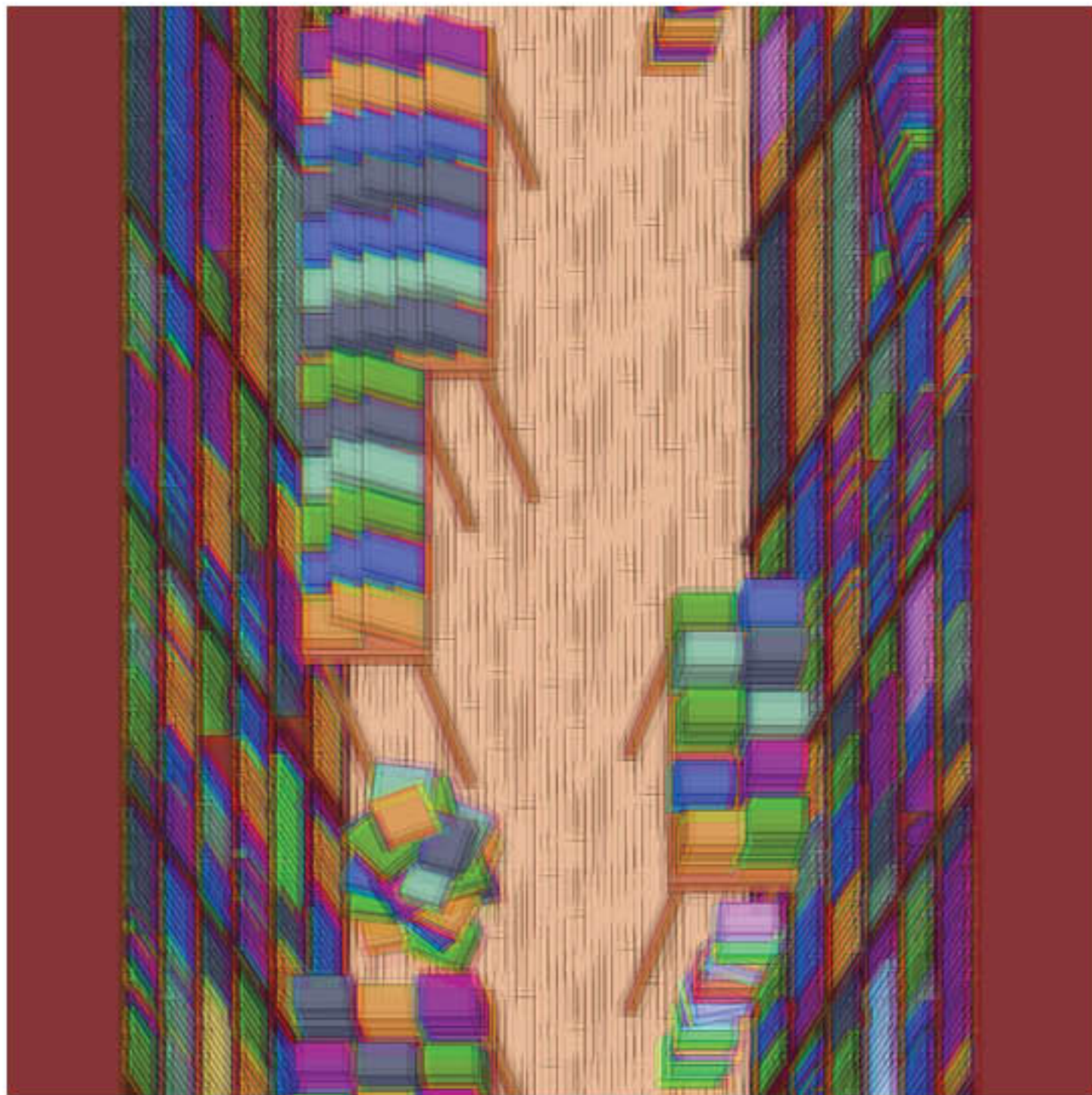
"She's holding up the whole line," they then heard the businessman behind them grumble. Up ahead, it appeared as though the young woman heard his comment as well and flushed, quickly gathering up her books and moving the line ahead, with the rest of them following just behind.

Our Observer did see a shift in the shelves again as they passed more stacks of books, some of which seemed to spill off the shelves themselves, while others built up from the ground below. Above them they noticed the new sign read "Nonfiction," and while some shelves were filled with textbooks, memoirs, and manuals, they also saw a few outliers. Some of the shelves had labels with subcategories, but a few of them had cracked or split, sitting at an angle allowing different topics to spill into one another.

Namely, our Observer felt drawn to a few shelves that were labelled as "Theoretical Physics," with several thick books on theories of quantum physics and entanglement, along with mathematical texts on probability.

"Are you looking for something in particular, dear?" asked the old woman in front of our Observer, noticing how they had gravitated towards the shelf.

"N-no, not particularly," they said with hesitation, glancing behind them at the



businessman and the line that had grown behind him, "Just something to keep me occupied."

"Well, how about a classic then?" the old woman said, reaching towards the physics shelf and producing a book with a rather well ornamented cover and worn pages.

Our Observer took it in their hands and looked for a title, and instead found a list of folk and fairy tales.

"All classics, my grandchildren love them," she was saying, turning fully around to face our Observer as the line moved forward, "Have you read them?"

Our Observer looked at the book, then the shelf, and noticed other similar stories mixed in with the sciences, "No, I don't think I—"

"Oh come on, those are all such a waste of time," groaned the businessman, "Can you all please keep moving?"

The old woman chuckled and patted the book, then turned to continue along the line. Our Observer cringed at the businessman's tone and hugged the book to their chest as they followed the old woman forward.

Our Observer kept their eyes on the ground for the next few minutes, noticing the uneven floorboards and various worn out rugs that traced the path of the line, along with books that had poked out from under shelves and propped up some of the rickety tables that kept interrupting the path.

The line stopped again, drawing our Observer's attention ahead to see that a young couple was loitering and quietly conversing in what appeared to be in the "Travel" section. The two were thumbing through various books and pamphlets, their heads drawn so close together that they didn't notice the large gap growing ahead of them.

"Are you kidding me?" seethed the businessman behind our Observer, before he mustered up his voice and shouted, "Hey, you two! Get a move on already!"

The couple startled and glared back at the man before apologizing to those immediately behind them, grabbing one or two pamphlets they were looking at, and rushing to catch up.

The line moved quickly as the businessman continued to grumble, and in an effort to keep pace our Observer tried to stay close behind the old woman in front of them. Unfortunately, while being overly aware of the businessman and his close proximity as he pressured them to move forward, our Observer stumbled over a stack of books, knocking them over into the path.

"You have to be joking," the man started as our Observer quickly began to apologize and

dropped to their knees, restacking the books off to the side.

Our Observer quickly rose and tried to ignore the rumblings from behind them, instead looking at the “Travel” section they now found themselves in, which seemed to overlap with the photography, art, and architecture books. In this section, the travel books were arranged relative to their distance from one another, while the architecture books were stacked in such a way that they supported their own weight and the art books on top of them, which were arranged based on color into a mosaic. The old woman was in awe over the design, but was quickly distracted by the next section ahead, which consisted of children’s books and toys, although our Observer was happy to now listen to her talk about it. The woman had several grandchildren and kept picking up different books and toys that reminded her of each, which caused our Observer’s heart to ache both to the genuine love and sweetness coming from the old woman, but also in longing for something like that that they couldn’t remember experiencing.

“Are there any books you remember from your childhood?” the woman was asking as our Observer suddenly became aware that her story had ended.

Our Observer shook their head a bit, but then said:

“I don’t think a town like this has many of the books that were read to me growing up.”

“That’s quite a shame, but good that you’re picking up that to read, then. Lots of good lessons in there,” said the old woman, pointing to the book of fairy tales. Our Observer simply nodded and looked over the woman to see that they had finally reached the end of the line. Just beyond her was a few stacks of various magazines, circulars, and other publications, and a young girl behind a cash register just by a door to the street.

The girl was helping a customer, one who was looking back the hall over our Observer’s head and asking if he could go back to switch the book out.

“No way,” said the businessman, overhearing the conversation, “You’ll have to wait in line again just like I did.”

The customer looked disheartened and paid for his book then exited through another jingling door.

The cashier then looked over to help who was next in line and exclaimed, “Grandma?”

“Hello, sweetie,” said the old woman in front of our Observer, as the young girl rounded the register to give her a hug.

“You didn’t need to come all the way out here just to see me at work!”

“Well, you’ve been working so much I never get to see you if I don’t,” the old woman explained, “It’s a bonus that I always love the line, you meet so many interesting people.”

The businessman behind our Observer scoffed.

“How about I take you out to dinner then, my treat,” the young girl said, “My shift is ending in a minute anyways.”

The old woman smiled ear to ear, which made our Observer’s heart break all over again.

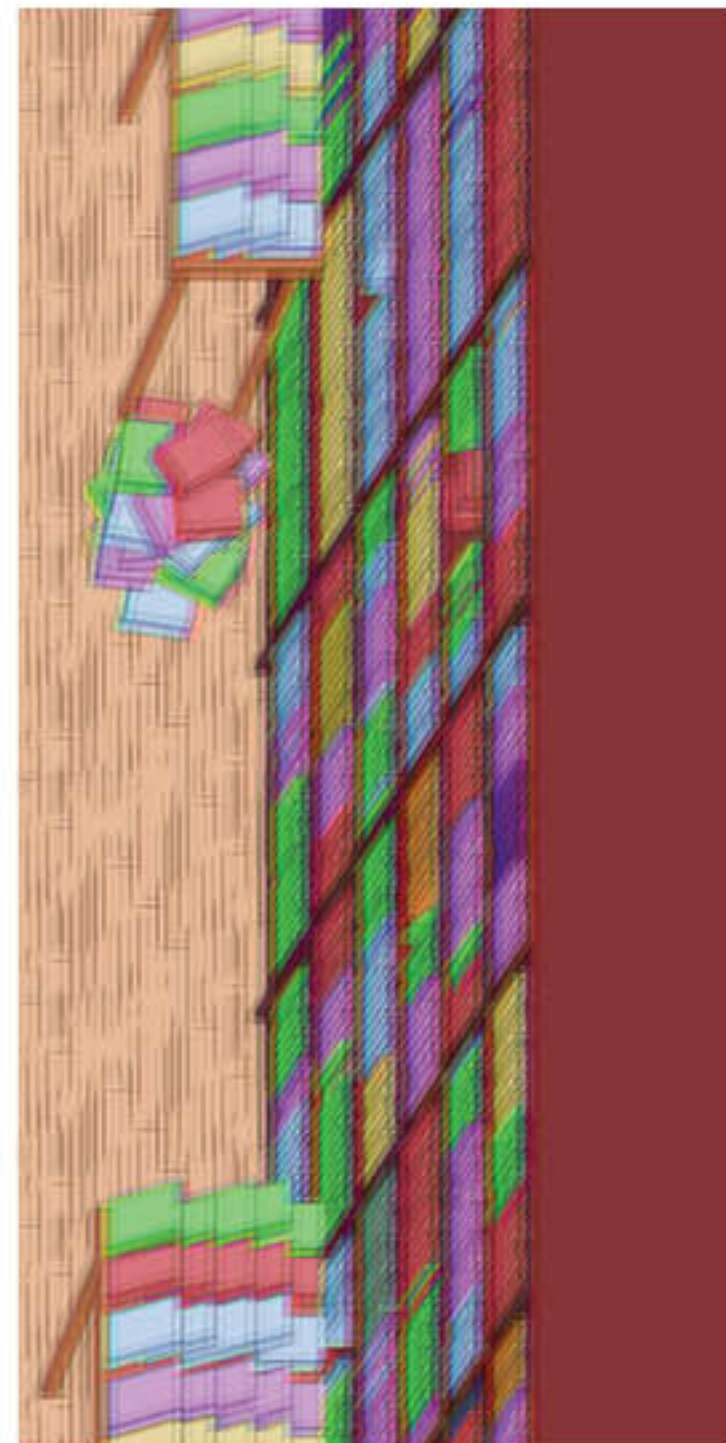
The young girl went back around to the register and looked at her grandmother’s empty hands, “Grandma, did you really wait all this time not getting anything?”

“You’re right sweetie, I would love to do today’s crossword,” the old woman said, picking up the last newspaper next to the register.

As the old woman paid, the businessman shoved our Observer out of the way to come and see that no other newspapers were left.

“Unbelievable!” he shouted, then rushed out of the store, slamming the door and causing some of the books to topple off the shelves from the force, with one last exclamation heard before the door closed again, “My boss is going to kill me!”

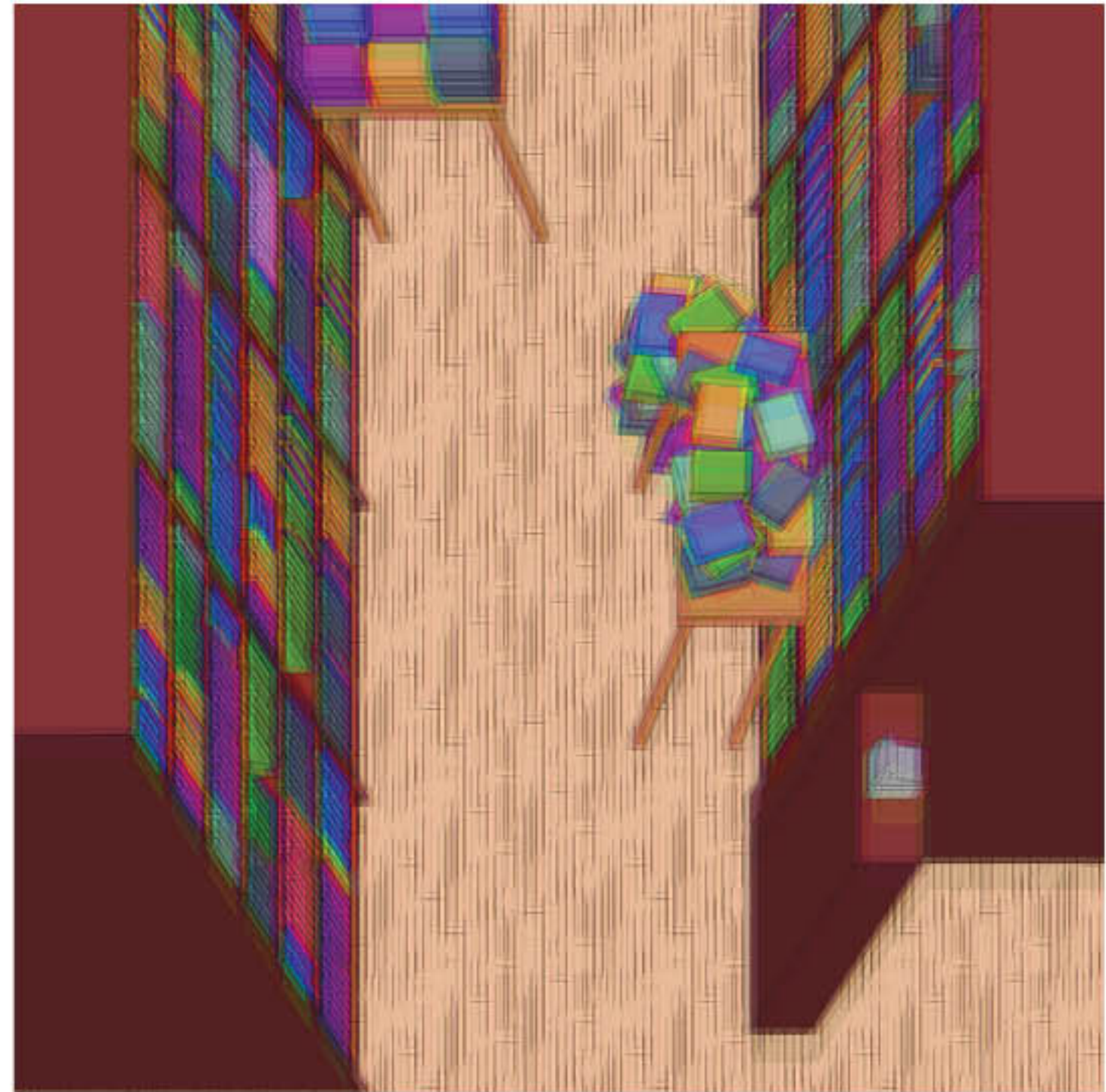
“Well, that wasn’t very kind,” said

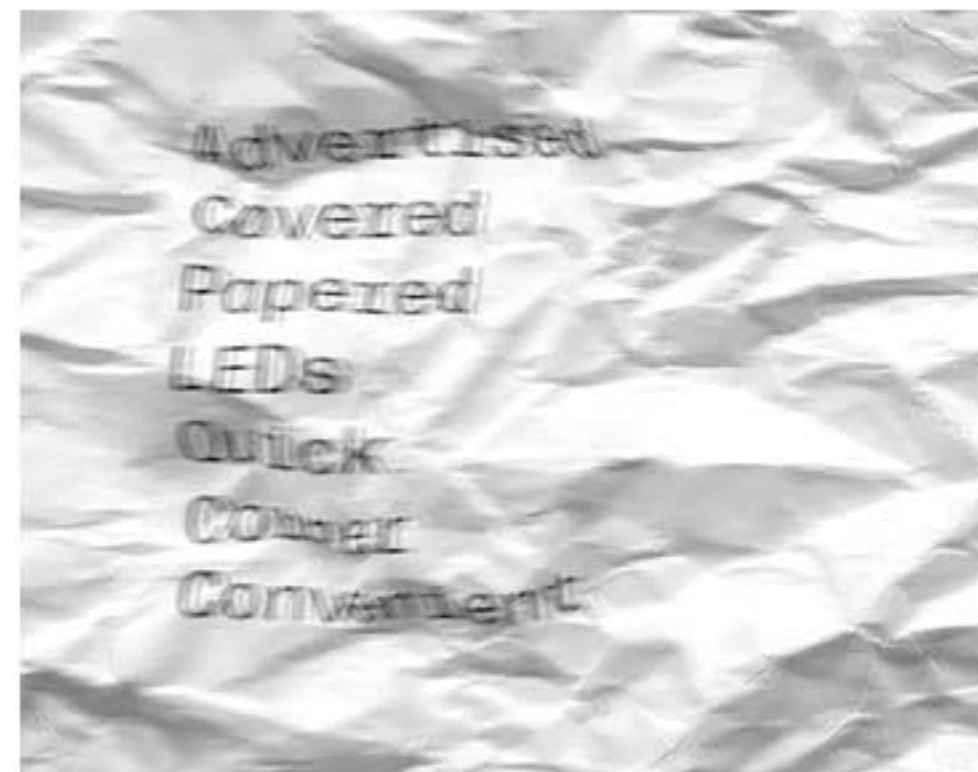
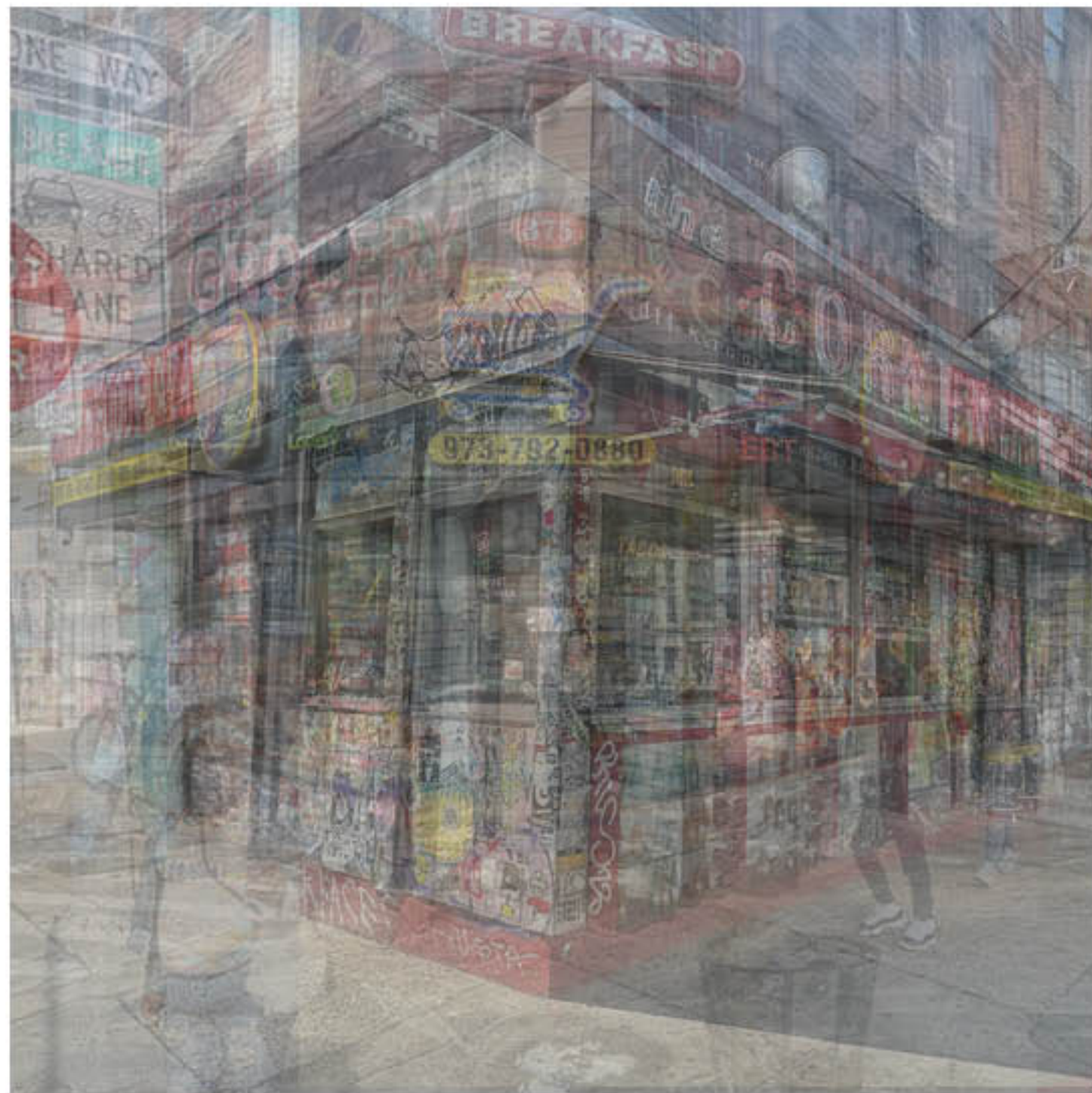


the old woman, looking back at our Observer as they righted themselves, and saying to her granddaughter, "Would you mind helping one more customer before we go? I know they're eager to read."

The granddaughter looked at our Observer, then at the book in their hands, and smiled, "Absolutely."

She then rang our Observer up, and left with her grandmother, waving to a young boy who had been patiently waiting behind the businessman through the whole line. The boy then stepped up and behind the register, ready to ring up the next customer, as our Observer took their book and made their way down the street.





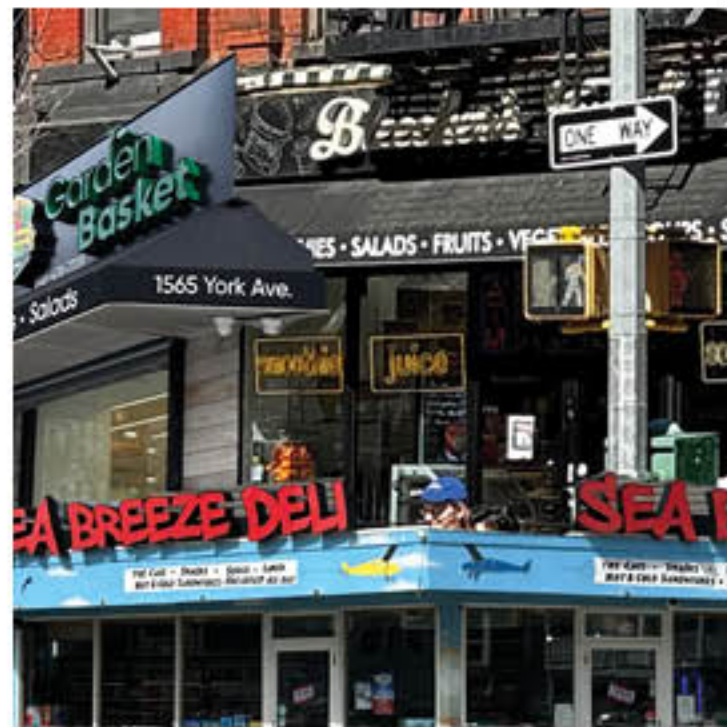
Deli
Ingredients
Routine



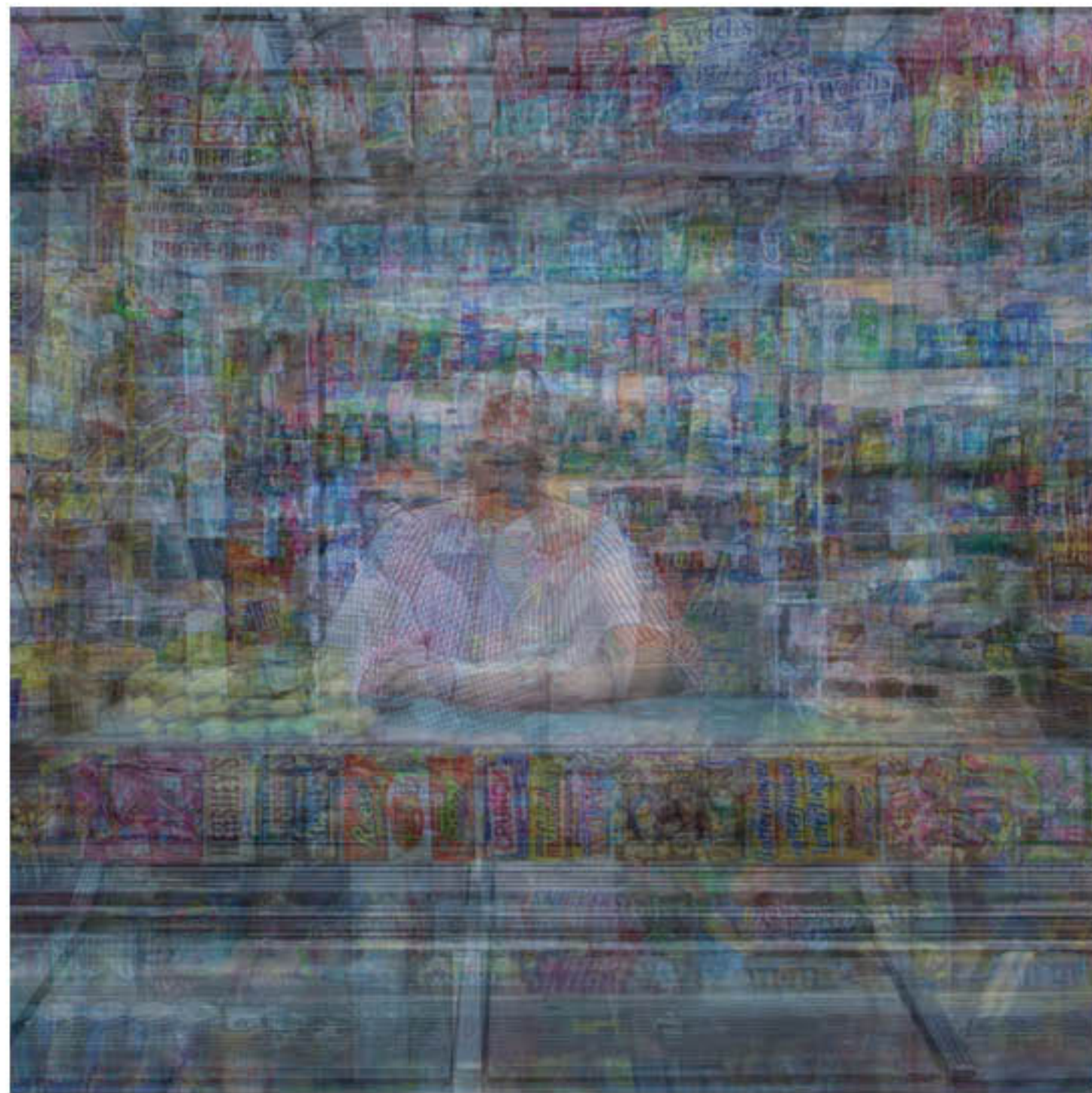
Cheap
Mom and Pop
The Usual



Grocery
Grab 'n' Go
Treats



Awning
Hanging Signs
Commercial





The Bodega

While the light of dawn still faded into the clear sky above, our Observer thought it would be best to find a place to complete a few basic errands before exploring further. They tended to travel very lightly on their journeys, preferring to make do with what they could scavenge, but if they could find some essentials that made their life easier and then abandon this entire idea of exploring this town altogether, the trip and the emotional toll of it would still be worth it.

At least, that's what our Observer reasoned internally.

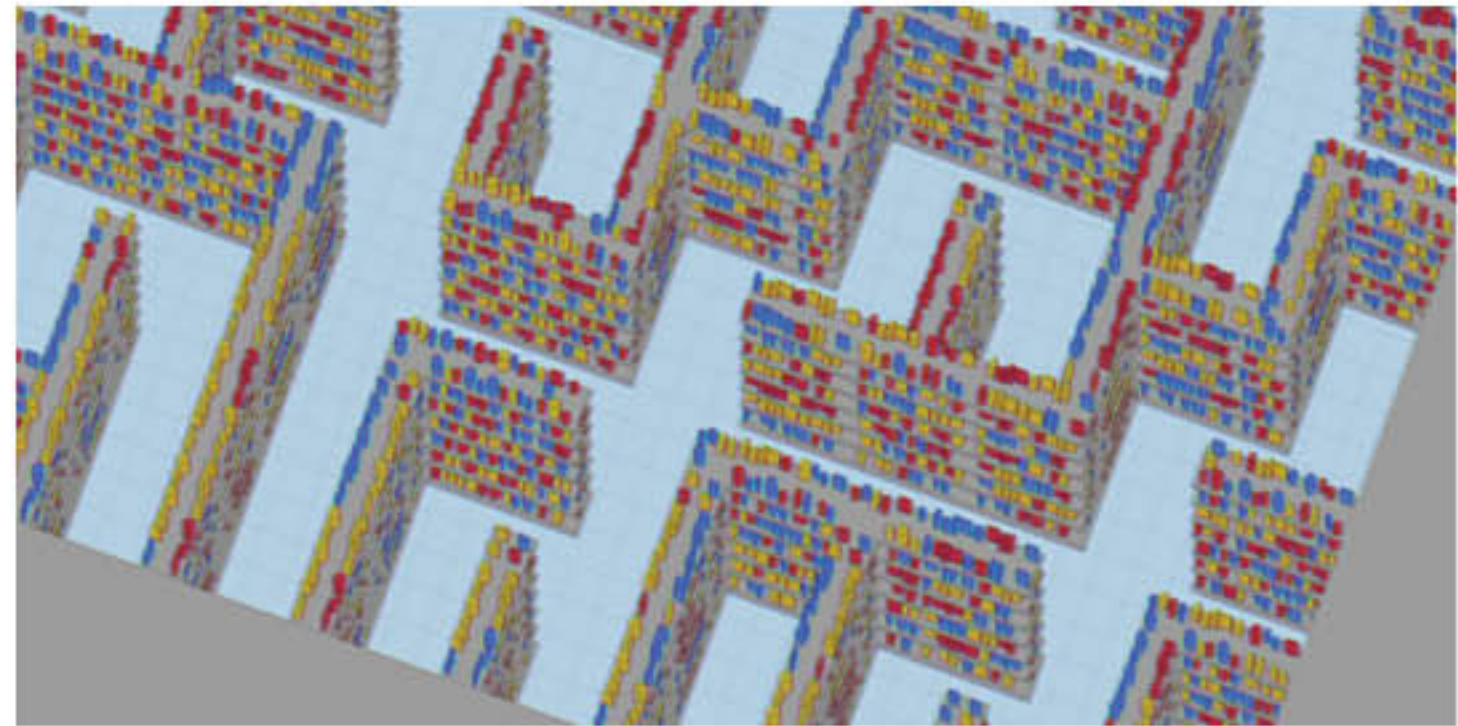
As they wandered down the central streets of Nowhere, Anywhere, most of the shops still had their lights off, doors locked, or grates pulled closed, except for one on the corner. It was a mostly glass storefront with a singular open door at the corner, although every clear surface had been papered over by various prices, bulletins, and advertisements, completely concealing its interior. There was one LED sign on the exterior that read "Open," and another above the door bearing the store's name:

"Mini Mino's Mart."

Our Observer first tried to read the advertisements outside, but noticed many to be out of date, faded, or simply in languages they didn't recognize. They shrugged it off, and thought there still might be something usable inside, and entered through the corner door that swung with a jingling bell.

Our Observer found a small vestibule space on the other side, with a few sparse shelves on either side, speckled tile floors, and fluorescent lights lining the ceiling above. The shelves carried various colorful snacks, periodicals, and small, cheap trinkets, although to our Observer's right the shelves were interrupted by a counter. Behind it sat an old, balding man with a magazine laid out in front of him next to a cat asleep in a small bed. Behind him were various other products, like cigarettes and lottery tickets, while in front was primarily candy.

"Hi, sorry," our Observer started, approaching the counter and trying to get the man's



attention, "You wouldn't happen to have any camping supplies, would you? It seems silly but—"

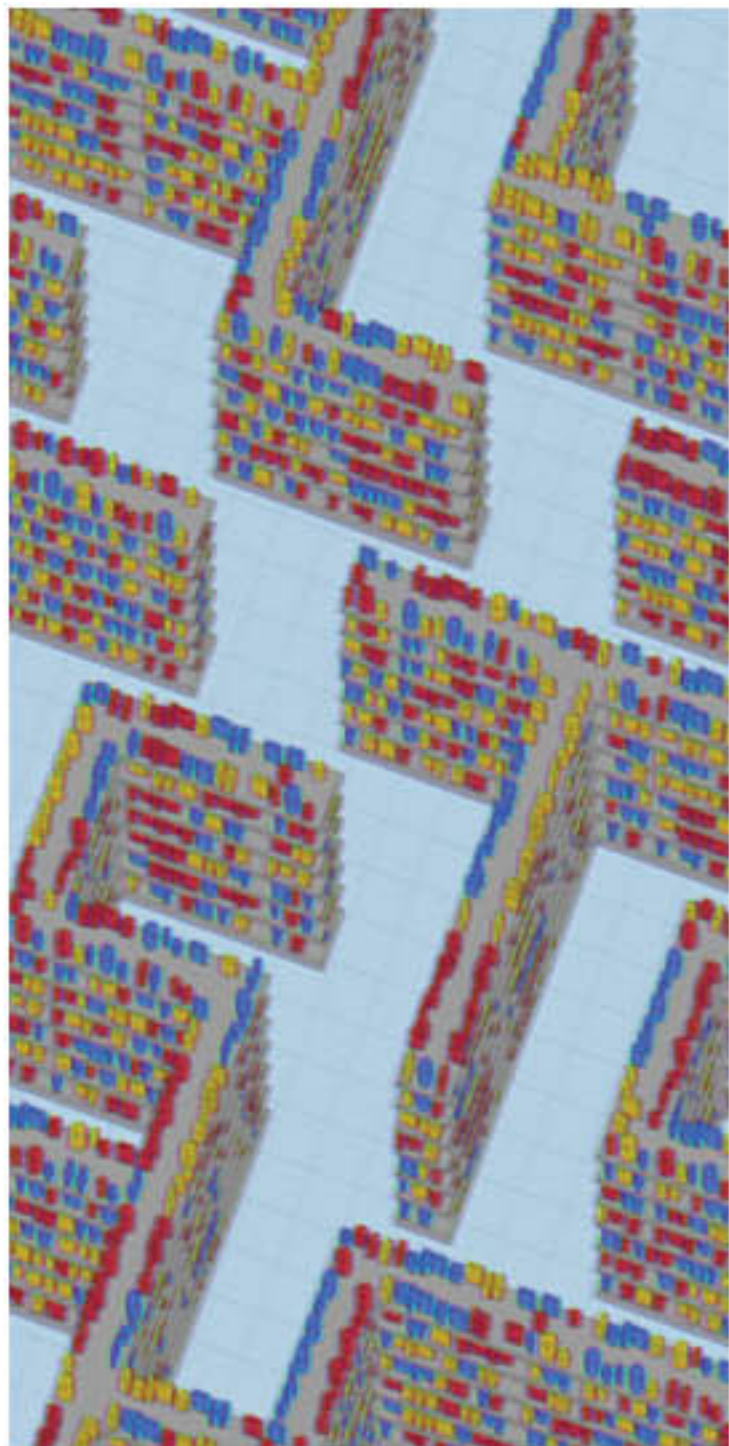
The man cut them off with a sigh, not removing his eyes from the page, and simply said, "Keep on walking and you'll find what you're looking for."

The cat turned in its sleep and the man turned his page.

Our Observer looked over the pair, unsure of what to make of the two, but as the man shifted in his seat and sneered at his reading, they decided it best to just follow the instructions given. Our Observer turned and continued into the store, but was quickly stopped by a junction ahead of them.

Just past the cashier's counter and its row of shelves, the path split into four.

Not four equally sized and arrayed aisles, but instead four aisles that varied in both size and angle, jutting out towards different parts of the store. Our Observer tried to find a sign denoting what they may find down each row, but none existed. Instead they saw that further along the aisles there was either a turn or another junction obscuring their view. They attempted to understand what kinds of products the aisles contained in the hopes that it may be indicative of a direction, but the packaging was both uninformative and



mostly unintelligible. Each aisle was lined with metallic shelving painted a thick white that towered nearly to the ceiling, allowing for the fluorescent lights to filter down but prevented our Observer from peering over the stacks of products. Each shelf was in turn filled with various plastic containers and bags of bright colors and enthusiastic words, at least for the products in languages that our Observer could understand.

They eventually chose one of the middle aisles due to the pictures on the packages looking vaguely edible, with the idea that following the trail of food may lead our Observer to products they found more useful. What our Observer did find down this aisle was at first many of the same candies that were laid out by the cashier, except with more variety in color, size, and flavor. There seemed to be king sized chocolate bars that were dull blue and industrial grade jawbreakers that came in a single serving at the size of a baseball, among other bags of miscellaneous and mixed gummies ranging from sour to sweet and even spicy.

Their teeth started to hurt with just the thought of them.

Our Observer came to another junction, this time with only two paths, and without thought chose to go left where the candy

seemed to end and other food products began, now in more solid packages. Gone were the plastic wrappers and bags of the candy aisle as the shelves were now filled with the metal of tins and cans. Some of the cans contained various kinds of soups, broths, bloods, stocks, and other liquids, while many of the tins had forms of meat, fish, substitutes for meats and fish, and even things pretending to be meat and fish. After the cans and tins the metal became glass, and the aisle was filled with various jars of pulps and purees, but our Observer ran rather quickly past this part of the aisle after they swore one of the chunkier jars winked at them.

At the next junction, the aisles split into three and it appeared as though one doubled back on itself, but something just ahead caught our Observer's eye and gave them pause. They carefully continued up the center aisle where the wireframed shelves were now filled with bags, marking the return to snacks within this section of food. Specifically, these bags were carrying various forms of salty, sweet, and quick foods like chips, pretzels, and trail mixes, varying in their flavors, coverings, and mixtures.

One particular brand grabbed our Observer's conscious attention but had sent their subconscious through a freefall of memory. They looked over a wall of shiny metallic bags, each bearing a different flavor description and color scheme but sharing one brand logo.

When our Observer was young, they had become obsessed with this brand of chip. They had tried it only once at a friend's house whose parents allowed them more access to snacks, and these particular chips were perfectly crunchy and twisted, filled with a cheesy, spicy, smoky flavor along every ridge. Our Observer was obsessed instantly, and spent years begging their family for a bag at every supermarket and gas station stop, constantly searching for another taste. Their family, however, never gave in to our Observer's pleas and instead bought some of the plainest and soggiest chips on the market in order to dissuade them from the chemical temptations.

Here on these shelves, however, our Observer did recognize the logo, despite its more modernized appearance that it had taken on since their childhood. The choice of flavors were vaguely the same, although the descriptions had shifted into over exuberance and the variety had spread farther than they could have fathomed. There were now fruit and candy based flavors, along with more variations in their meat and spice based ones. Our Observer spent a good deal of time going through each and every flavor, reading their descriptions and analyzing their packaging before coming to one such flavor that sounded the most similar to the vague image in the recesses of their memory.

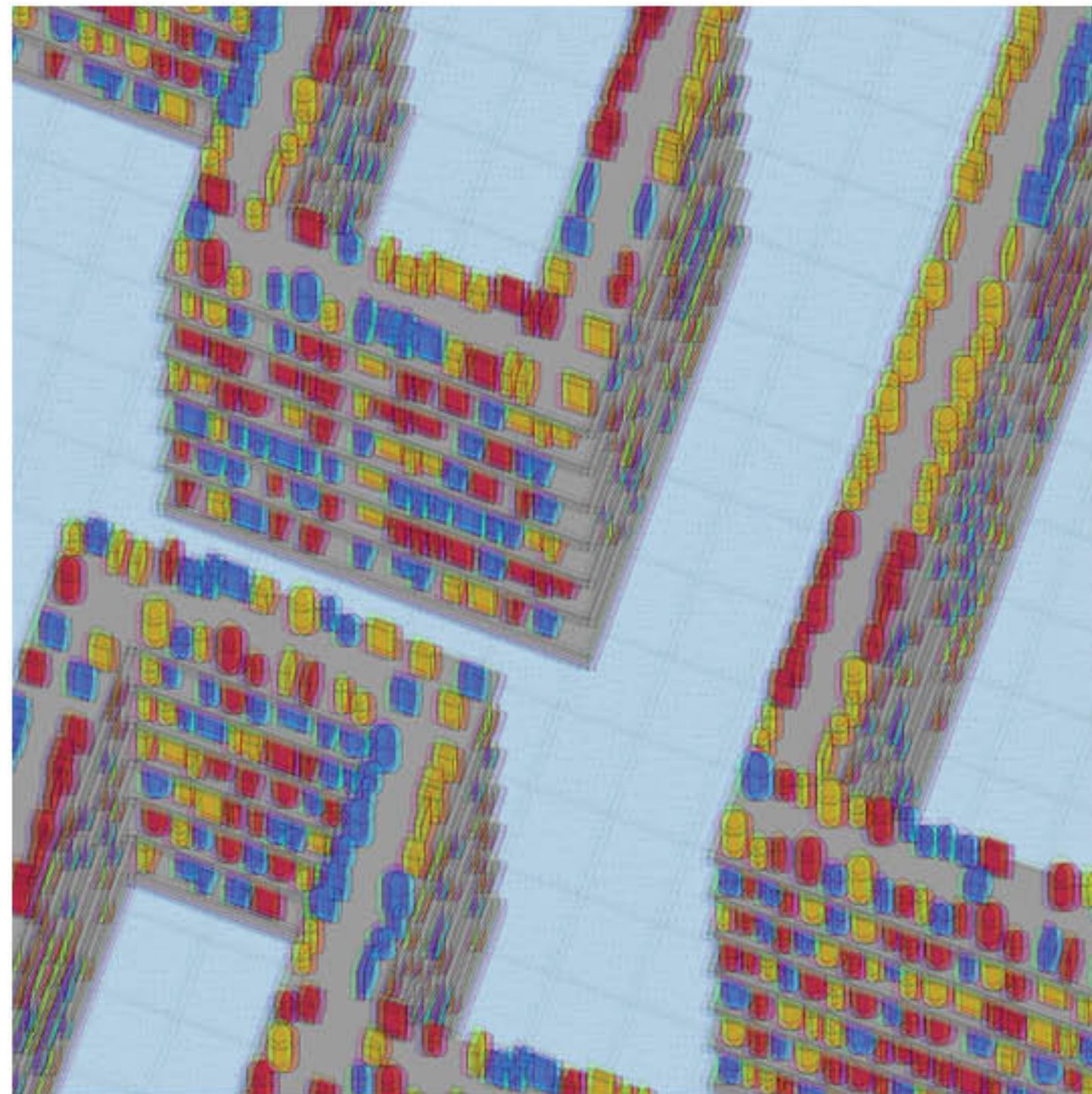
They picked up the bag and cradled it gently in their hands, feeling the chips crunch and shift within the package, lost to the joy of finding something so far lost, but suddenly remembered exactly where they were deep within the aisles of the store. They snapped their head up and looked around, as the fluorescent lights beat down above them, casting strange shadows through the shelves onto the dusty fake tile floors. Our Observer was unsure which direction they had come from, the endless repetition of the various products producing a sense of vertigo in the pits of their stomach, and causing their head to swivel as they looked around for which direction they should go next.

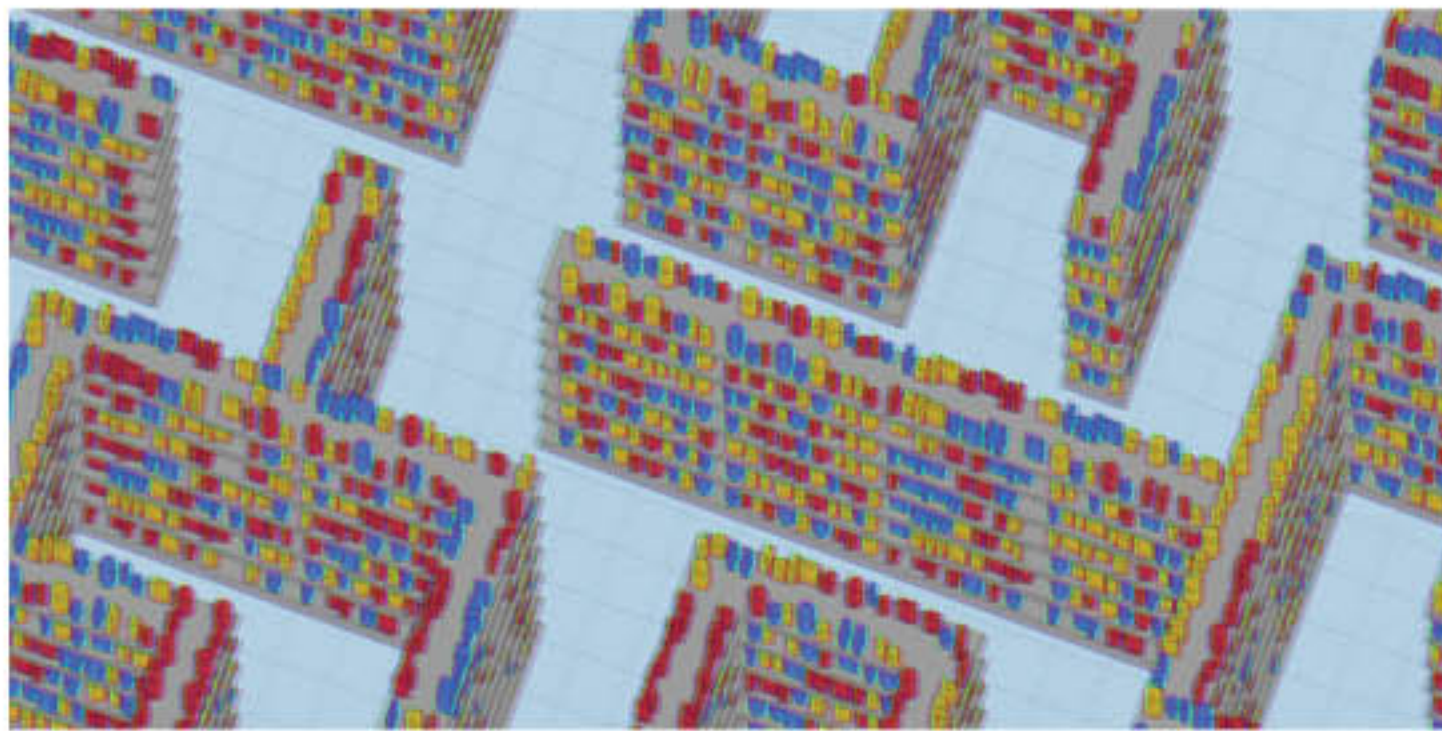
It took our Observer a minute or two more to compose themselves and to decide that following the food toward camping equipment was not the most fruitful route. They saw a sudden break in the shelves up ahead where the snacks became cereals, and chose to follow it. The aisle was filled with multicolored plastic as well, except it was now that of various toys and playthings packaged in wire and cardboard, laid out on shelves among the broken pieces of their fallen comrades. Our Observer passed these easily, having always been afraid of the cheap plastic shards that many toys leave when quickly broken, although a clattering sound up ahead drew their attention onward.

Just around the next bend they saw someone wandering a cross aisle, this time filled with various board games next to cheap water equipment like plastic guns and foam surfboards. The person shuffling along was a young woman, who had her head so deep in a book that she didn't see our Observer. Within a moment, she closed the book and produced a tall can of an energy drink, cracked it open, drank it all, crushed it on her head, then tossed it over her shoulder. It produced the same clattering sound and landed next to a similarly crushed can, implying that this was her second drink.

Before our Observer had the chance to raise their hand and call out to the young woman, she turned a corner and vanished down another aisle. They quickly rushed after her, but found themselves at a five aisle junction and unable to ascertain the direction she went. Instead, they groaned, and continued on their own way.

After several more turns, junctions, and even a few dead ends, our Observer found themselves in an aisle filled with primarily batteries and wires for various electronics, however the electronics themselves were not on display. As they moved along the stretch of accessories, they saw just up ahead a transition more into the analog. The technical products became far less technical, and they finally found a wall of simple tools and survival equipment.





With a sigh of relief, our Observer quickly went through the wall and picked out the few supplies they had been hoping to retrieve, primarily a new set of matches and a can of bug spray, while just over top of the shelves they could hear a jingling bell.

They stopped for a moment and realized that it was the bell from the front door.

"Hey, Mino," said a voice in the distance, "Busy today?"

"Never busy, Big Mike. Can I get you the usual?" answered Mino, who based on the voice, was the cashier behind the counter. Although, he sounded much more pleased to be speaking to this Big Mike than our Observer.

Our Observer looked around as the conversation continued regarding Big Mike's cigarettes and lottery tickets, and as it transitioned into a discussion of a local sports team, our Observer couldn't find exactly where their voices came from or how close they were.

They decided it best to take their finds, pick a direction, and rush off. They traversed several aisles and bends, recognizing one or two junctions within the store and choosing new directions to explore, feeling the air grow colder and colder in one such direction, until they finally came out into one large and continuous area.

Our Observer stopped their running and stared at a long wall of glass freezers and fridges, curving down and out of sight in either direction, opposing several entrances back into the aisles of the store. They started to walk along this wall and saw rows and rows of bottled and canned drinks with similar variety in color and flavor to the snacks, various forms of fresh meat and milk products that our Observer never expected to see displayed in such a way, alongside ice creams and alcoholic beverages.

They perused this wall until they grew chilly, and decided it best to grab a drink to accompany their snack, especially after all their running trying to find their way through the aisles. Our Observer returned to the drink section of the fridges and carefully opened a door, causing it to fog as the temperature changed and the cold was let out. They reached in to grab one of the fruitier canned drinks, but as our Observer looked over the products and grasped their choice, their eyes met another set just beyond the contents of the fridge.

Our Observer yelped and jumped back, taking the can with them as the door slammed and the eyes disappeared in the blackness beyond. Their breathing was heavy as they quickly gathered themselves and their purchases, and sprinted back down the closest aisle, unsure what kind of eyes they had just peered into but not wanting to know the answer anytime soon.

Our Observer found their way through the aisles again, but found none of them the same as before, quickly passing new mixes of products and junctions as they continued their run along the shelves, unsure where they would let out but no longer caring. They instead focused on the things contained in their arms and their own ragged breathing, keeping their head down and pushing down aisle after aisle, passing junctions over and over again. Their legs started to wane, but they continued their pursuit, going further and further through the store, squeezing their eyes shut until-

"You know we have baskets, right?"

Our Observer snapped their eyes open and saw the entryway to the store in front of them, the cashier, Mino, leaning over the counter in front of them to point at a stack of baskets off to the side.

"I... I didn't know how much I would be getting," our Observer answered carefully, earning a grunt from Mino as they laid their finds onto the counter beside the cat.

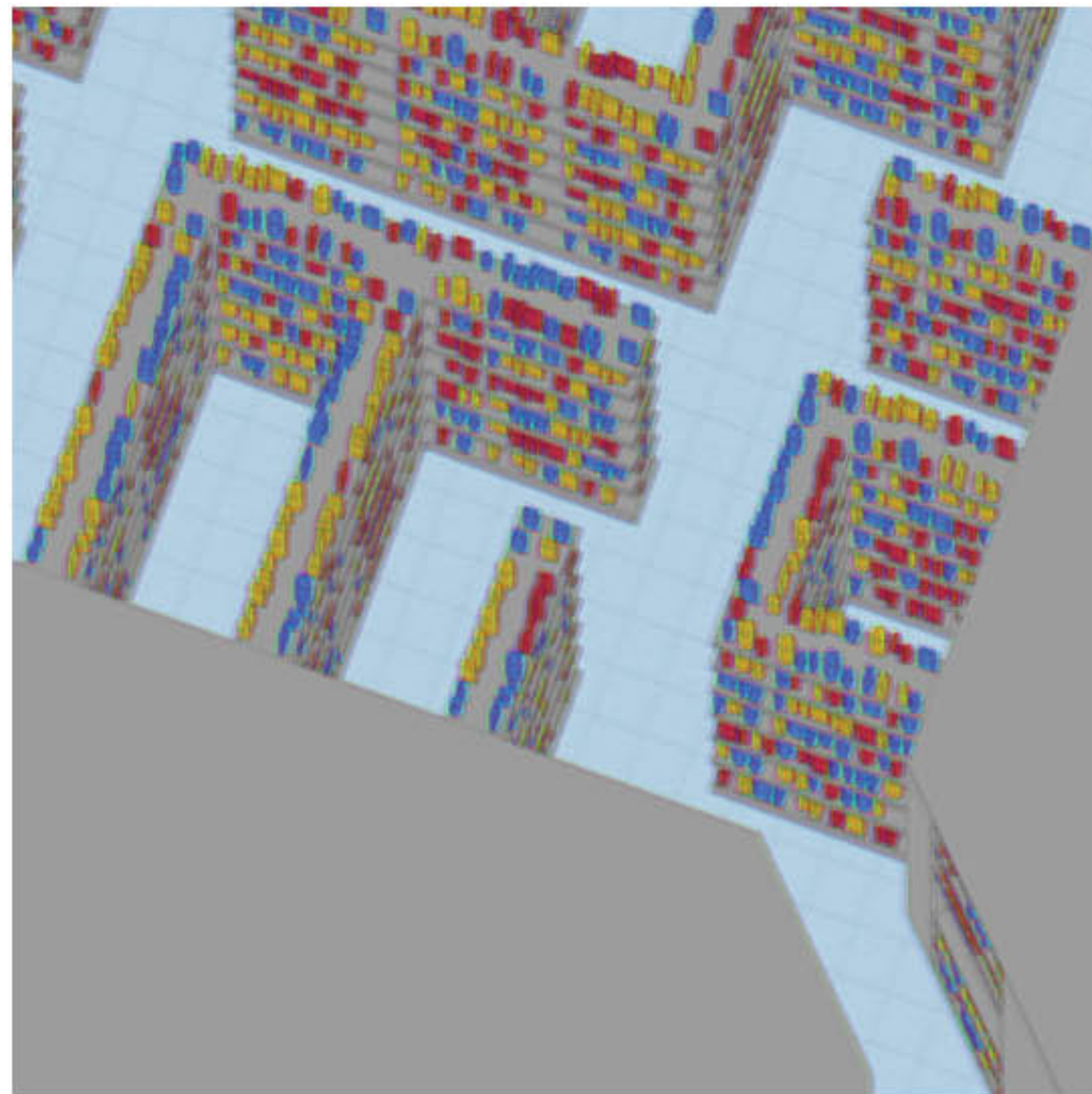
They had regained their breath, and saw that the cat was still asleep, as the cashier began to ring up the various products. Our Observer carefully scratched the cat beneath its chin with a finger, earning a purr from it but a scowl from its owner.

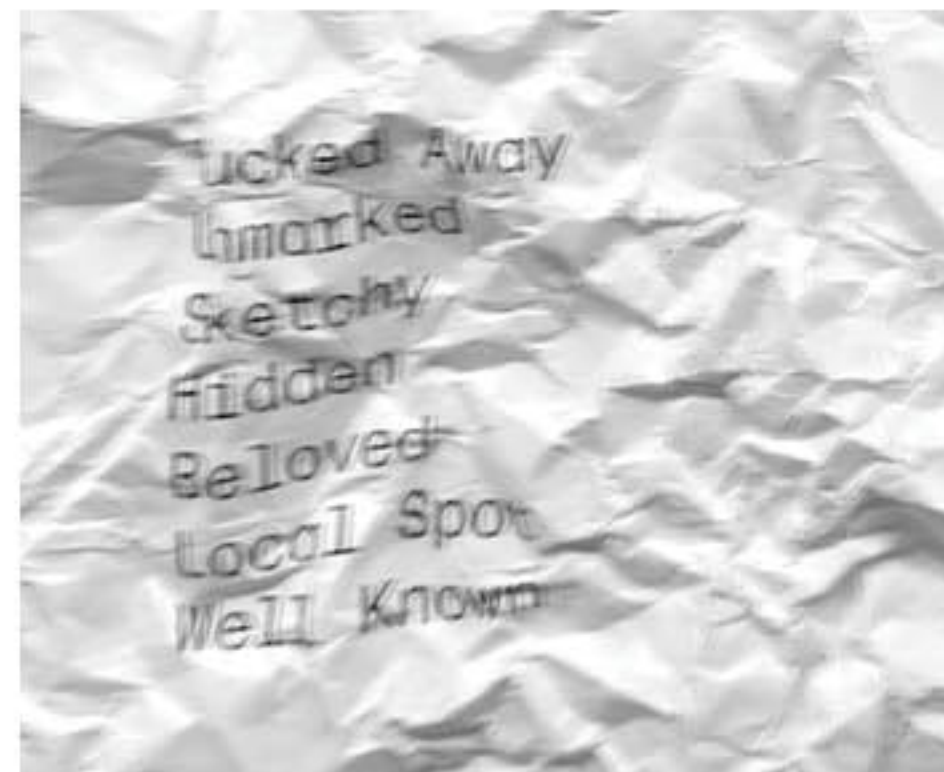
"You at least want a bag?" he asked in a gruff tone.

Our Observer nodded and pulled away from the cat as they paid, while Mino packaged up the purchase and left it on the counter. He then returned to his seat and his magazine and didn't acknowledge our Observer's thanks as they went out the front door and back into the now blinding sunlight.

Our Observer looked up and down the street, watching as the other stores opened their doors and greeted one another, then looked down at their bag of new items. It had been easy enough to navigate one store without too many incidents, so it may be worth it to try and venture out to a few more places.

With a sigh, they continued on their journey further into town.

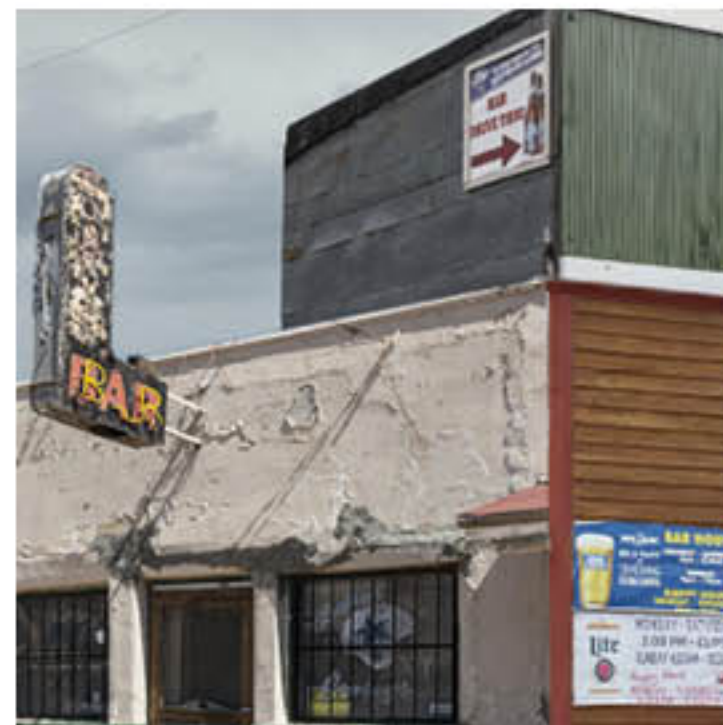




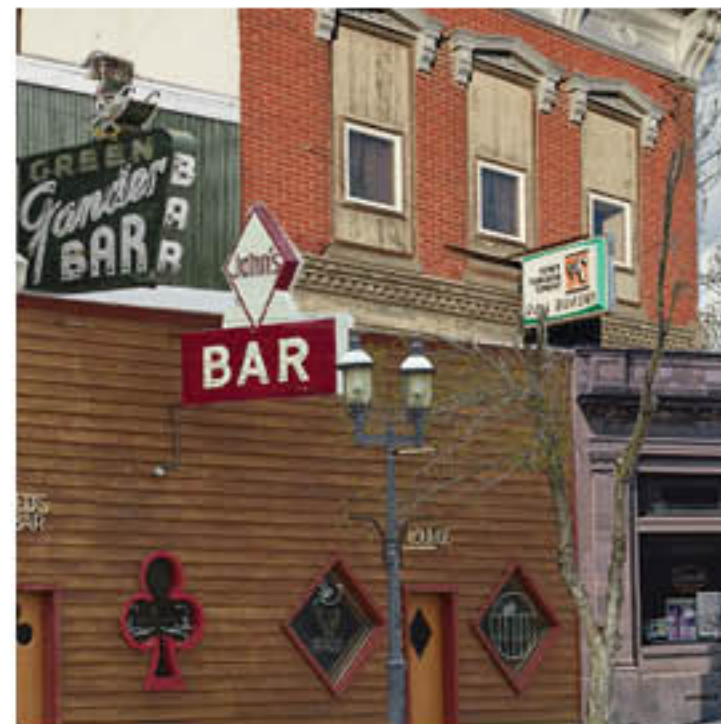
Decorated
Lived-in
Signs



Neighborhoodly
Intimate
Rumor



Dive
Or Lunge
Windowless



I.D.
Tabs
Open/Closed

Belligerent
Bottle
Di
Live
Cacophony

Buzzing
Drunk
Creaky
Fillet
Memorabilia





By the time the sun had set, our Observer had nowhere left to go. They had already walked every street of Nowhere, Anywhere, passed every business and every home, and although they would typically return to the forest to rest their head, that didn't seem to be much of an option. Since they had been forced to stay longer in the town and didn't know how to leave, they felt as though they had something else yet to explore, an energy yet to leave them, and a need to stay out later and later.

They continued along their path, walking by the center of the town over and over, with each location they had visited throughout the day shutting their lights and locking up their doors. It was then that they started to wonder, what else could be here, what had they missed, and most of all, what else happened at night?

Our Observer wasn't the only one on the street at this time as they saw some people jogging, walking dogs, or simply strolling between the street lights. Some of them waved as they had before, others averted their eyes, and a few of them simply disappeared.

Not fully, but down alleyways, behind homes and businesses, just out of sight from the street. Our Observer didn't see it quite at first, but after it happened a few times, they took notice. It was when one such walker waved in a friendly manner and still disappeared that they decided to follow.

During the daytime, the gaps between the structures of Nowhere, Anywhere seemed innocuous and faded so easily into the background. Nothing was down there except backdoors and dumpsters, but as our Observer went down the alley where the last few people had disappeared, they noticed a new light and another door. They had counted entrances in many of the neighboring stores and facilities when they visited, and realized that this new door was somehow extra. During the day it had faded into the background like the rest of the alley, but now there was a small neon sign illuminated above with an arrow pointing directly down.

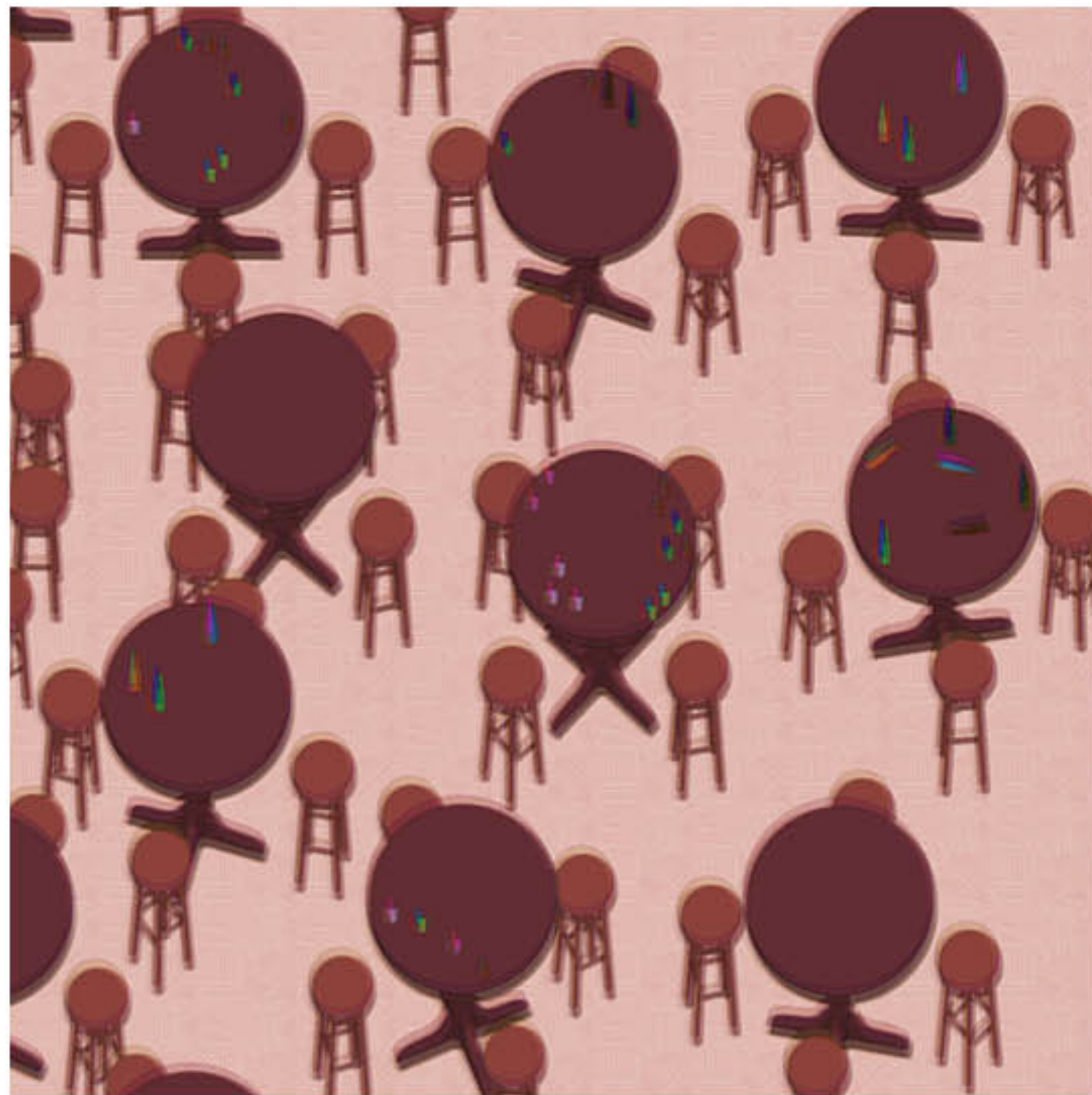
This sign had one word in bold font: "BELOW."

The heavy metal door was swinging shut as the walker our Observer was following disappeared through it, and they waited a minute or so outside the door, thinking through this realization and the possible implications of the door's existence and the sign denoting it. They weren't exactly sure what the sign could indicate, and what could lie beyond, but they did know that the last person who passed this way seemed friendly and the night was growing cold.

Our Observer reminded themselves of the intentions they had when walking into Nowhere, Anywhere, the ideas of finding something new here, of the various events they had forced themselves into throughout the day, and pushed through the new door.

What they found was a dimly lit corridor made of concrete and stone, with small, incandescent light bulbs marking the path with warm, gentle light as it reached a stairwell going down. Our Observer made their way along, feeling their steps echo downwards as other noise, nearly indiscernible, echoed back. The steps stretched far and bent, turning around themselves and doubling back, winding along as the noise up ahead grew louder and louder. Our Observer was very turned around, wondering where exactly in the





town now were, so much so that they barely noticed as the concrete underfoot transitioned into hardwood, the lights no longer poked out of the walls but hung from above, and the walls were no longer made of stacks of cinder blocks but instead were painted a light beige with a dark wood chair rail and paneling beneath it.

The corridor now turned hallway finally ended with another door, one more befitting of the change in decoration, that of similar dark hardwood and ornament. Our Observer hesitated before this one as well, but now they could hear the muffled noise from the other side. As they strained to hear it through the wood, it felt like hundreds of conversations and clattering glasses overlapped into one cacophony.

Our Observer had already come this far, and was tired from the long trek underground, so they pushed through the ornate door into a large, clustered room. In front of them was a wall of people gathered in groups and squeezed up against one another, punctuated by the occasional wooden stool or table. When our Observer looked to either side of them, they found that these groups continued along a curved and continuous wall decorated like the previous hall that looped the entire room, alternating with doors identical to the one they just exited and pocket booths between them.

Our Observer tried to gather their thoughts over the tidal wave of noise crashing onto them, the sounds of glasses clinking together and against wood, along with more wood scraping against itself as people pushed against each other and furniture, all the while raucous laughter underlined everything. Our Observer looked over the crowd and saw that the continuous wall was in fact circular, and the roof was arched into a dome that culminated in a large pillar of glass at its center. They couldn't see the base of the pillar, but the room did seem organized around it, and so our Observer tentatively decided to venture forth towards it.

They began to push their way through the crowd, searching for gaps between people and groups that they could exploit, although their chorus of "Pardon me," "Excuse me," and "Sorry" all were lost to the oppressive noise. They were shorter than most of the crowd and easily overshadowed, their voice hidden beneath the conversations, but as they pushed through they were noticed for brief moments at a time by wandering hands that moved them by the shoulder or rested firmly on their waist and lower back. Our Observer was also subjected to pointed glares as they were shoved into people and glances that took in their full figure in a long and lingering way. They found it hard to move in the crushing crowd and even more so with the sticky floor beneath them. They saw the cups and glasses in hands, filled

with various strongsmelling and multicolored liquids that tainted breath and body odor, while the contents were spilled onto others and our Observer alike.

With great effort and nearly jilted ambitions, our Observer broke from the crowd and saw that the crushing people were merely one ring of the room, and by passing through them it opened up considerably towards the center. Our Observer continued onward and was able to see that the room was made up of a constellation of sorts, starting with the outer ring of doors and booths, then the ring of crowd, now onto a mix of calmer tables and chairs similar to those lost within the former area. At the center of the room was the glass pillar still, but immediately surrounding it was a ring of stools and a bar.

"Sorry about that," called out a bartender just ahead, and while our Observer first questioned who they could be talking to, the bartender nodded and pointed at them then a stool just in front, "Come, take a load off."

Our Observer looked around again, realizing that no one else was watching them or this interaction, and made their way to the bar itself and took their place on the empty stool.

"That crowd wanders on through here from time to time and makes a mess of the place for the regulars," the bartender was saying as they picked up a glass to clean, "I told the boss to stop letting them in, but the money's good and they pass through quickly. I'd give them a little bit before most of them clear out for the night, anyway."

"Yeah, it certainly is a lot," our Observer said, fixing their clothes a bit.

The bartender watched them, then put the glass down and approached, "You have an I.D. on you?"

"Me?" our Observer asked, shocked by the look on their face, "No, not really. I left it somewhere along the road. I mean, it expired a long time ago, and it was very outdated."

"Outdated?"

"It... it didn't match. Not anymore."

The bartender leaned against the heavily varnished countertop, almost as if they were trying to push it down and instead were pushed backwards, and made a grunting noise, "Okay. Your first drink is on me."

"Oh, you don't have to-" our Observer started, but the bartender was already gone, walking along the circular counter towards the far end, nearing one of the two exits from its inner ring to grab a glass. They went about filling the cup from a tap as our Observer looked around to see several other people sitting along the bar, engaging in more quiet conversations here,



while the noise level rose behind them first at the tables then at the crowd further back. Before they returned, our Observer did see the bartender lean around the pillar and say something to another person manning the bar on the opposite side, then walk back over.

The bartender placed a tall glass of golden liquid down on a coaster.

"Thank you," our Observer said carefully, earning a nod as the bartender stepped back, crossed their arms and leaned against the pillar, waiting. Our Observer looked down at the drink as a few small carbonated bubbles fizzled out, then carefully took a drink and found it to be... sweet.

"This isn't beer."

"Beer? Why would I give you beer?" the bartender said, twisting their face in repulsion, "You don't want beer."

"How would you-"

"Sorry, am I getting ahead of myself?" the bartender asked, stepping forward and leaning on the counter again, "See, it's mead. Honey wine."

"Really?" our Observer said, holding up the glass to the warm lights above and examining



its refraction, "Why do you have this?"

"It's the drink of warriors, the nectar of the gods and all."

"But why do you have it on tap, not in a bottle or something?"

"Why wouldn't we, it's very good," the bartender insisted. Our Observer did agree, having not had alcohol or anything quite as sweet as this in a very long time. In the past they had shied away from anything that might inhibit their ability to observe, and sweets just hadn't been much to their liking after having too many candies as a child and losing a few teeth, but in this moment they enjoyed the drink.

However, when they took another look around the bar, they noticed that no one else was drinking anything quite like the mead. There were other golden drinks, but due to the foam or the bubbles our Observer could tell that they were beers and ciders, along with other more colorful mixed drinks and wines.

"My name's Ozzie, by the way," the bartender offered, interrupting our Observer's train of thought. When they returned to looking at Ozzie, they saw how intensely they were analyzing them.

Our Observer began to stutter through a response, but was quickly cut off.

"No need to tell me yours," Ozzie said, holding up a hand, "I offered mine freely,

with no need for one in return. I remember observing myself, I remember how it was."

"You were an observer?"

"Of course, can't you tell?" they said, stepping back and motioning at themselves. Our Observer looked at them and shrugged, but there was a recognition deep in their stomach they couldn't quite shake.

"I walked the roads myself, years ago," they continued, returning to the counter, "I found a lot of strange places, and a lot of stranger people. Eventually I found myself here, and fell in love with the place."

Our Observer went to question, but with the sound of a crash above the bar's chatter, their attention was pulled back to the crowd behind them. They turned to see the outer ring dispersing, masses of people rushing through various doors around the edges of the room as the laughing and belligerent noise followed, revealing some quiet music being played beneath. The bar cleared, leaving behind people on stools, at tables, and in booths, along with one lopsided and broken table where a drunk had collapsed and scared the group off.

"See, I told you they would clear out soon," Ozzie said, as the other bartender rounded the bar and helped the drunk out of the room before trying to put the table back together.

Our Observer turned back to Ozzie and found that their eyes still hadn't left them.

"Tell me if this sounds familiar," Ozzie started, leaning on the counter, "You felt different than all the other people back home. Pieces of you didn't fit with the pieces of them, and you never felt as though you belonged in any meaningful way. Eventually it became too isolating, too strange, and you decided to leave."

Our Observer locked eyes with the bartender and drank more from their cup.

"You took to the roads to find something else, something familiar, and you found yourself here, like me."

"No," our Observer said, "That's not right."

"Which part?"

"I took the road to get away, yes. But I wasn't looking for somewhere new."

"Not at first, right?" Ozzie said, glancing to their side as another customer tried to get their attention and was promptly ignored, "Then what? An escape?"

Our Observer nodded a bit, "I needed to leave, and the road was my way. I didn't want to be there, I didn't want to be anywhere, so I kept walking."

"Then why are you here?"

There was then a thud off to the right of our Observer. They turned and saw a man in a disheveled suit, his tie undone and shirt unbuttoned, head down on the bar with several finished glasses in front of him.

"I needed to come back," our Observer said quietly, tearing their eyes away from the businessman, who must have had a rough day without his boss's newspaper, "I stayed away for too long, and the thought of seeing people again, being in places again, terrified me."

"More so than before?"

"I can't remember," our Observer confessed, "I already didn't like people or the way they looked at me before I went on the road, but now I felt like..."

"You needed them."

Our Observer nodded.

There was a slight snorting noise from their right.

"I should handle that," Ozzie said, then excused themselves to help the businessman out of the bar.

Our Observer took the opportunity to swivel on their stool and take in the bar as a whole, seeing the framed pictures of people on the walls between the booths and the graffiti on the tables and booth walls, scribbles of names and phrases in various languages and with various curses. The people remaining after the crowd had passed seemed to be more respectful of the space, with groups of friends tucked into the booths for quiet conversations or circling tables with cards spread out. There was a group chanting and banging on a table as a diner waitress, Joan, finished a boot filled with beer with a genuine smile, an empty booth with a one-eyed man surveying the others the room as he sipped a cocktail, and a few well dressed singles on the opposite side of the glass pillar talking to the other bartender as they mixed several different drinks at once.

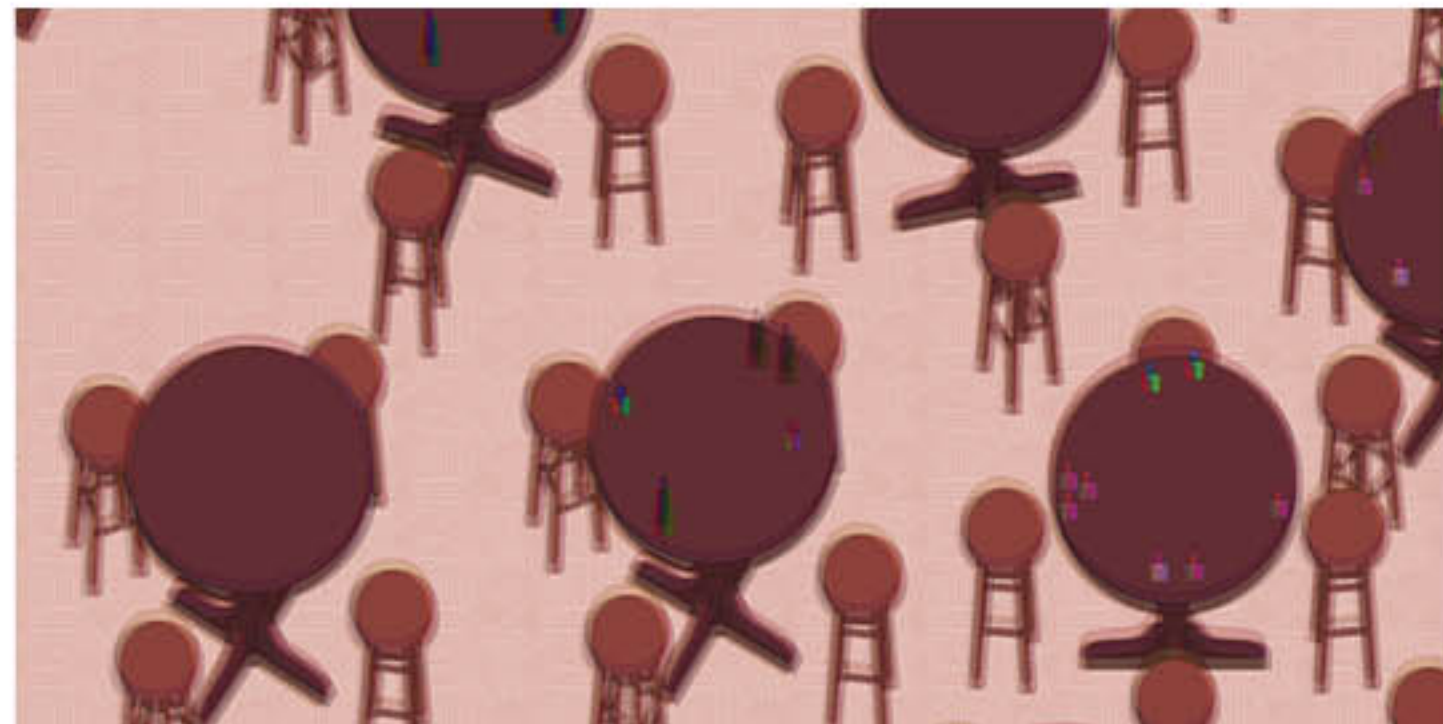
Our Observer then noticed a few more pictures behind the bar, not framed but instead stuck behind bottles and taped to the glass. Most of them showed far off locations and obscured people, although they could see Ozzie and the other bartender pictured together often.

They seemed very close.

Ozzie then returned and stood between our Observer and the photos, asking, "How's the drink?"

Our Observer looked down and realized that they had nearly finished it.

"I'll get you another," said Ozzie, already having walked away before our Observer could



answer. They returned with another full glass and swapped it with the now empty one that our Observer had rushed to polish off.

The bartender then proceeded to clean the old glass as our Observer thanked them, then asked:

"So, why did you stop?"

"Stop what?"

"Stop observing."

"Stop? You don't stop," Ozzie said, rubbing a rag along the inside of the glass, "You just find something else to observe."

Our Observer looked around, "That's why you settled here?"

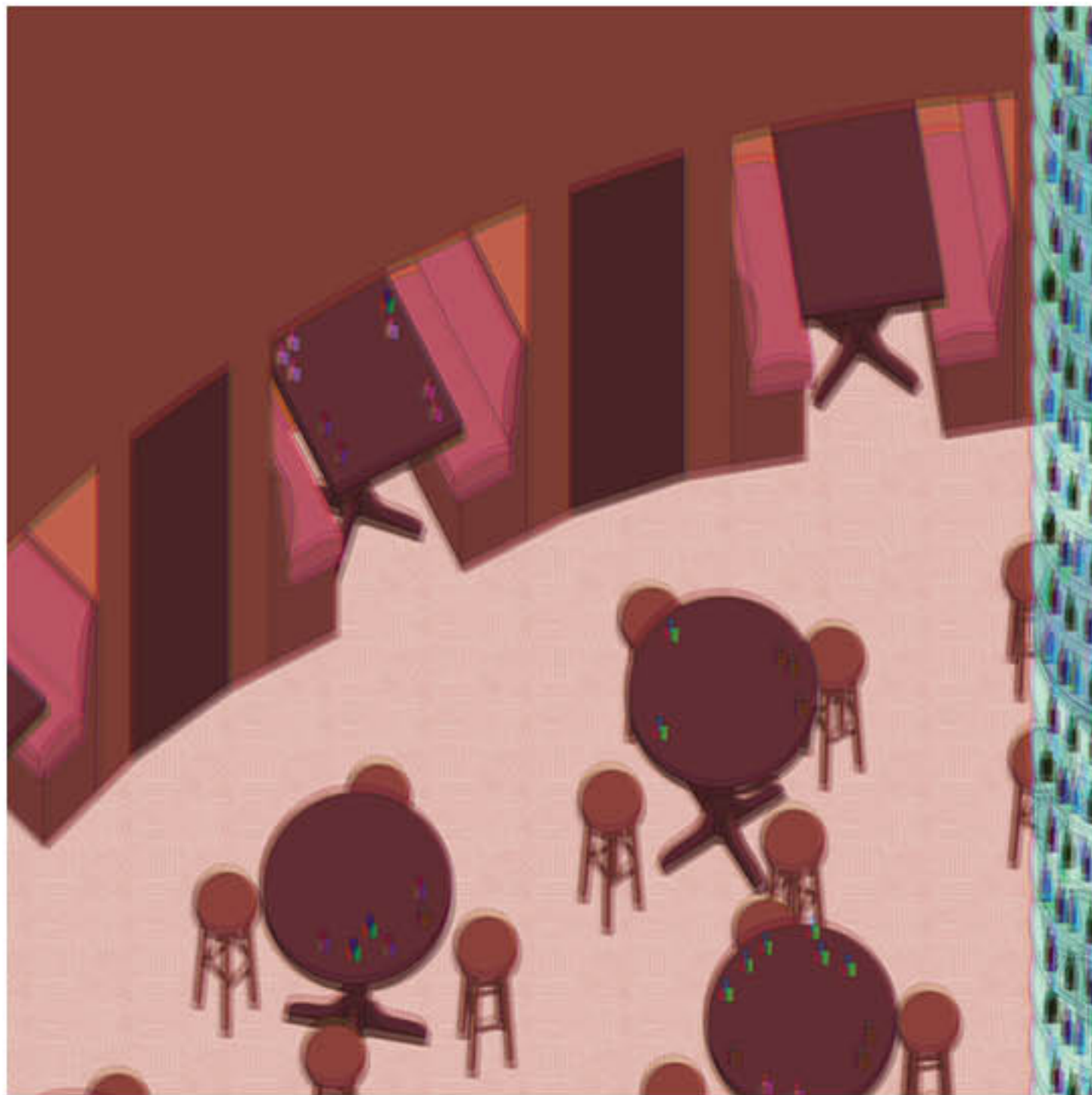
They nodded, "Now I don't need the road. It brings people to me."

"Like me."

They shrugged, "You could say that."

"Then tell me," our Observer asked, leaning forward, "How did you stay?"

"Only if you," Ozzie answered, leaning in themselves, "Tell me why you won't."



The two proceeded to talk in hushed voices for the rest of the night, ignoring other drink orders, changes in music coming on an unknown speaker system, and even a fight on the other side of the bar. Eventually they were broken from their trance by the sound of a large slam to our Observer's left, where a young woman sat alone.

She had closed a book and smacked it down on a table, and was now drinking a line of about six total shots that she had laid out in front of her.

"I guess she finally finished that series," mused Ozzie, looking around as the other bartender had begun to put chairs on tables and usher customers out, including a reconciled couple whose travel plans had fallen through, "It's closing time."

"Right," our Observer said, reaching for their wallet, but was stopped by Ozzie.

"Don't worry about it. You should get going."

Our Observer hesitated, taking in the bartender, then nodded a bit. They stood to go towards the door, stopping and looking at the different exits around the circular room, saying:

"I don't remember which one I came in through."

"That doesn't matter," Ozzie said, "What matters is where you want to go next. Back to the town? Back home? Or somewhere else?"

Our Observer spun a bit, looking at all the options.

"Look, any of these doors could bring you where you want to go," Ozzie said, hopping over the bar to stand beside our Observer and put a hand on their shoulder, "So where's that?"

Our Observer looked at Ozzie, then at the other bartender who stood with a broom in hand, then back at the bar itself with its many pictures behind the counter.

They finally nodded, tapped Ozzie's hand, and our Observer gathered up their few items they had collected throughout the day: supplies they bought in the morning, some leftover napkins from lunch, the book they had read nearly half of, some torn up fliers splattered with paint, and a coaster they had just swiped off the counter.

They turned back to the bartenders, nodded, and picked a door.

Then our Observer walked through.



Wooded Horizon

Small Town

Roads' Edge

Backroads

Highways

Parkways

Dirt and Beaten Paths

Cracked Sidewalks

Freshly Paved

Gravel Crunch

Dilapidated Homes

Pop-Up Neighborhood

Cookie Cutter

Patchwork

Liminal

Uncanny

Episodic