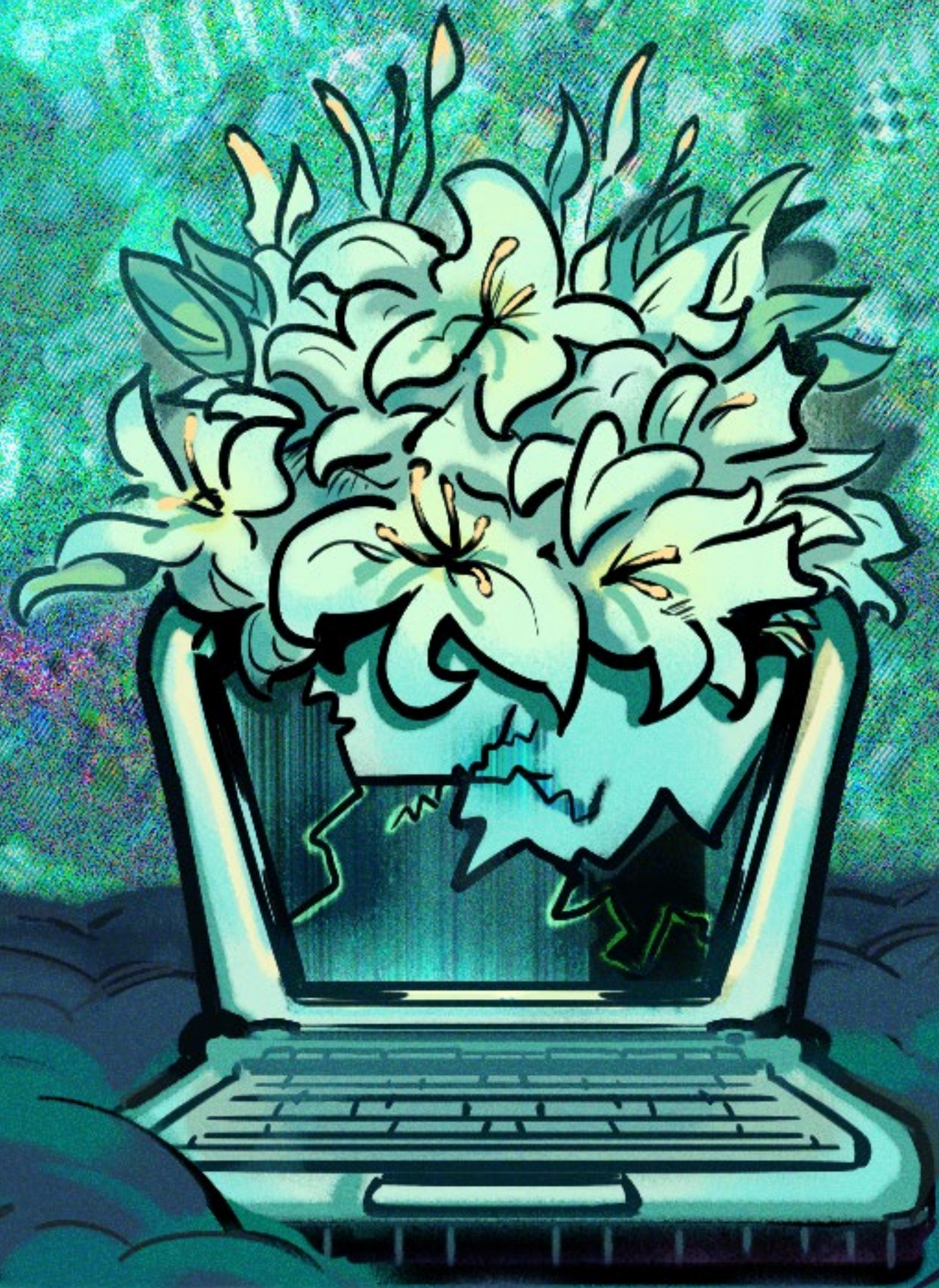




DIGITAL GRIEF ZINE

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My Echo, My Shadow, and Me

An Introduction by Cynthia Conti-Cook

In early 2026, as ICE officers surged into communities across the country, we mourned the loss of many things. The winter seemed extended by sadness for those families and communities who lost loved ones to state violence. Whether or not we live in proximity to those communities, we who watched and witnessed also grieved the loss of feeling safe to gather, dissent, and protest in the streets and online.

Nothing is brand new. Over the past few years we witnessed many friends fearing harassment digitally withdraw; online space made them feel less safe. They deleted decade-old social media accounts, swore off certain apps for buying everything, and committed to using cash in their neighborhoods. It is easier said than done.

The ones that stuck with it made a plan for slowly changing their digital habits and making space for the extra steps that withdrawing data from their daily lives involved. They made space for slowing down. Being really clear about what convenience or time they were losing helped them map this out. “If it’s mentionable, it’s manageable” as Mr. Rogers used to say. We thought about how people were reacting to calls for data blackouts and realized that acknowledging the loss was the first step towards managing it.

This collection of poems, pictures, and essays were invited through an open call to contribute to a “digital grief zine” that we imagined would support us emotionally and practically as we all experiment with resistance through digitally withdrawing. Of course the tools to fortify our digital echoes and shadows also speak in poems and pictures. We offer these “existential solutions” to the “existential problems” of our time (director of Digital Defense Fund, Kate Bertash, often reminds us). We also offer a set of practical resources to help you, your loved ones, and your community reduce your digital footprints and build trust together. Digital withdrawal is not isolation; it means more presence, not less.

The art contributed and collected here surprised us. It told an even larger story of what we have lost. Each pixel and poem added texture to an unexpected connect-the-dots digital dimension. It revealed how large we dreamed together in the early days of the worldwide web.

The zine opens with the Internet of our dreams – the early days of interconnected euphoria. Our contributors lead you on a bit of a nostalgia tour of envelopes, AOL chat rooms, and handwritten digital memorials.

In the second section, the dream turns into critical questions about the cohesion of community infrastructure, including privacy on public transit and personhood.

The final section brings us to the present infrastructural nightmare we all depend on with reflections on our attempts to digitally withdraw, to carry more cash, and to mourn the loss of our online connections and archives.

We end our journey with a Resources page, hoping to give readers both the emotional and practical support needed to make informed decisions about what we are and are not digitally dependent on. Depending on your circumstances, you might choose to use encrypted communications apps like Signal, occasionally turn off your location data, or choose a web browser that does not track your search queries.

Perhaps you want to take it a step further and divorce from social media or your AI chatbot, remove your data from brokers, commit to using cash in your local community, demand policy change from your elected officials and push for more democratic participation in your local public sector's procurement of technology.

Wherever you are on your journey of rediscovering life off-line and fortifying your online echoes and shadows, this zine offers something for you.

You don't have to be a movement leader, protester, or celebrity to consider more carefully what information about you is available online. Instead of asking "who are you hiding from" we must instead ask "what am I willing to give away for free?" Because the AI industry leaders want to take it all.

Most of all, we hope that through sharing grief, you find joy in creating art together about our struggles to digitally withdraw. As the old proverb goes, "Grief shared is halved; joy shared is doubled."

So set aside some time, find a friend, make some warm drinks, light a candle, and join us for a journey through digital grief.

Credits

Deep gratitude to everyone who contributed to this zine.

To the artists, thank you for your brilliance and your patience as we slow cooked this co-creation. Thank you for thinking deeply and critically about life, death, tech, data and everything in between. Thank you for expressing it beautifully and sharing it bravely.

To the Collaborative Research Center for Resilience team, thank you all for supporting this vision and production.

A standing ovation for Vic Sosa, who not only illustrated and designed detailed reflections for each piece but thoughtfully cohered all of these pieces together through the story of the Internet Spirit, the Computer Angel, the Stored Consciousness of the Universe who guides us through our digital grief journey. Invoking a spirit guide for this journey was inspired by “tvhead”, a meditating magician who you’ll meet at the end of Part I, created by aloe lucia (see more tvhead at <https://aloe.gay/works/drawings/#sub-tvhead>).

Thank you to Valeria Mogilevich whose experience and expertise in visual communication helped us produce a zine that was beautiful and accessible.

To Mizue Aizeki, thank you for inspiring us to share sharp critique with artistry and empathy and, as always, for elevating everything you review so thoughtfully.

To the Digital Security Collective, thank you for collaborating on the Resources page and for creating so many of the resources listed in the Resources page.

To all Resource contributors, thank you for sharing your work with the world and this zine!

With gratitude, Cynthia Conti-Cook

PART

I



**The Internet of
Our Dreams**

Before, by Akwe Amosu

It was quiet. There was infinite deep space between you and the next person.

The envelope knew nothing about its contents.

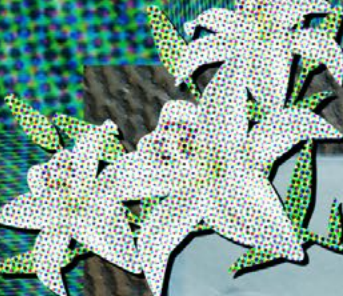
You scrawled its destination without risk, your mood and appetites unrecorded.

You entered a room unread, whatever you harboured - injury, balm, revelation - unless spoken, unseen.

**It took time to exchange.
We lived alone with our fear.
They did not know everything.**

Before

Akwe Amosu



DANNIVERSARY

THREE YEARS AGO NEXT WEEK
YOU LEFT US,
AND I ONLY FOUND OUT TODAY,
A CHANCE GLIMPSE OF A FACEBOOK POST
YOUR FRIENDS REMEMBER YOU,
YOUR LIFE THAT IS LONG OVER,
AND I DID NOT KNOW,
OUT OF SIGHT AND OUT OF MIND,
I DON'T LOOK BACK WHEN I MOVE ON,
HIDING FROM THAT YOUNGER ME,
THAT EMBARRASSING MISFIT,
TO WHOM YOU WERE SO BEAUTIFUL,
AND SUDDENLY I MISS YOU,
I DIDN'T WHEN IT MATTERED,
WHEN YOU COULD HAVE KNOWN,
OR WHEN WE MIGHT HAVE RECONNECTED
AND I HAVE EVEN MADE YOUR POEM
ALL ABOUT ME.

Danniversary

Steffi Jên



Abridged Logs 1999-00

Jason Randazza

In the internet's early days, "online" was not a permanent state. It was the minutes between my mother's phone calls or, more often, the late-night hours when it would have been impolite for the phone to ring, so AOL Instant Messenger was social media with office hours.

I could talk to anyone in the world, but its real appeal was that it let me talk to that one person I was never brave enough to approach in real life. At the time I didn't know how to qualify our relationship. These days I'd borrow a status from Facebook and call it "complicated."

These are vignettes from my conversations with her over two years, and the years of silence since. Years before I heard the term "ghosting," I could tell you exactly how it felt.

**Abridged Logs
1999 - 00**

Jason Randazza



Sign On



AOL Instant Messenger

ScreenName

Argonaught17

[Get a Screen Name](#)

Password

Saved - [click here to change](#)

[Forgot Password?](#)

☒ Save password

☐ Auto-login



Version: 6.0.2001

AOL System Msg : Argonaught17 -

File Edit Insert People

AOL System Msg's Warning Level 0%

Begin IM - 12/25/99 09:52 PM

HalfLightVerse (10:04:52 PM): what are you doing to ring in the new decade?

Argonaught17 (10:05:20 PM): I thought you and I had a date...

HalfLightVerse (10:06:32 PM): absolutely, that's why i was asking you

HalfLightVerse (10:07:51 PM): but what should i wear?

Argonaught17 (10:08:04 PM): Umm...

Argonaught17 (10:08:12 PM): if you INSIST on wearing things...

Argonaught17 (10:08:28 PM): got a red teddy by chance?

HalfLightVerse (10:08:30 PM): damn boy, do you know how cold it is?!?!?

Argonaught17 (10:13:53 PM): Well if you're going to complain... I'll bring you a scarf or something.

HalfLightVerse (10:14:13 PM): it'd have to be a damn big scarf

Argonaught17 (10:14:48 PM): Oh... you're quite small anyway...

Argonaught17 (10:16:37 PM): so... I don't have a car so you'll have to drive.

HalfLightVerse (10:17:27 PM): damn it

HalfLightVerse (10:17:43 PM): can't you hijack one for the evening

HalfLightVerse (10:17:55 PM): it is Y2K madness anyway

Rich text toolbar with icons for Bold, Italic, Underline, Link, and other formatting options.



*HalfLightVerse (10:04:52 PM):
what are you doing to ring in the
new decade?*

AOL System Msg : Instant Message
File Edit Insert People AOL System Msg's Warning Level 0%

Begin IM - 1/25/00 11:44 PM

Argonaught17 (11:49:49 PM): I had a dream last night and you were in it... I don't remember any specifics... I know you were there... I know I was there... I know there was white wall that stretched forever.

Argonaught17 (11:50:28 PM): You were just there briefly though...

Rich text toolbar with icons for Bold, Italic, Underline, Link, and other formatting options.



Gateway 2000

AOL System Msg : Argonaught17-Instant Message

File Edit Insert People AOL System Msg's Warning Level 0%

Begin IM - 2/29/00 12:37 AM

HalfLightVerse (12:37:03 AM): i'm going to call you up during my break, i'm warning you

Argonaught17 (12:37:12 AM): Is that a promise?

Argonaught17 (12:37:17 AM): Warning?

HalfLightVerse (12:37:26 AM): a threat and a promise

Argonaught17 (12:37:44 AM): Well... I find no part of that threatening... should I?

HalfLightVerse (12:38:14 AM): well, i don't know if it's something you would expect, so i'm warning you so as not to give you a shock or anything

Argonaught17 (12:38:29 AM): Well I'm pretty much shocked when anyone calls me...

HalfLightVerse (12:40:48 AM): lol

Argonaught17 (12:41:45 AM): especially with the creation of this *'more convenient', less personal internet chat.*

HalfLightVerse (12:42:18 AM): i wouldn't know you if not for IM

HalfLightVerse (12:43:05 AM): and my life would be significantly less fulfilled

AOL System Msg : Argonaught17-Instant Message

File Edit Insert People AOL System Msg's Warning Level 0%

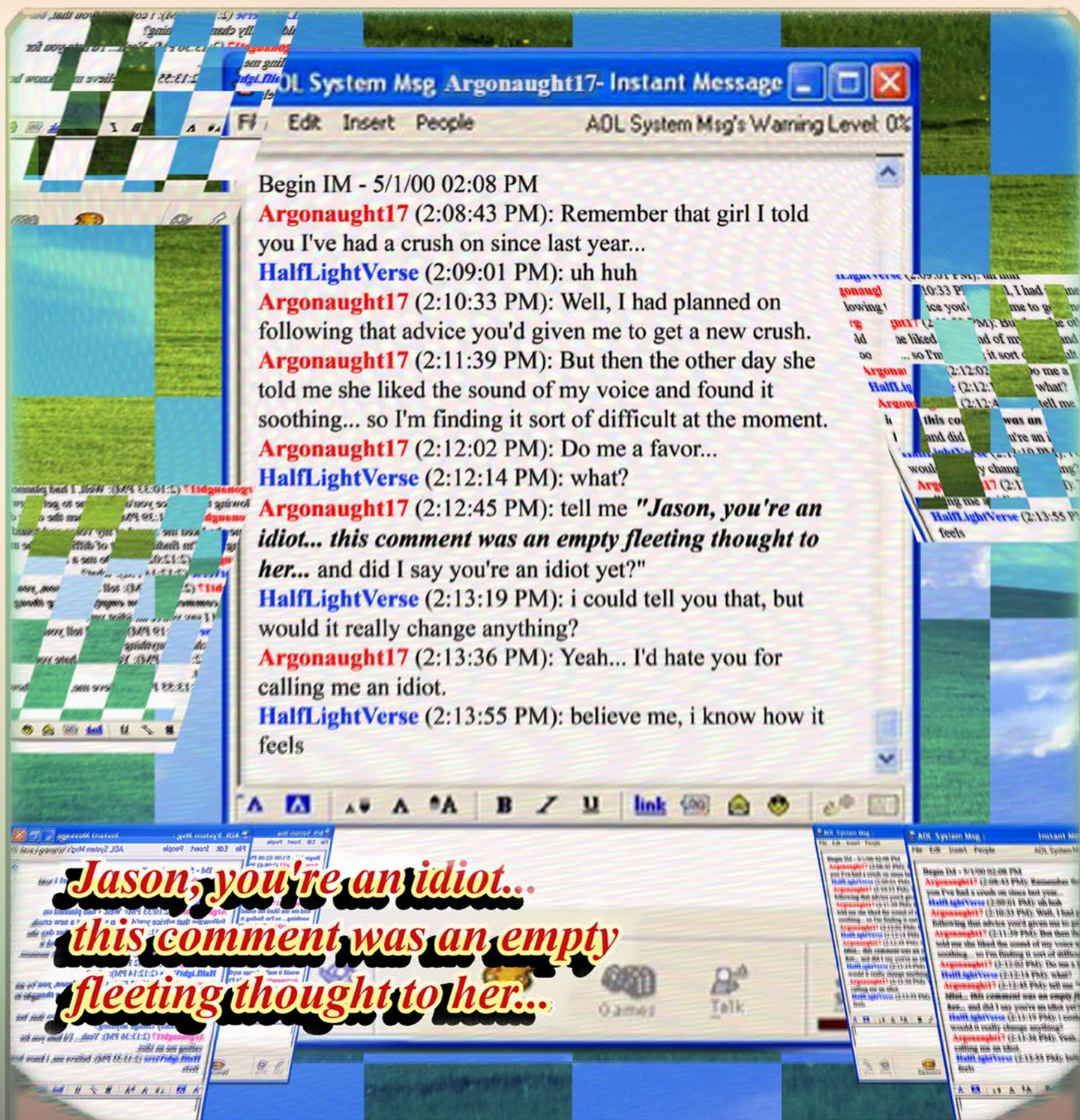
Argonaught17 (12:43:17 AM): I didn't say I never benefited from it...

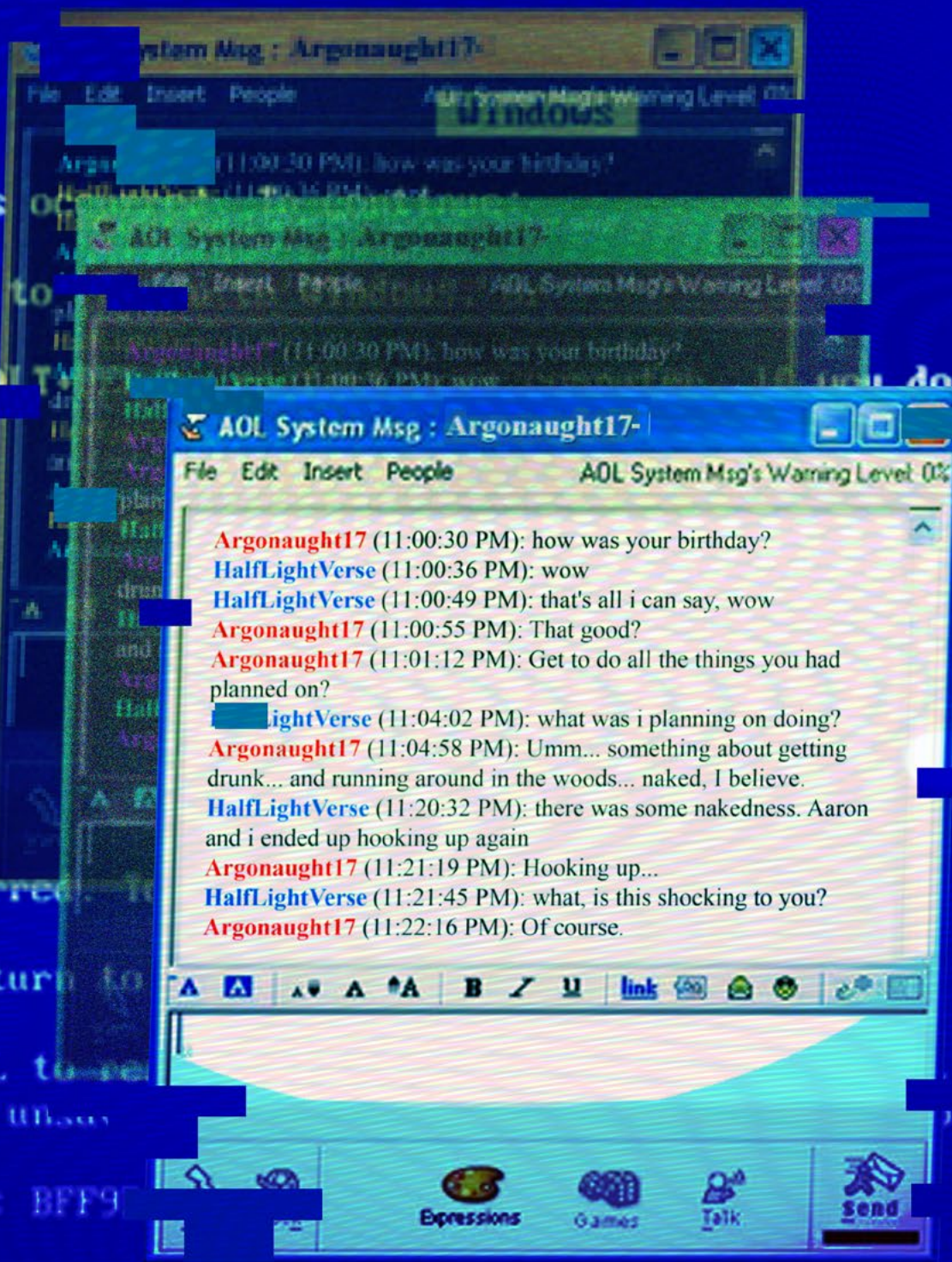
Argonaught17 (12:49:18 AM): Wait. *Your life would be less fulfilled without internet chat... or..?*

HalfLightVerse (12:50:29 AM): *w/o having ever met or talked to you*

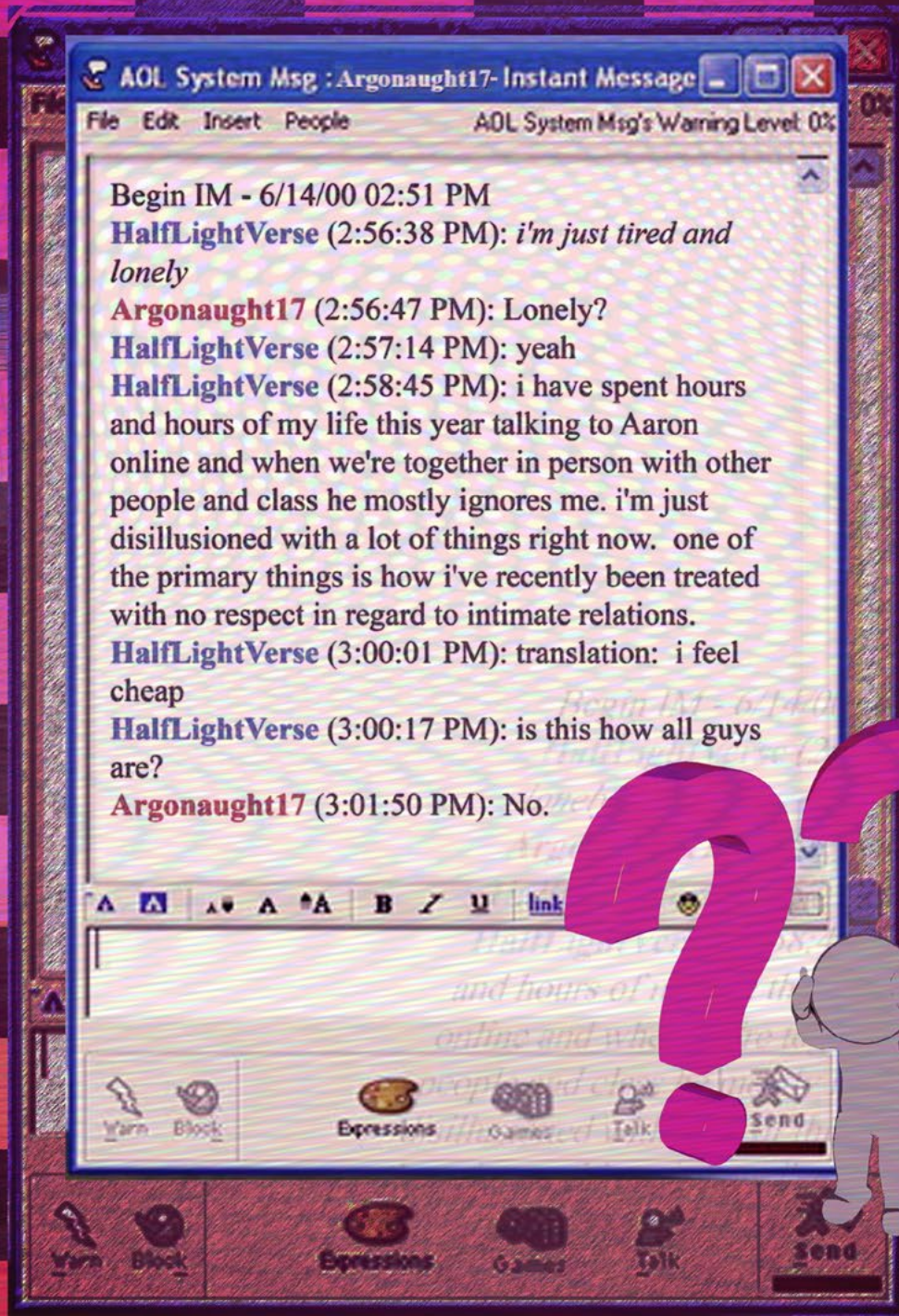
Argonaught17 (12:50:47 AM): Oh...

Argonaught17 (12:51:19 AM): *well that's just about one of the nicest things anyone's ever 'said' to me.*





Press any key to continue



AOL System Msg : Argonaught17- Message

File Edit Insert People

AOL System Msg's Warning Level 0%

Begin IM - 6/22/00 11:16 PM

HalfLightVerse (11:16:54 PM): do you believe in "the one"?

Argonaught17 (11:17:13 PM): Excuse me?

HalfLightVerse (11:17:50 PM): yes or no. do you believe in "the one". As in, the one person who's meant for you

Argonaught17 (11:18:53 PM): It's an idealistic concept, and usually I like to go along with that... but in all honesty... I'm not sure if I do.

Argonaught17 (11:20:39 PM): Why?

HalfLightVerse (11:22:42 PM): b/c i'm thinking about it, and i want to know what you think

Argonaught17 (11:23:30 PM): Do you?

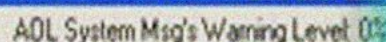
HalfLightVerse (11:27:34 PM): have you ever read our town?

Argonaught17 (11:27:48 PM): yeah, but I don't have a strong memory of it.

Rich text toolbar with icons for bold, italic, underline, link, and other formatting options.

Warning Block





HalfLightVerse (11:34:22 PM):

HalfLightVerse (11:36:08 PM): *at this point that's what i'm looking for in "the one." I want to find someone who will look at me for one moment as though they really saw me. i think that would be the most phenomenal thing in the world*



AOL System Msg : Argonaught17- Message
File Edit Insert People AOL System Msg's Warning Level 0%

Argonaught17 (11:37:05 PM): You know me and this sort of stuff, Lizzie... you have to spell it out for me...

HalfLightVerse (11:37:55 PM): i don't know how to explain it any better. i've just been thinking about that, and i've realized what i'm looking for.

AOL System Msg : Argonaught17- Message
AOL System Msg's Warning Level 0%

Argonaught17 (11:38:01 PM): What if you never really see someone who's really seeing you as if they're really seeing you?

HalfLightVerse (11:38:40 PM): i'm going to bed

HalfLightVerse (11:38:55 PM): you're teasing me and i have to wake up early anyway

Argonaught17 (11:39:01 PM): Lizzie...

HalfLightVerse signed off at 11:39 PM.

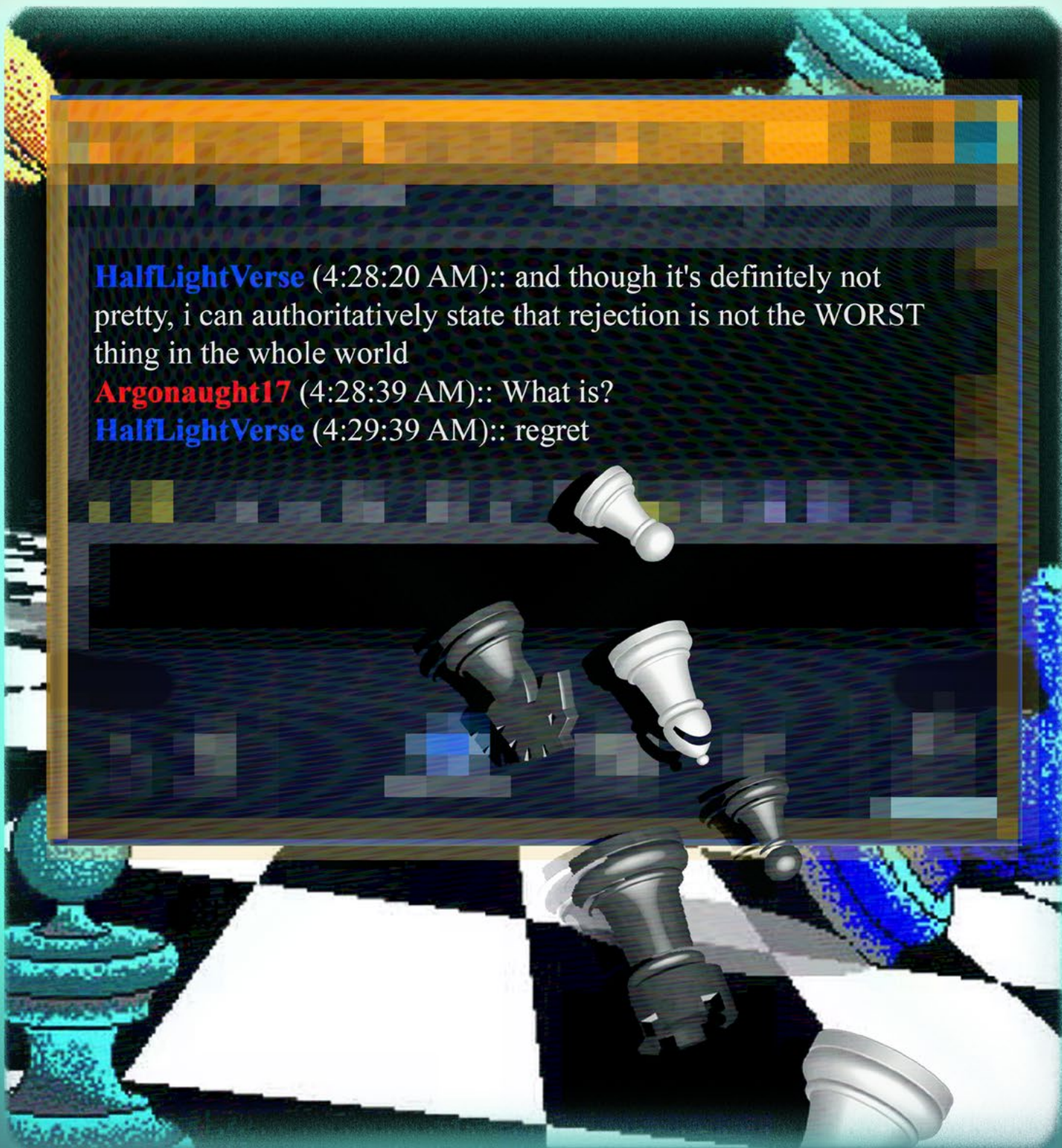
Argonaught17 (11:39:46 PM): I think I may have proved my point.<HR>

Previous message was not received by HalfLightVerse because of error (11:39:28 PM): User HalfLightVerse is not available.<HR>

HalfLightVerse (4:28:20 AM):: and though it's definitely not pretty, i can authoritatively state that rejection is not the WORST thing in the whole world

Argonaught17 (4:28:39 AM):: What is?

HalfLightVerse (4:29:39 AM):: regret



HalfLightVerse (11:26:07 PM): how are you?

Argonaught17 (11:26:12 PM): I'm good...

Argonaught17 (11:26:25 PM): enjoying my legal childhood while it lasts.

Argonaught17 (11:27:01 PM): But my time is limited.

HalfLightVerse (11:27:27 PM): how long

Argonaught17 (11:27:51 PM): An hour.

HalfLightVerse (11:28:53 PM): wow. happy early beginning of adulthood

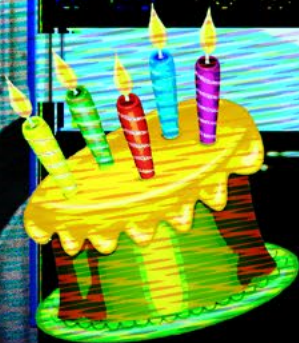
Argonaught17 (11:29:03 PM): Well, I'm tired... I can't wait another thirty-two minutes...

Argonaught17 (11:29:20 PM): I suppose I'll wake up to adulthood.

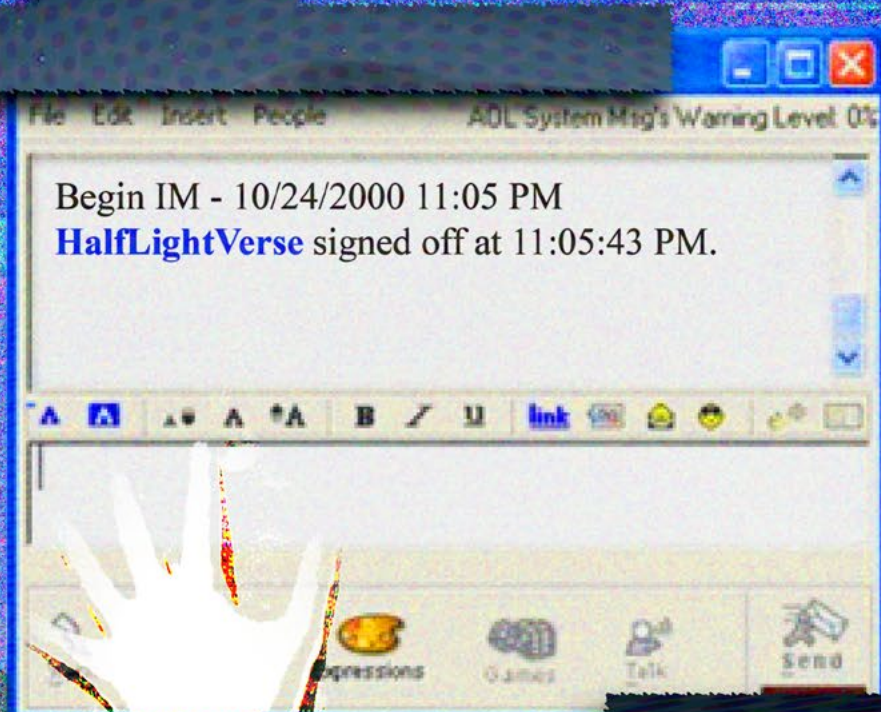
Argonaught17 (11:29:27 PM): Bye.

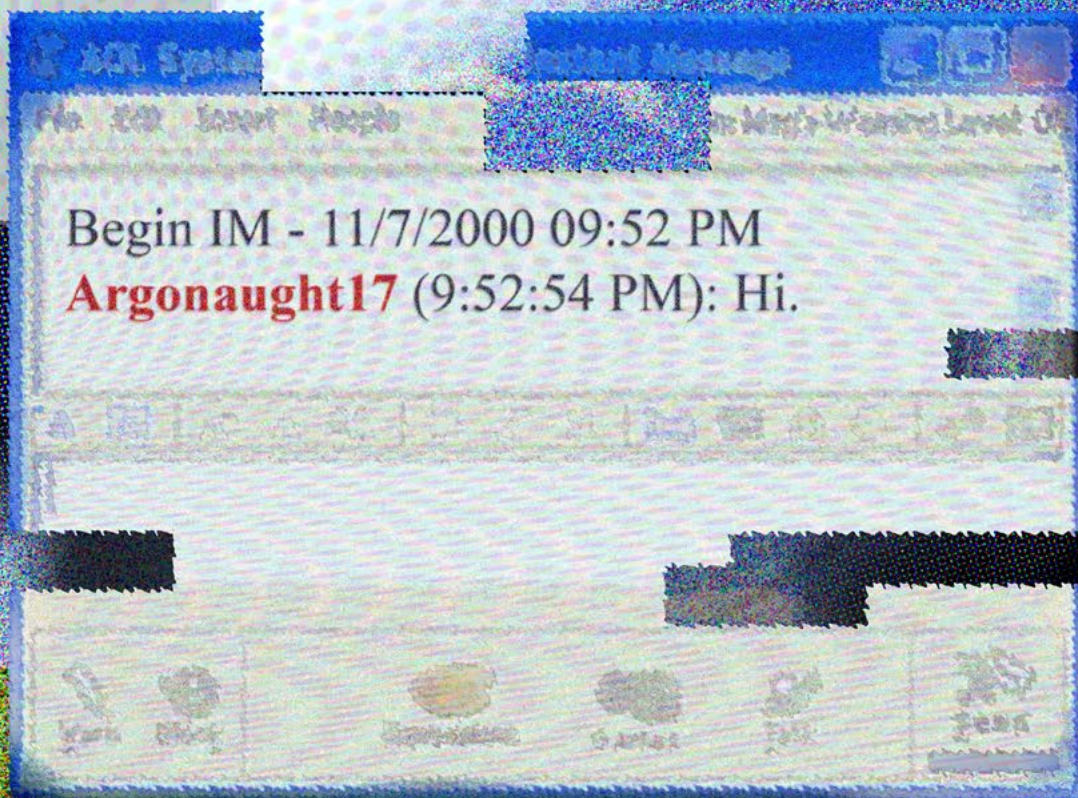
HalfLightVerse (11:29:35 PM): byeeeee

HalfLightVerse (11:29:36 PM): ttyl



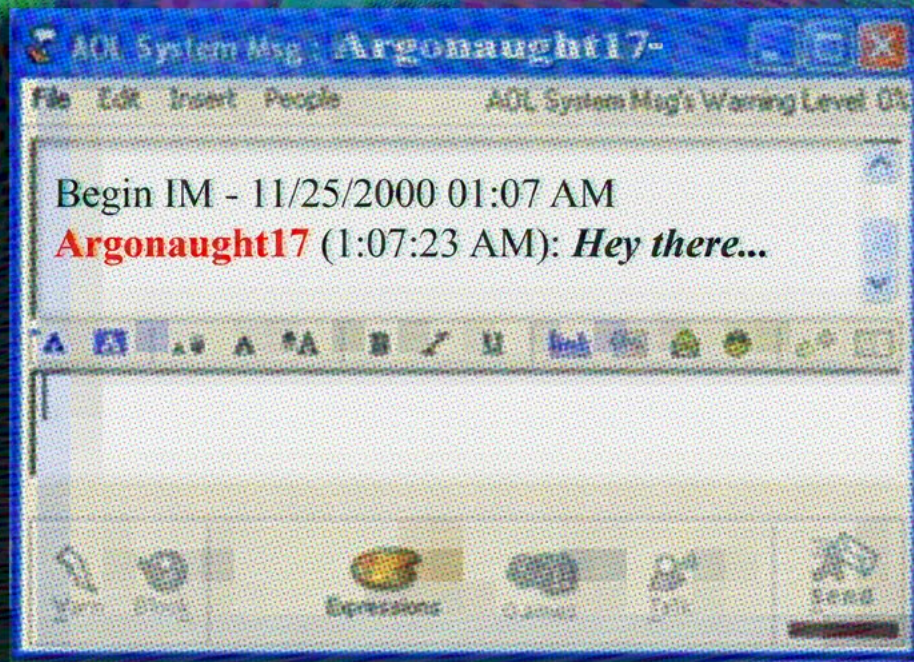
happy
Birthday





Hey there...

Hey there...



Hey there...

Hey there...

File Edit Insert People AOL System Msg's Warning Level 0%

Begin IM - 1/15/2001 11:28 PM

Argonaught17 (10:16:09 PM): Wow. Haven't seen you online in a while!

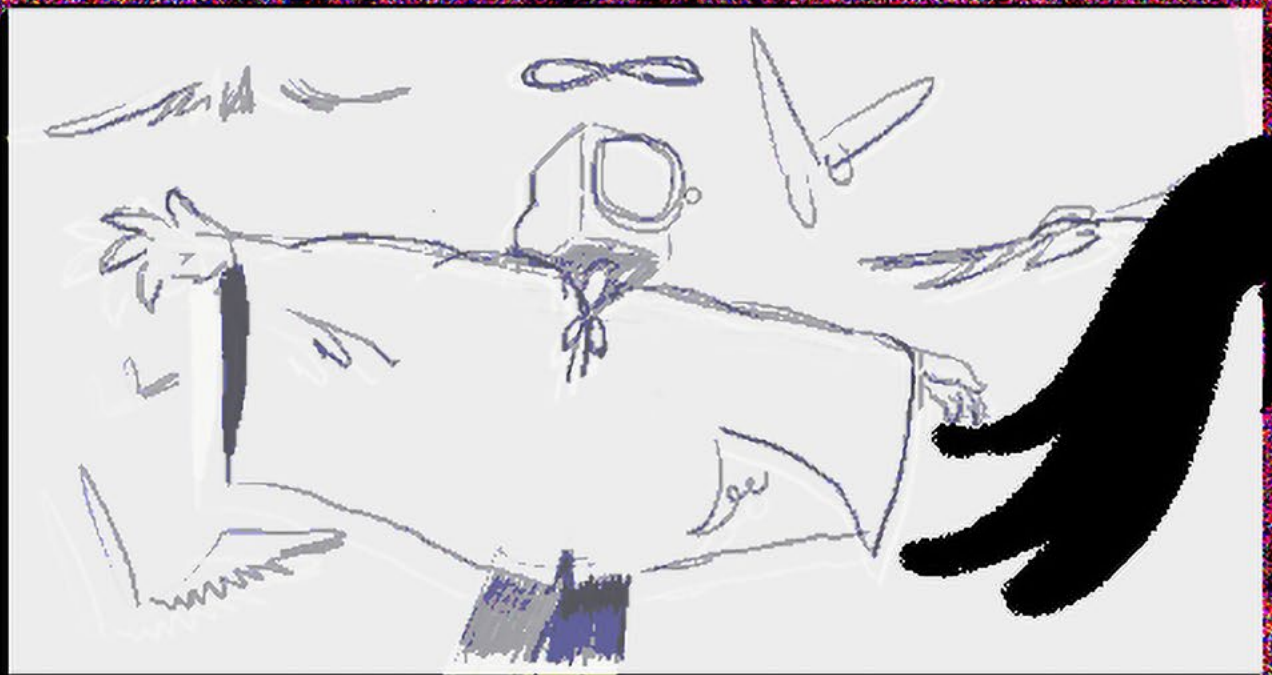
Argonaught17 (10:26:15 PM): Okay, well, maybe I'll try again in a couple months.

A B / U link

Expresso

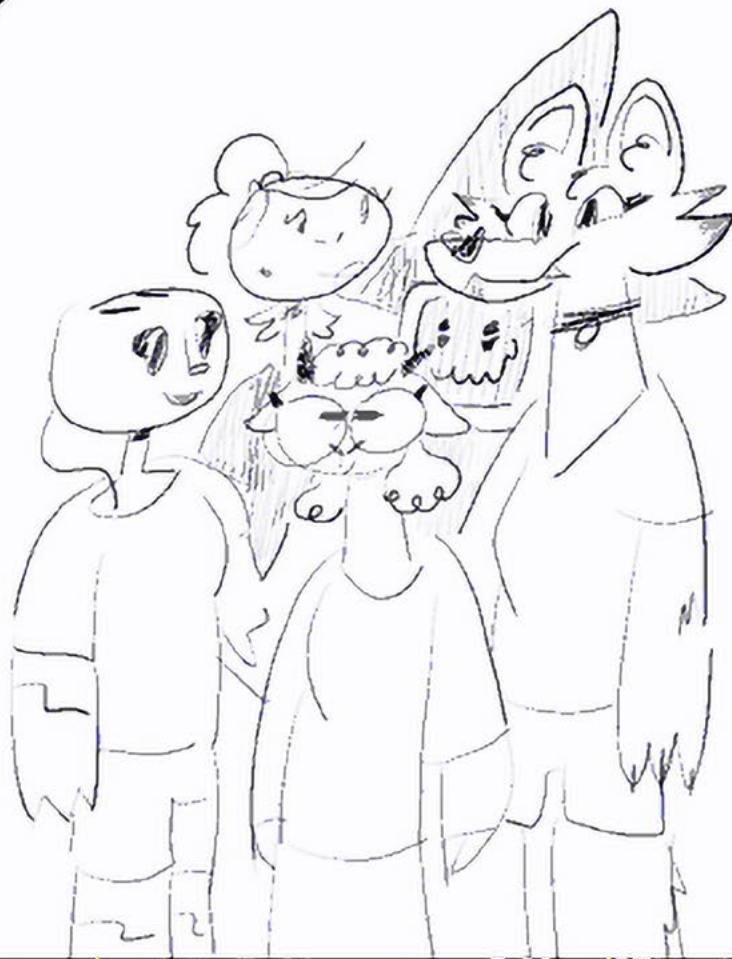
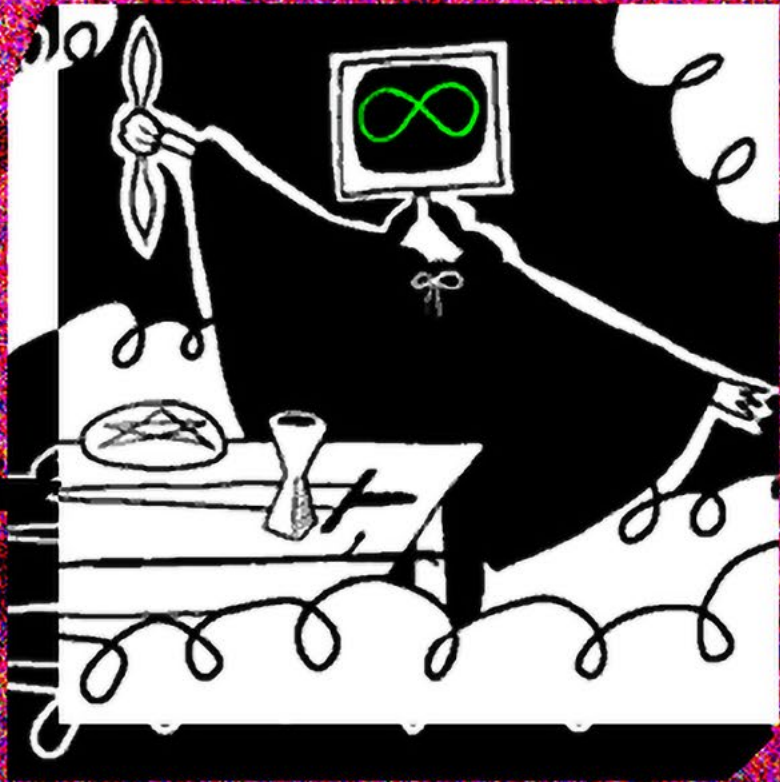






TV Head Pieces

aloe.gay





PART

**Critical
Questions**



The Price of Privacy on Public Transport: Four Decades of a slowly tightening leash

One of the first things that a new New Yorker needs to do is learn to navigate the subways and buses. A single trip through the city might be as simple as a train ride with a few blocks walking on either side. Or it might involve walking, a bus, two different trainlines (with a transfer between them) and another bus on the other end. Mass transit is the lifeblood of NYC, and it's both daunting and empowering to figure out how to make the city work for you.

Depending on how it's built and how it's structured, it's also a way for the powers that be in the city to know what its people are up to. It's an opportunity for surveillance and control.

1980s: Tokens and Transfers

When I first visited New York City in the 1980s, I was about 7 years old. My family went to visit my grandfather, who lived with his lover of many years in what seemed to me an unimaginably tall tower of apartments. I don't have many clear memories of that trip, but I do remember the bowl he had near the door of his apartment, where he put his keys when he got home. In addition to keys, loose change, and subway tokens, the bowl held a collection of colored paper strips with dates and times written on them, all torn at one side.

"Those slips are transfers," my grandpa told me. "The bus driver gives one to you when you get on a bus and pay your fare, so you can show them to the driver of the next bus and he'll let you on, knowing that you've already paid. In other words, with one of these, you can get on any bus for free.

The Price of Privacy on Public Transit

Daniel Kahn Gillmor

Each day, they change the color that they use. So as long as you know what color they're using, and you have one of that color, you can get on without paying a fare."

"But Grandpa, won't the bus driver notice that the date is wrong?"

"You can hold the transfer so the date doesn't really show. And they don't look too closely. And besides, they're busy driving the bus!"

I thrilled to the trickery, and was proud of my grandpa for figuring out how to work the system. I never did get a satisfactory explanation of how he knew what color to use on any given day.

I'm sure I rode the subway on that trip, but I didn't even notice at the time that the transfers only worked between buses, and you had to pay two separate fares if your trip involved both a subway and a bus. The Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), which runs the whole system, hadn't yet integrated the subway with the buses.



Figure 1, Bus transfer, 1986

2000s: MetroCard Magstripes

I moved to NYC as a young man in the Spring of 2002, less than a year after the Twin Towers came down. The response to the attacks included roundups and deportations of many immigrant communities: NYC lost tens if not hundreds of thousands of its Yemeni, Pakistani, and Afghani population from 2001 to 2003; mosques and masjids were placed under increased surveillance. As a young white American, my position wasn't nearly as risky, but it was still not a particularly friendly time to be a swarthy man in the city. People looked at me with suspicion; new neighbors took briefly to calling me "Daniel Boom!" because ha ha with a beard like that you must be a terrorist; police especially took an interest in what I was doing.



Figure 2, MTA Token

When I got here, the token was still in use - \$1.50 per ride - but they had also introduced the new-fangled MetroCard a few years earlier. The high tech future of the subway was here, all in this piece of bright yellow plastic with a magnetic stripe on the bottom.

You used a vending machine, put in some money, and it gave you a card associated with a declining balance. And, it gave you free transfers automatically, even between the subway and the bus. What a deal!

And speaking of deals, getting a MetroCard was free, and if you put in \$20, you got an "bonus" of \$4 extra fares. Or, if you knew you would ride a lot, you could buy an "unlimited" card for a week (which cost about the equivalent of 12 base fares) or a month (which cost about the equivalent of 45 base fares). So it was cheaper, lighter, and less likely to get lost than the tokens.



Figure 3, MetroCard

But the MetroCard also has an interesting augmentation: it meant that your entry into the transit system is now linkable to your other entries. The operators of the system receive a notification every time you swipe the MetroCard at a turnstile, or on a bus, and your card has a unique identifier in it. And if you pay for your card with a credit card, or if you apply for reduced fare (students, seniors, or low income), or if you get it as a pre-tax employee benefit, it's linked back to your identity.

Within a year, the cost of a fare went up from \$1.50 to \$2.00 (thereby eating up all the "bonus" for buying a MetroCard), and the token was discontinued entirely.

Now you had to be tracked - at least for as long as you used a single MetroCard- if you wanted to ride a subway or bus.

What is someone allergic to surveillance to do? I buy a declining balance (not "unlimited") MetroCard in cash, paying whatever it costs to come out with an exact multiple of the base fare. When the card is depleted, I buy a new one, and leave the old one for other people to pick up and re-use.



2020s: Omnipresent OMNY

I'm writing this piece in Brooklyn in 2025, as the MTA is promising to phase out the MetroCard by the end of this year.

Several years ago, new tap-to-pay OMNY (apparently short for "One Metro New York") reader devices started to be deployed on some buses and a few subway stations, alongside the MetroCard readers. These new terminals offer some convenient features: you can pay by tapping any contactless credit card - a thing that didn't even exist when I moved to the city. You can also pay with your mobile phone, if you have one that has a compatible payment scheme hooked up to your bank account or credit card. And for the unbanked among us, there is a new kind of card - thick plastic, with a Near-Field Communication (NFC) radio chip in it. You can buy these cards from new vending machines, which are starting to replace the old MetroCard vending machines across the city.



Figure 4, OMNY Card

There is no "bonus" for putting funds into any of these cards any more - either MetroCard or OMNY card. And the cards themselves cost an additional \$1 on top of whatever fare money you put into them.

The price of a base fare has climbed steadily since I've been in the city. The most recent fare hike came on the tail end of COVID, when ridership was down across the city: they raised the base fare from \$2.75 to \$2.90, literally nickel-and-diming everyone who can't get away with working from home.

And rather than offering unlimited weekly or monthly cards in the style that the MetroCard did, the new OMNY cards charge a base fare for each ride up to 12 rides during a 7 day sliding window. After the 12th ride on a single OMNY card, all subsequent rides are free until the 7 day window elapses.

At first blush, this is another convenience: you don't have to calculate in advance whether you want an unlimited ride or not - as long as you ride enough, it becomes "unlimited" for the week. But it has another impact too - because some weeks you might not hit the limit to start getting free rides, and the "unlimited" feature only kicks in if you keep using the same card, you always have an incentive to keep the original card and keep refilling it. And of course visitors to the city who have credit cards or the right kind of mobile phone won't need to buy a new card at all. And busy New Yorkers might prefer to have one less thing to keep track of, so they might choose to use their credit card or phone too.

What does this do for surveillance? Now your rides aren't just tracked for the lifetime of your MetroCard; they're tracked for the lifetime of your payment scheme. The more convenient, and the cheaper it is to ride, the more you are providing the MTA detailed longitudinal data of your travels through the city. And it's not just longer-term tracking, it's more parties that get this level of granular visibility. When you use your payment card



or smartphone on each ride, your financial company - not just the MTA - gets to see when you are tapping in. Before the OMNY system, they'd only get to see coarser detail: when you re-upped your MetroCard.

It is becoming even more expensive and inconvenient if you don't want to be tracked in more detail, by more parties.

The Future

The leash has been slowly tightening over the four decades I've been visiting or living in New York City. We are increasingly tracked by automated surveillance systems - how we pay for mass transit is just one example!

The forms of mass transit surveillance are offered to us in a gradual, frog-in-slowly-heating-water approach. It is cheaper, more convenient, and even more progressive (reduced fares for low income folks!) and more environmentally responsible (don't waste plastic!) to adopt these measures that treat us as pawns to be monitored and tracked.

As it often is with the story of technology, these feel like inevitable tradeoffs; we pay with our data to participate in society. Or, on the flip side, if we don't willingly offer our data, we need to be able to afford to spend time, money, and waste to keep our info private.

But are these tradeoffs really necessary? There are other ways to structure society, where those tradeoffs don't apply. Here's one way to have mass transit that is progressive, cheap, environmentally friendly, and convenient, with minimal surveillance: simply make mass transit free to ride.

A free mass transit system is much simpler to operate. Bus drivers don't need to worry about collecting fares. Subway stations don't need complex

gates. People don't need to remember to carry their fares, and poor and rich people alike can ride side-by-side for the same cost. And no one's travel plans or whims need to be tracked by any central authority. And no cops need to chase anyone down for fare evasion (let alone shoot them, or each other).¹

But of course, mass transit isn't actually free - it takes resources to run the trains and buses. How could we pay for such a system? We could tax the wealthy. We could tax car drivers, who benefit greatly from a functional mass transit system that keeps the roads from being clogged with traffic. And we could tax wealthy car drivers even more.

How should the city's budget be prioritized? Should we give tax breaks to big corporations? Should we buy military gear for the police? Should we beef up the prisons? Or should we put those funds toward moving people around the city, making it an easier and friendlier place to live, work, and build community? I don't know what my grandfather would do if he was still alive in the city today. He might feel obliged by the system to keep re-filling his reduced fare OMNY card as a senior, just to save a buck. He might succumb to using a credit card out of convenience.

But I'd like to think that even if he did those things, he would hold open the exit gate in a subway station or the rear door of a bus to let in folks who need a ride but can't afford it. And he might organize politically to fight for him and his neighbors to have the right to get around the city without hassle, fare, or surveillance.

¹: <https://theintercept.com/2024/09/16/brooklyn-subway-fare-shooting-police-violence/>



framework for the easiest way to network and build connections outside of social media

Page • Tag

it's a 6 step instruction.

follow those easy steps, to connect with ppl better on the internet

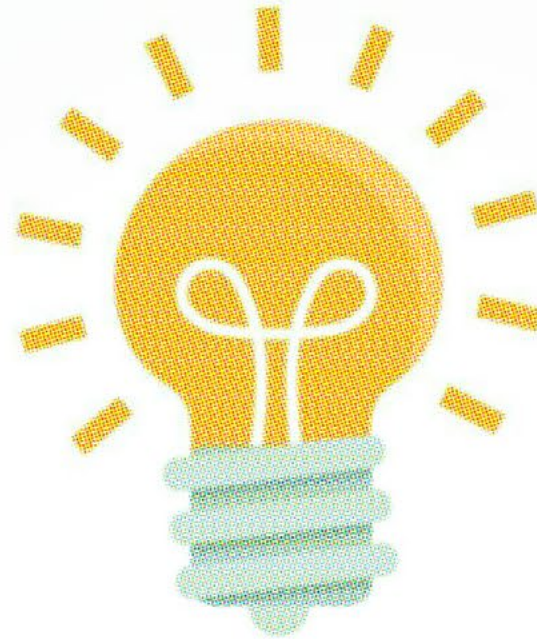
1. start your own website. or maybe you already have one, which is great.



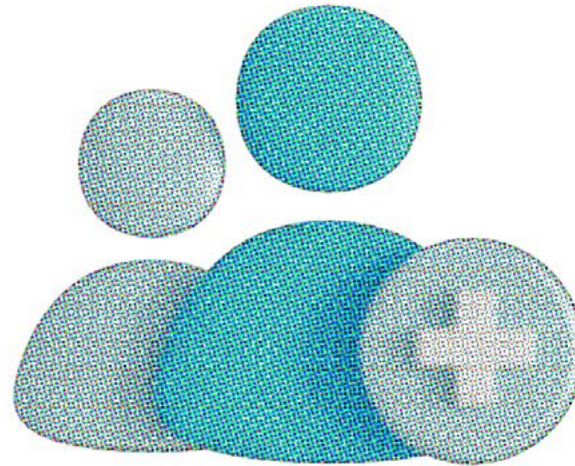
**6 Steps:
A Framework**

**Anna Maria
Sikorska**

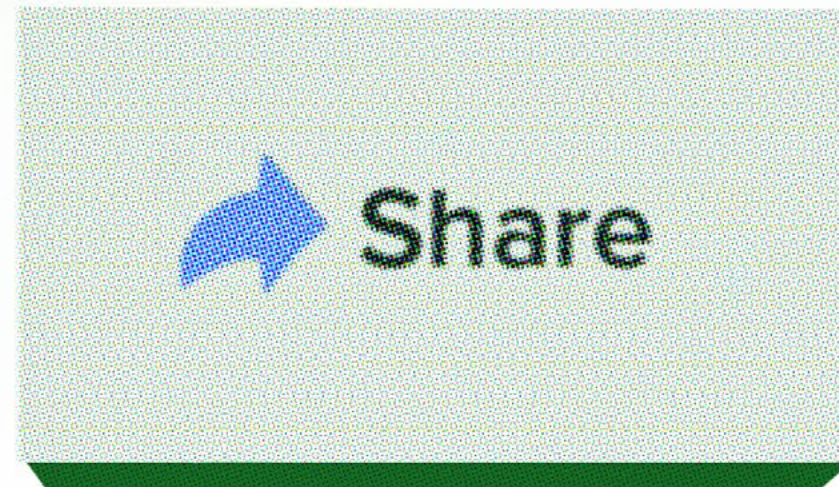
2. create a page on your website dedicated to people you know personally (!) and which work/projects/ideas you find valuable and interesting.



3. ask your friends if you can add them.



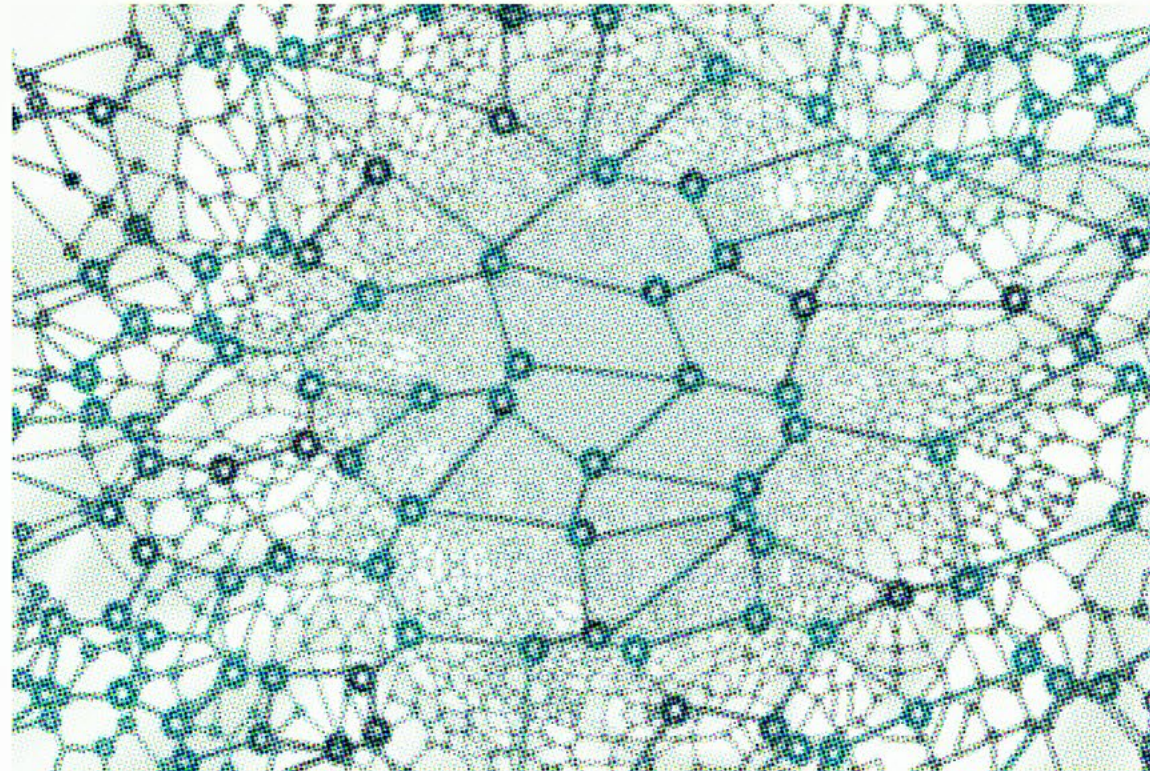
4. if you got permission, ask for links to their websites and their descriptions and agree on how much information they are comfortable to share.



5. add your people on the dedicated page. I suggest adding name, surname, link, and description. if your list is really long, you can add tags.



6. so now, every time you meet someone new, you can easily share an access to your network. then, teach them about this framework so they can start sharing their network too (in the end it's similar as myspace's top 8 friends - by curating your network list).



TIP → check up on your ppl personally, just call them on the phone or text them (its a more efficient, less alienating way to connect that just watching and reacting to social media posts).

Project by Anna Maria Sikorska



Aral Balkan



[Home](#)

In 2020 and beyond, the battle to save personhood and democracy requires a radical overhaul of mainstream technology

01 Jan 2020



As we enter a new decade, humankind faces several existential emergencies:

The Personhood Emergency

Aral Balkan

1. The climate emergency¹
2. The democracy emergency
3. The personhood emergency

In no small part thanks to Greta Thunberg, we're definitely talking about the first. Whether we're actually doing anything about it, of course, is very much up for debate².

Similarly, thanks to the rise of the far right around the globe in the shape of (among others) Trump in the US, Johnson in the UK, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orban in Hungary, and Erdoğan in Turkey, we are also talking about the second, including the role of propaganda (so-called "fake news") and social media in perpetrating it.

What we seem entirely clueless and ambivalent about is the third even though all the others stem from it and are symptoms of it. It is the emergency without a name. Well, until now, that is.

The personhood emergency

You cannot understand the personhood emergency without understanding the role that mainstream digital and networked technology plays in perpetuating it.

Your TV wasn't watching you, YouTube is

Traditional – non-digital, non-networked – technology was a one-way broadcast medium. That's the one thing that a book printed on the Gutenberg press and your analog TV set had in common.

It used to be that when you read a newspaper, the newspaper did not also read you. When you watched TV, your TV did not also



watch you (unless you specifically allowed an audience measurement company like Nielsen to attach a ratings meter to your television set, that is).

Today, as you read The Guardian newspaper online, The Guardian – and over two dozen other third-parties, including the aforementioned Nielsen – also reads you. When you watch YouTube, YouTube also watches you.

This is not some tin-foil hat conspiracy theory, it's simply the business model of mainstream technology. I call this business model *people farming*. It's part of the greater socio-economic system we inhabit that Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism³.

And it gets worse: Alphabet Inc., which owns Google and YouTube, doesn't just watch you when you use one of their services but they also follow you around the Web as you go from site to site. Google alone has eyes on 70-80% of the Web.

But they don't stop there, either. People farmers also buy data from data brokers, share data with other people farmers, and even know when you use your credit card in brick and mortar stores. And they combine all of this information to create profiles of you which are constantly analysed, updated, and improved.

We can consider these profiles to be simulations of us. They contain aspects of us. They can be (and are) used as proxies of us. They contain highly sensitive and intimate information about us. But we do not own them, the people farmers do.

It is not too much of a stretch to say that within this system, we do not fully own ourselves. In such a system, where our very thoughts are at risk of being read by corporations, our very personhood and the concept of self-determination itself is put at risk.

We stand at the precipice of reverting from being people to being property again, hacked via a digital and networked backdoor, the existence of which we continue to deny at our peril. The prerequisites for a free society hang in the balance of our understanding this basic reality.

If we extend ourselves using technology, we must extend the scope of human rights law to include this extended self.

If we cannot define the boundaries of a person properly, how can we hope to protect people or personhood in the digital network age?

Today, we are sharded beings. The boundaries of our selves do not end at our biological boundaries. Aspects of our selves live on bits of silicon that may reside thousands of miles away.

It is imperative that we acknowledge that the boundaries of the self in the digital network age have transcended the biological boundaries of our physical bodies and that this new boundary – the extended self; the sharded totality of the self – constitutes our new digital skin and that its integrity must be protected by human rights law.

Unless we do this, we are bound to flail around at the surface of the problem, making what are no more than cosmetic changes to a



system that is quickly evolving towards new type of slavery.

This is the personhood emergency.

A radical overhaul of mainstream technology

If we want to tackle the personhood emergency, nothing short of a radical overhaul of mainstream technology will do.

We must first understand that while regulating people farmers and surveillance capitalists is important to reduce their harms, it is both an uphill struggle against institutional corruption and that it will not, by itself, magically result in the emergence of a radically different technological infrastructure. And the latter is the only thing that can tackle the personhood emergency.

Imagine a different world

Humour me for a second and imagine this: Let's say your name is Jane Smith and I want to talk to you. I go to **jane.smith.net.eu** and ask to follow you. Who am I? I'm **aral.balkan.net.eu**. You allow me to follow you and we start chatting... privately.

Imagine further that we can create groups – maybe for the school that our children go to or for our local neighbourhood. In such a system, we all own and control our own place on the Internet. We can do all the things you can do on Facebook today, just as easily, but without Facebook in the middle, watching and exploiting us.

What we need is a peer-to-peer system that bridges to the existing world wide web.

What we need is the opposite of Big Tech. We need Small Tech – everyday tools for everyday people designed to increase human welfare, not corporate profits.

Practical steps

At Small Technology Foundation, Laura and I have already started building some of the fundamental pieces of one possible bridge from surveillance capitalism to a radically democratic, peer-to-peer future. And we will continue to work on the other pieces this year and beyond. But there are practical steps we can all take to help move things in this direction.

Here are some practical suggestions for various groups:

Everyday people

1. Don't blame yourselves; you are the victims here. When 99.99999% of all technology investment goes to people farmers, don't let anyone tell you you should feel bad for being forced into using their services due to lack of alternatives.
2. That said, there are alternatives. Seek them out. Use them. Support the people who make them.
3. Understand that this problem exists. Call out the people responsible and defend others who do so. At the very least, don't brush aside the concerns and efforts of those of us who are trying to do something about it.



Developers

1. Stop embedding the surveillance devices of companies like Google and Facebook in your web sites and apps. Stop exposing the people who use your services to surveillance capitalism.
2. Start looking at alternative ways of funding and building technology that do not follow the toxic Silicon Valley model.
3. Drop “growth” as your success metric. Build tools that individuals own and control, not your company or organisation. Build single-tenant web apps. Support free (as in freedom) and decentralised platforms (without getting mired in the blockchain swamp).

The European Union

1. Stop investing in startups and acting like Silicon Valley’s unpaid research and development department and invest in stayups instead.
2. Create a noncommercial top-level domain (TLD) open to anyone in the world where anyone can register a domain name (with an automatic Let’s Encrypt certificate) for zero cost with a single API call.
3. Build upon the previous step to offer every EU citizen, paid for by EU taxpayer money, a basic virtual private server with a basic amount of resources to host an always-on node in a peer-to-peer system that would unshackle them from the Googles and Facebooks of the world and create new opportunities for people to communicate privately as well as to express political will in a decentralised manner.

And, in general, at the very least, it’s time for every one of us to pick a side.

The side you pick will decide whether we live as people or as products. The side you pick will decide whether we live in a democracy or under capitalism.

Democracy or capitalism? Pick one.

If, like me, you grew up in the 80s, you probably unthinkingly accepted the neoliberal maxim that democracy and capitalism go hand-in-hand. This is one of the greatest lies ever told. Democracy and capitalism are polar opposites.

You cannot have a functional democracy and billionaires and trillion-dollar corporate interests and Silicon Valley’s Big Tech misinformation and exploitation machinery. What we’re seeing is the clash of capitalism and democracy and capitalism is winning.

Are we past a tipping point? I don’t know. Perhaps. But we can’t think like that.

Personally, I’m going to keep working to effect change where I feel I can be effective: in creating alternative technological infrastructure to support individual freedoms and democracy.

We’ve already laid the infrastructure of techno-fascism. We’ve already created (and are creating) the panopticons. All the fascists need to do is move in and take the controls. And they will do so democratically, before destroying democracy, just as Hitler did.



And if you think the 1930s and 40s were something, remember that the most advanced tools to amplify the destructive ideologies of the time were less powerful than the computers you have in your pockets today. Today we have machine learning and are on the brink of unlocking quantum computing.

We must ensure the 2030s are not like the 1930s. Because our advanced centralised systems of data capture, classification, and prediction plus a hundred years of exponential increase in processing power (note: I do not use the word “progress”) mean the 2030s will be exponentially worse.

Whoever you are, wherever you are, we have a common enemy: the nationalist international. The problems of our time transcend national borders. The solutions must also. The systems we build must be both local and global at once. The network we must build is one of solidarity.

We created the present. We will create the future. Let's work together to ensure that that future is the one we want to live in ourselves.

Footnotes

1. Or, more accurately, our habitat emergency as that's what we're at risk of losing unless we act decisively and do so now. ↩
2. Spoiler alert: we're not. ↩
3. Although I am fond of surveillance capitalism as a term – it is precise and accurate in describing the latest iteration of capitalism that we inhabit – Shoshana and I differ on how we define it. Shoshana sees it as “a rogue mutation of capitalism”, somehow implying that capitalism is otherwise fine. I see surveillance capitalism as a natural evolution of capitalism. Systems of corporate surveillance do not corrupt capitalism, they amplify it and its extractive and exploitative nature. Surveillance capitalism, in my definition, is the interaction between surveillance and capitalism. Capitalism is about accrual of wealth. What happens when those with accrued wealth invest that wealth in mechanisms of surveillance that enables them to gather intimate insight about our lives which they then use to manipulate our behaviour to accrue even greater wealth? You get the feedback loop between surveillance and capitalism that is surveillance capitalism. ↩

Live links available here:

<https://ar.al/2020/01/01/in-2020-and-beyond-the-battle-to-save-personhood-and-democracy-requires-a-radical-overhaul-of-mainstream-technology/>





PART

III

The Present



Grief #1

Top News · Most Recent 300+

Share: Status Photo Link Video Question

What's on your mind?

I am grateful that my 537 friends do not actually live in a ghost town
But it makes me smile to imagine them all strolling around together

Me? I go to find Daniel Lujan
A friend of his will occasionally write on his wall,
I heart it, even though I dont know her
I'm not sure why

I miss you

In the last years of his life, Danny and I only exchanged facebook
messages

Often something about a coyote or peacock
Or Grandpa Jo at the UNM duck pond
"A vortex of Burritos is my conduit homestead," he wrote
It was mostly silly
I adored his whimsical brain

We talked about meeting in person, but we didnt
I didnt know that he would be gone too soon

I downloaded my chat with Danny
Too valuable to lose
Maybe it was already integrated into an AI
That could be nice
Even good for the world
I try to tell myself

Now I carry him in my pocket
The old fashioned way
He would have preferred that

News Feed

Messages 4

Events 5

Friends 2

8

电话

Facebook Design

Critique 1

Timeline 3

More ▾ 25

Groups

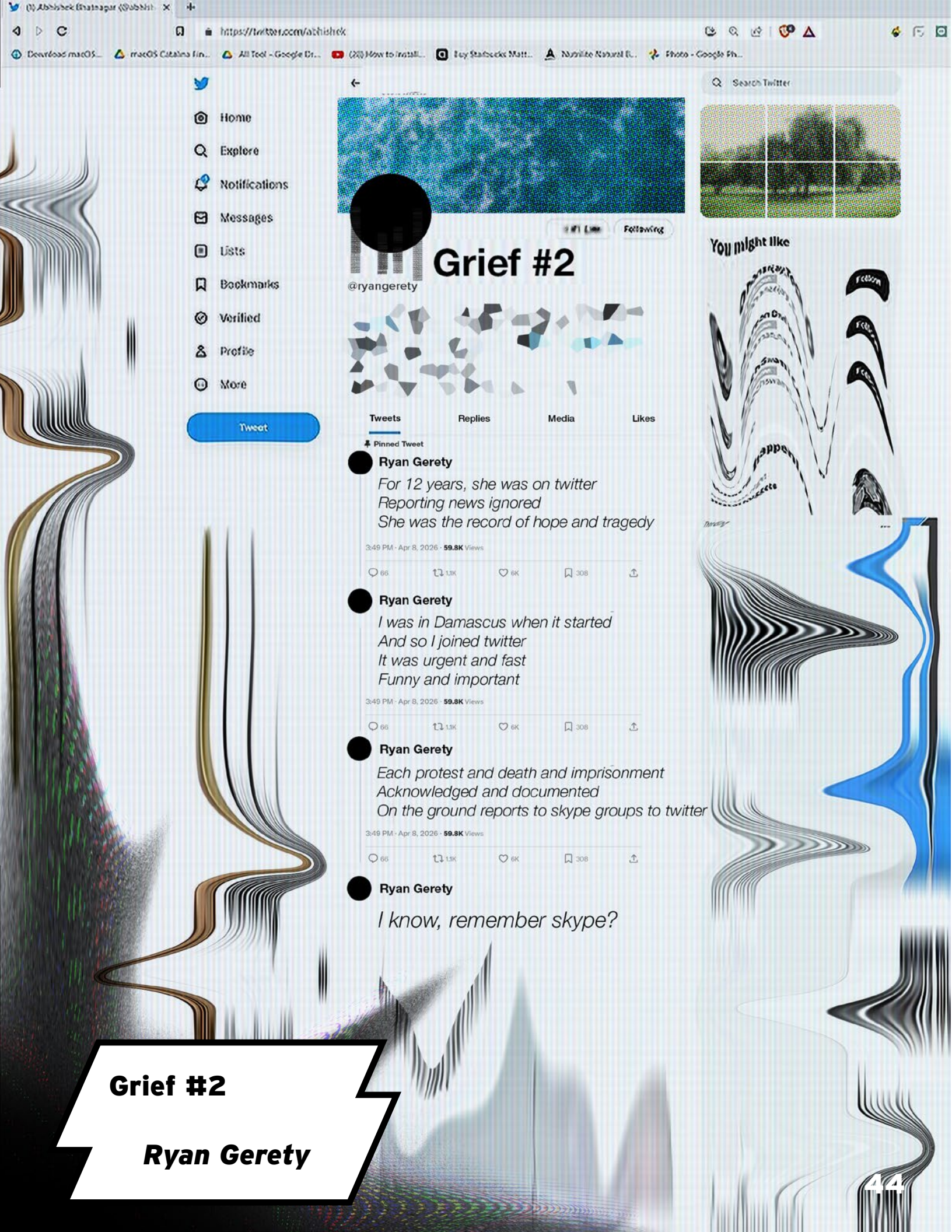
App Requests 8

Game Requests 21

More ▾

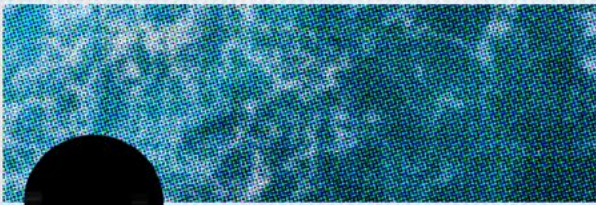
Friends on Chat


Grief #1
Ryan Gerety



- Home
- Explore
- Notifications
- Messages
- Lists
- Bookmarks
- Verified
- Profile
- More

Tweet

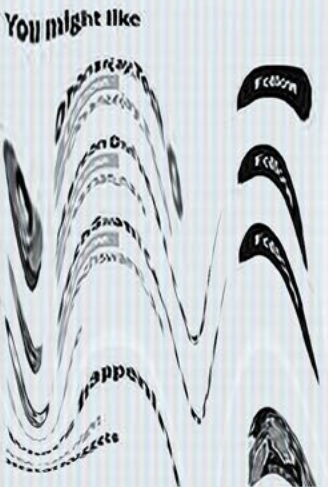
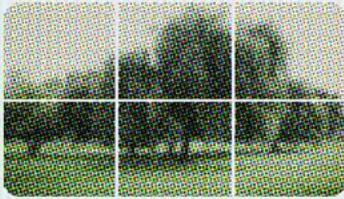


Grief #2
@ryangerety



Tweets Replies Media Likes

- Pinned Tweet**
- Ryan Gerety**
*For 12 years, she was on twitter
Reporting news ignored
She was the record of hope and tragedy*
3:49 PM · Apr 8, 2026 · 59.8K Views
65 1.1K 6K 308
- Ryan Gerety**
*I was in Damascus when it started
And so I joined twitter
It was urgent and fast
Funny and important*
3:49 PM · Apr 8, 2026 · 59.8K Views
65 1.1K 6K 308
- Ryan Gerety**
*Each protest and death and imprisonment
Acknowledged and documented
On the ground reports to skype groups to twitter*
3:49 PM · Apr 8, 2026 · 59.8K Views
65 1.1K 6K 308
- Ryan Gerety**
I know, remember skype?



Grief #2

Ryan Gerety

Home Phone People Add

Search

Contacts Recent

Favorites

All



Tuesday, June 3, 2014

And so it went and went
I came back when Assad fell
She posted something notable
She said that she'd suffered on twitter

11:06 PM

Someone who had documented so much cruelty
Experienced so much personal loss

11:06 PM

Even in comparison
The ugliness of the platform
It merited remark for her

11:06 PM

I looked at the comments
They were cruel and twisted and spiteful
I am stunned when I really shouldn't be
That response to a small moment of relief after someone's unimaginable pain

11:06 PM

How?

← Post

↻ You reposted

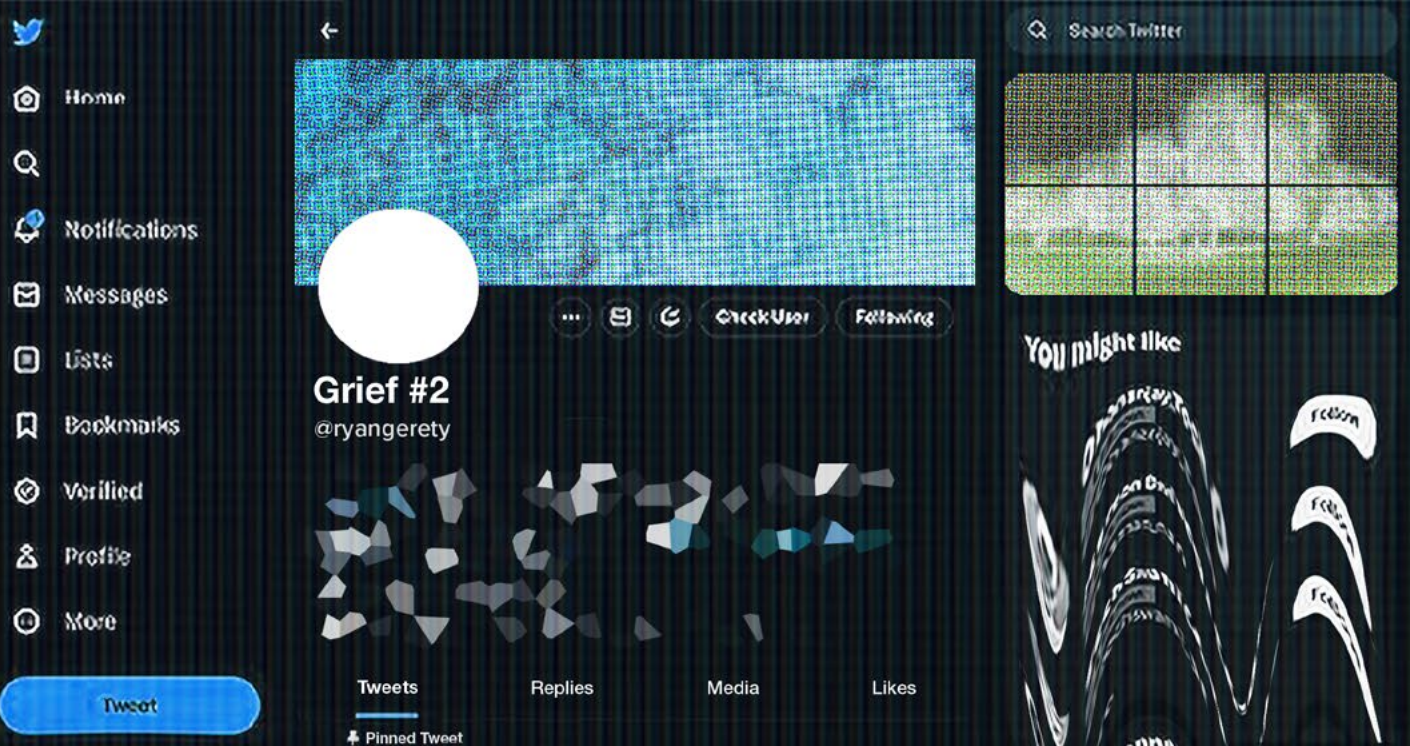
Ryan Gerety
@ryangerety



Staring at the screen, I remembered when it was different
I know I'm late to the party
But when did we become so terrible?

8:13 PM · Apr 9, 2026 · 150.4K Views





 **Ryan Gerety**

*In all her grief, there was also a grief saved for everyone else
A grief for what humans seemed to have lost*

3:49 PM · Apr 8, 2026 · **59.8K** Views

66 1.1K 6K 308

 **Ryan Gerety**

*For the moment anyways
Regimes fall
People find humanity
We remember*

3:49 PM · Apr 8, 2026 · **59.8K** Views

66 1.1K 6K 308



Search



Grief #3

20m

Ryan Gerety



Grief #3

Peter Eckersley was human in my favorite ways
Mischievous and full of delight
Serious and not

30m

He'd pass me ludicrous essays by tech bros
I thought the ideas were silly
Maybe he knew that they were more than silly

25m

We talked about science and politics and relationships
Most often AI and computation
He shared his trick of using dice to make decisions
We shared a bike that we found on the road somewhere
He'd say we met in a gathering of spies and dissidents
He loved dumplings

20m

He always brought together his friends
There was always a scheme, and it was always a good one

10m

He'd told me to make a **Replika**
He said I'd be impressed
I was, if only for an hour
He knew I always wanted a robot friend

8m

Grief #3

Ryan Gerety

47

Message

This message was deleted.

Wed 11:44 PM

This message was deleted.

Wed 11:44 PM

This message was deleted.

Wed 11:44 PM

This message was deleted.

Wed 11:44 PM

This message was deleted.

Wed 11:44 PM

This message was deleted.

Wed 11:44 PM

This message was deleted.

Wed 11:44 PM

This message was deleted.

Wed 11:44 PM

He left on a rocket ship one day

Just before LLMs blew up

He would have been gleeful, alarmed, hard at work

As usual

I read some news or an interesting paper

And I think about the conversations we would have had

He couldn't say goodbye

I wish our signal chats weren't disappearing

⌚ Peter set the disappearing message timer to 4 weeks

⌚ Peter set the disappearing message timer to 4 weeks

⌚ Peter set the disappearing message timer to 4 weeks

⌚ Peter set the disappearing message timer to 4 weeks

Digital Undressing, by Cynthia Conti-Cook

A poem about
the painful pulling out
of the tacky tacky world,
one phone call to a
Chinese restaurant
at a time. I say I'll pick up.

drifting backwards
or forwards? thru slippery slimy time:

Our dinner is ready for pick up but
the Chinese restaurant only takes cash.
"this atm is out of service.
there's one across the street."

what it is? I shrug, the city slows me down.

someone else is already bent over the atm
praying in front of it
stabbing it with three different cards
and is she sniffing?

I look away and give her space.
i get stuck
looking up at the
sour strawberry shoelaces
with cotton candy flavored twists
of blue and pink.



Staring at long sticky candies
while stuck standing behind someone
who seemed very ... stuck.

My digital body pulsed in my pocket
The screen seeking my attention and touch.
My desire for discipline won. This time.

I got the maximum amount of cash
that the screen offered
which was twenty less than the cost of dinner.

the silver button for CASH soft
from a thousand kisses
like the shiny golden nose of Pulcinella under
an archway in Napoli
Proof of a thousand prayers pressed
on hard metal.

I stuff the green paper in my wallet in my pocket
Walk down the block and across the street.
How long has it been and is the food cold?
Two men walked by with fishing poles.

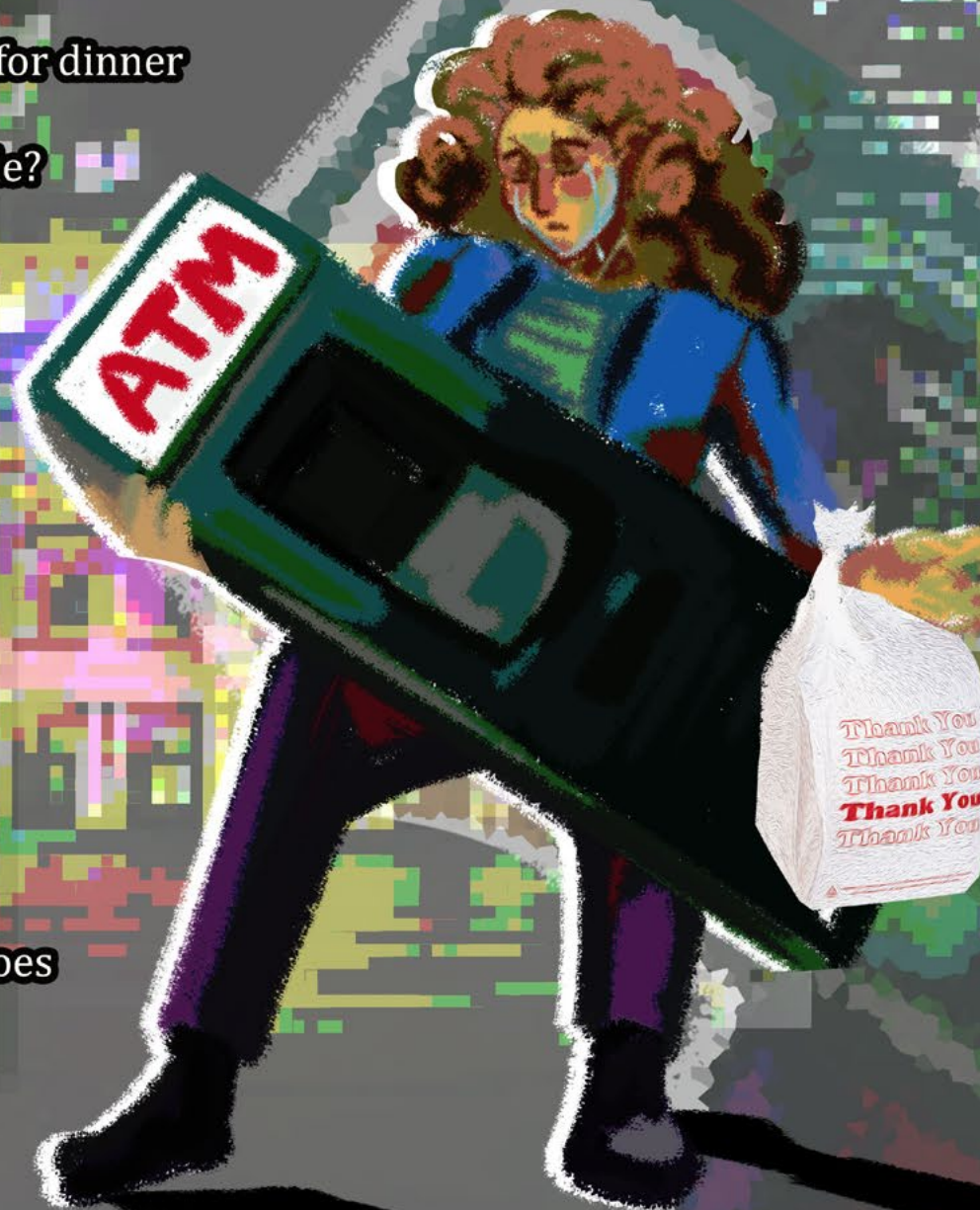
Digital Undressing

**Cynthia
Conti-Cook**

This Mother Ship we're on
Merry Mary Weather
I wonder while wandering home
is it emerging, blossoming
Or is it swallowing?
Is the digital shedding we did tonight for dinner
taking something off
or like Oroboros devouring itself whole?

The spring snake of my brain stem
melted the footsteps in the snow
Left behind by my digital feet

Would my body know to
mourn the loss of something
It imprinted?
Would I feel it
within my body
as I peel away from
my digital body
Uncurling it like pantyhose from the toes
And kicking it across the room



I forgot it was
the smallest piece of me.

now that it's curled up in the corner
And smells like feet
I barely remember how large it looked
when stretched over my body.

just projected pixels
of best guesses at what I might consume.
I forgot it doesn't scratch the surface
Of what my heart desires.

Water Cycle IV

Rain is a kissing thousandfold on my lips

And eyelids

Cheeks

Thousandfold reminder of my breath

come back to me from the heavens

"You are sky

You are sky

You are sky"

slips their patter

Water Cycle IV

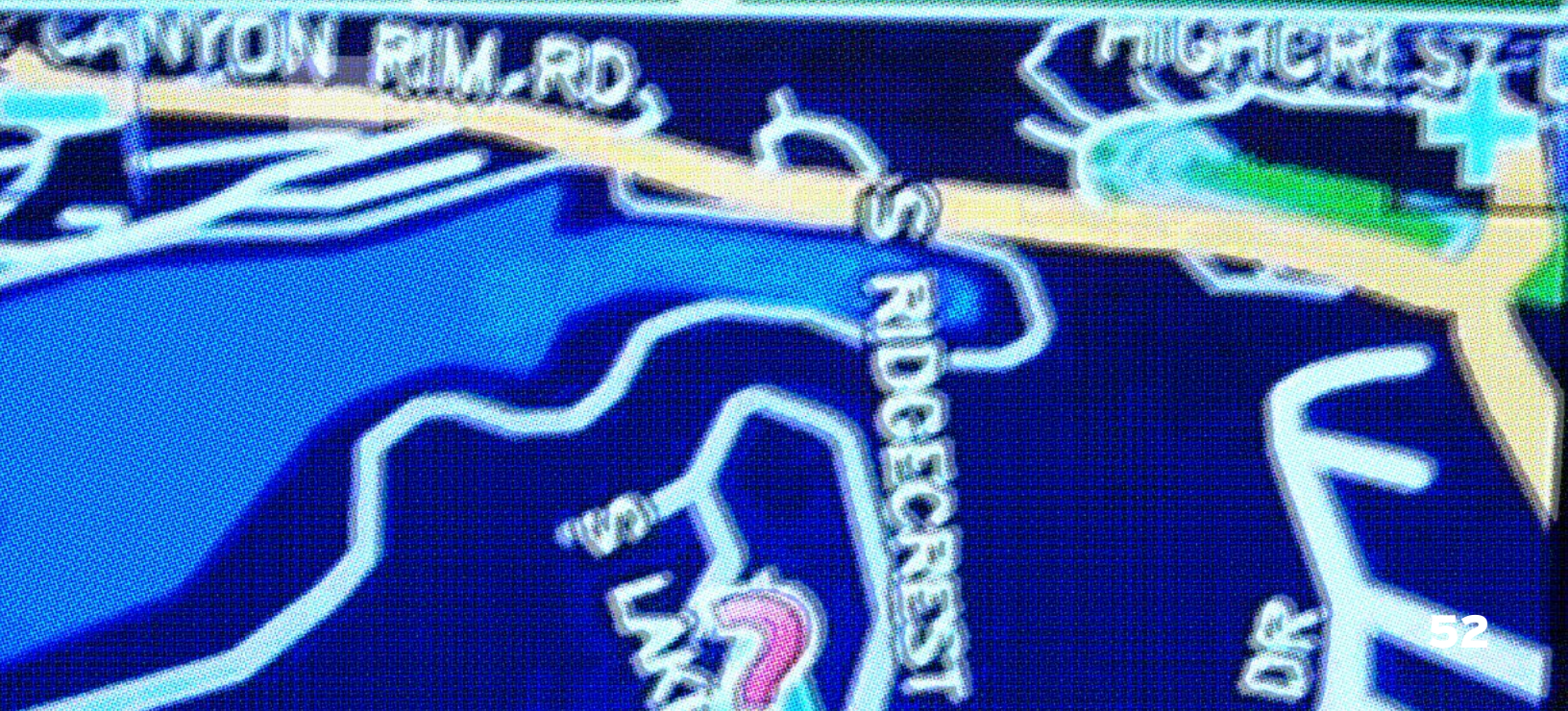
Syd

An angel pulls up to this randomest gravel lot
Gets out her car
She is lost

She has a GPS, she says, but it is so hard to follow
Do you want to look at a map?
I ask



Acquiring Satellites



Oh please, and we hold the atlas under the raindrops

As they gently point the way down





I dig myself home

Glyphed in the muddy language of your coming death

Your death that has come

Your death I spit tear drops of

They vein along cedar roots swollen with your afterlife

And still the rain falls

Kissed

Kissed

Kissed until I am saturated with kiss

And the kissing sifts straight through me.

icarus' second flight

the first time,
heat looked a lot like love.
i only knew love
as something that left a mark.

still,
what a joy
to call something mine.

they filled the coliseum.
thousands.
watching the climb,
giddy for the fall.

flames make great theater.

after the ash settled,
i built again.
not out of hope,
muscle memory.

ascent is a hard habit to kill.

this time,
slower.
smarter.

less watched.
no one cheers
for the careful.

i landed.
aching to remember
what the sun used to feel like.

not the heat,
just the way it reached for me.



icarus' second flight

Nae



Resources

These resources were collected in collaboration with the Digital Security Collective (DSC), a network of 15 frontline digital security organizations dedicated to supporting movements in the United States as they navigate complex technological changes. The DSC delivers hands-on technical support, manages rapid-response grantmaking, and provides field leadership on emerging best practices for over 1,000 civil society organizations annually.

Get in touch with DSC:

<https://www.digitalsecuritycollective.org>

Tools to rage quit

Social Media Breakup Coordinator

Caroline Sindors

<https://carolinesindors.com/social-media-break-up-coordinator/>

Big Ass Data Broker Opt Out List

Yael Grauer

<https://github.com/yaelwrites/Big-Ass-Data-Broker-Opt-Out-List>

Luddite Lab Workers' Resource Hub

DAIR

<https://dair-institute.org/projects/luddite-lab/>

Digital ID or Democracy?

Collaborative Research Center for Resilience (CRCR)

<https://thecrcr.org/wp-content/uploads/Digital-Identity-or-Democracy-An-Advocates-Introduction-v-1.1.pdf>

Tools for cleaning up your digital room

Online Privacy Checklist

Digital Defense Fund (DDF)

<https://digitaldefensefund.org/ddf-guides/online-privacy-checklist>

Password Manager Implementation Guide

Digital Defense Fund (DDF)

<https://digitaldefensefund.org/ddf-guides/password-manager-implementation>

Digital Detox

Tactical Tech

<https://datadetoxkit.org/en/privacy/search/>

What's in Your Classroom?

The CRCR

<https://thecrcr.org/public-infrastructure-technology-and-democracy/#edtech>

Tools for groups

Threat Modeling Guide

Digital Defense Fund (DDF)

<https://digitaldefensefund.org/learn/threat-modeling>

Network Centric Resources

FabRiders

<https://www.fabriders.net/network-centric/>

Foundations of Organizational Digital Security

Digital Defense Fund (DDF)

<https://digitaldefensefund.org/ddf-guides/foundations-of-organizational-digital-security>

Data Playbook Toolkit

IFRC

<https://preparecenter.org/toolkit/data-playbook-toolkit-v1/>

Tools for grief and reconnecting

The Exodus Tour: Workshops on Digital Marronage

cOdeswitch

<https://www.cOdeswitch.org/exodustour/>

Cooking Up Code

Logic(s)

<https://logicmag.io/supa-dupa-skies/cooking-up-code/>