

"The Monument"

Now can you see the monument? It is of wood  
 built somewhat like a box. No. Built  
 like several boxes in descending sizes  
 one above the other.  
 Each is turned half-way round so that  
 its corners point toward the sides  
 of the one below and the angles alternate.  
 Then on the topmost cube is set  
 a sort of fleur-de-lys of weathered wood,  
 long petals of board, pierced with odd holes,  
 four-sided, stiff, ecclesiastical.  
 From it four thin, warped poles spring out,  
 (slanted like fishing-poles or flag-poles)  
 and from them jig-saw work hangs down,  
 four lines of vaguely whittled ornament  
 over the edges of the boxes  
 to the ground.  
 The monument is one-third set against  
 a sea; two-thirds against a sky.  
 The view is geared  
 (that is, the view's perspective)  
 so low there is no "far away,"  
 and we are far away within the view.  
 A sea of narrow, horizontal boards  
 lies out behind our lonely monument,  
 its long grains alternating right and left  
 like floor-boards--spotted, swarming-still,  
 and motionless. A sky runs parallel,  
 and it is palings, coarser than the sea's:  
 splintery sunlight and long-fibred clouds.  
 "Why does the strange sea make no sound?  
 Is it because we're far away?  
 Where are we? Are we in Asia Minor,  
 or in Mongolia?"  
 An ancient promontory,  
 an ancient principality whose artist-prince  
 might have wanted to build a monument  
 to mark a tomb or boundary, or make

a melancholy or romantic scene of it...  
 "But that queer sea looks made of wood,  
 half-shining, like a driftwood, sea.  
 And the sky looks wooden, grained with cloud.  
 It's like a stage-set; it is all so flat!  
 Those clouds are full of glistening splinters!  
 What is that?"

It is the monument.

"It's piled-up boxes,  
 outlined with shoddy fret-work, half-fallen off,  
 cracked and unpainted. It looks old."  
 --The strong sunlight, the wind from the sea,  
 all the conditions of its existence,  
 may have flaked off the paint, if ever it was painted,  
 and made it homelier than it was.  
 "Why did you bring me here to see it?  
 A temple of crates in cramped and crated scenery,  
 what can it prove?  
 I am tired of breathing this eroded air,  
 this dryness in which the monument is cracking."

It is an artifact  
 of wood. Wood holds together better  
 than sea or cloud or and could by itself,  
 much better than real sea or sand or cloud.  
 It chose that way to grow and not to move.  
 The monument's an object, yet those decorations,  
 carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all,  
 give it away as having life, and wishing;  
 wanting to be a monument, to cherish something.  
 The crudest scroll-work says "commemorate,"  
 while once each day the light goes around it  
 like a prowling animal,  
 or the rain falls on it, or the wind blows into it.  
 It may be solid, may be hollow.  
 The bones of the artist-prince may be inside  
 or far away on even drier soil.  
 But roughly but adequately it can shelter  
 what is within (which after all  
 cannot have been intended to be seen).  
 It is the beginning of a painting,  
 a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,  
 and all of wood. Watch it closely.

Late that night, Moon-Watcher suddenly awoke. Tired out by the day's exertions and disasters, he had been sleeping more soundly than usual, yet he was instantly alert at the first faint scrabbling down in the valley.

He sat up in the fetid darkness of the cave, straining his senses out into the night, and fear crept slowly into his soul. Never in his life—already twice as long as most members of his species could expect—had he heard a sound like this. The great cats approached in silence, and the only thing that betrayed them was a rare slide of earth, or the occasional cracking of a twig. Yet this was a continuous crunching noise, that grew steadily louder. It seemed that some enormous beast was moving through the night, making no attempt at concealment, and ignoring all obstacles. Once Moon-Watcher heard the unmistakable sound of a bush being uprooted; the elephants and dinotheria did this often enough, but otherwise they moved as silently as the cats.

And then there came a sound which Moon-Watcher could not possibly have identified, for it had never been heard before in the history of the world. It was the clank of metal upon stone.

Moon-Watcher came face to face with the New Rock when he led the tribe down to the river in the first light of morning. He had almost forgotten the terrors of the night, because nothing had happened after that initial noise, so he did not even associate this strange thing with danger or with fear. There was, after all, nothing in the least alarming about it.

It was a rectangular slab, three times his height but narrow enough to span with his arms, and it was made of some completely transparent material; indeed, it was not easy to see except when the rising sun glinted on its edges. As Moon-Watcher had never encountered ice, or even crystal-clear water, there were no natural objects to which he could compare this apparition. It was certainly rather attractive, and though he was wisely cautious of most new things, he did not hesitate for long before sidling up to it. As nothing happened, he put out his hand, and felt a cold, hard surface.

After several minutes of intense thought, he arrived at a brilliant explanation. It was a rock, of course, and it must have grown during the night. There were many plants that did this—white, pulpy things shaped like pebbles, that seemed to shoot up during the hours of darkness. It was true that they were small and round, whereas this was large and sharp-edged; but greater and later philosophers than Moon-Watcher would be prepared to overlook equally striking exceptions to their theories.

This really superb piece of abstract thinking led Moon-Watcher, after only three or four minutes, to a deduction which he immediately put to the test. The white, round pebble-plants were very tasty (though there were a few that produced violent illness); perhaps this tall one . . . ?

A few licks and attempted nibbles quickly disillusioned him. There was no nourishment here; so like a sensible man-ape, he continued on his way to the river and forgot all about the crystalline monolith, during the daily routine of shrieking at the Others.

Arthur C. Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)