THE GLITCH IS THE MACHINE:

TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION AND IDENTITY IN

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ROWAN BLACK

A dissertation submitted to the

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ABSTRACT

THE GLITCH IS THE MACHINE

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The Glitch Is the Machine examines the intersections of identity, technology, and authorship through the fragmented literary archive of Rowan Black, a composite author whose collected works explore the ways digital mediation disrupts and reshapes selfhood. The project operates as both a creative and critical inquiry, engaging with existentialist philosophy, postmodern theory, media theory, and digital culture studies to interrogate the instability of identity in a hyper-connected world.

Through a curated selection of poems, essays, digital artifacts, and annotated fragments—many framed as found texts—the dissertation constructs a meta-archive that blurs the boundaries between fiction and scholarship, challenging traditional notions of authorship, authenticity, and permanence. Rowan Black is neither wholly fictional nor entirely real; he is an emergent figure shaped by archival instability, media saturation, and algorithmic presence. His work—recovered, reconstructed, and interpreted by the fictional Corvids Collective—reflects the tension between digital ephemerality and the persistent human need to narrativize experience.

The dissertation is structured into four sections:

- Introduction: Establishes the theoretical foundation, tracing the evolution of identity in digital spaces and positioning Rowan Black within the traditions of postmodern literature, media theory, and experimental authorship.
- The Collected Works of Rowan Black: A creative-critical archive of Black's fragmented writings, presented as a curated assemblage of texts, marginalia, and digital remnants, annotated by the Corvids Collective.
- Personal Reflection: A metatextual examination of the author's own role in constructing and interpreting Black's archive, questioning the boundaries between creator, subject, and critic.
- Critical Analysis: Engages with existentialism, postmodern theory, and digital culture studies to examine the implications of Rowan Black's work, focusing on

technological mediation, archival instability, and the commodification of selfhood.

Ultimately, *The Glitch Is the Machine* argues that Rowan Black is not simply an individual but an evolving cultural construct—a ghost in the machine of digital authorship. His archive, unstable by design, mirrors the fragmented and transitory nature of identity in the 21st century. Rather than presenting a fixed theory of selfhood, the dissertation embraces an open-ended meditation on what it means to exist—and to be remembered—in a world increasingly mediated by technology.

DEDICATION

To Lauren

ifly

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Outsider's case against society is very clear. All men and women have these dangerous, unnamable impulses, yet they keep up a pretense, to themselves, to others; their respectability, their philosophy, their religion, are all attempts to gloss over, to make look civilized and rational something that is savage, unorganized, irrational. He is an Outsider because he stands for Truth.
\- Colin Wilson

‡

Concentrate on what you want to say to yourself and your friends. Follow your inner moonlight; don't hide the madness.
\- Allen Ginsberg

‡

I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion.
\- Jack Kerouac

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Introduction

In the early stages of the DLitt program, I could not have predicted the direction my dissertation would take. In one of those initial weeks of the Introduction to Arts and Letters class, the notion of identity as an idea to interrogate, not merely to define, was introduced. I believe it was Prof. Golden's visit. In discussing the work of Natan Sharansky, we were asked to consider identity not as a static entity but as a dynamic construct: shaped, fragmented, and reassembled by forces both within and outside ourselves. This theoretical framing set something in motion within me, though at the time, I couldn't see its destination. What does identity mean? Who determines it? Why does it matter?

These questions followed me incessantly, echoing through my daily life, trailing me at work, at home, and creeping into the margins of my writing notes for other ideas. Those early reflections were chaotic, scattered across the pages of my Remarkable digital tablet in fragments that seemed to resist cohesion. The phrase "culture of identity" emerged—a clumsy attempt to name my fascination with the interplay between how we perceive ourselves and how society perceives us. This was not just an abstract curiosity but a lived tension I felt daily. Theoretical works like *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* exposed me to perspectives I hadn't fully considered, even as they frustrated me with their oversimplifications. I consumed texts voraciously, seeking something concrete to anchor my ideas. Yet, as much as I read, I found myself stuck in a whirlwind of contradictions and possibilities.

During this time, I clung to a vague sense of direction. I remember saying to my wife, "My dissertation is about identity," though I had no clear framework to justify that

claim. The coursework phase of the program allowed me to experiment, particularly with writing in various creative forms. Memoir writing emerged as a strength—a genre where my introspections felt most at home. The idea of my first attempt at a dissertation, *The Surface is Everything,* took shape: a collection of memoir pieces interwoven with essays exploring privilege, addiction, recovery, and other personal themes.

But as I began drafting, I encountered an unexpected impasse. The collision of personal narrative and analytical essay created friction, rather than harmony. My memoir pieces were vivid and raw, but they resisted being molded into evidence for abstract arguments. Conversely, the essays felt disembodied, unmoored from the emotional weight I wanted them to carry. Each form undermined the other, and no matter how I revised, they refused to coexist. I was beyond frustrated, and at times, the idea of abandoning the program entirely seemed less daunting than continuing down this dead-end path.

It was my First Reader, Dr. Laura Winters, who provided the clarity I couldn't find on my own. She urged me to rethink my approach, to strip away what wasn't working and focus on what was essential. The question, "What is my dissertation really about?" loomed large. In peeling back the layers of my initial idea, I realized my fascination with identity was not theoretical—it was deeply personal. I was not trying to define identity for others; I was trying to understand my own.

With this realization, I turned to philosophy, seeking to ground my exploration of identity in a more existential framework. For weeks, I immersed myself in the works of thinkers who had long intrigued me—Nietzsche, Camus, and even George Carlin, whose incisive humor often carried more philosophical weight than traditional texts. This effort

culminated in *Dispatches from the American Circus*, a sprawling, incoherent

philosophical treatise—an ambitious but ultimately flawed attempt to articulate a unified

theory of identity, which I called "praxism." Though the project failed in its execution

(for a number of reasons), it clarified what I had been circling around: identity is not a

singular answer but a series of questions, endlessly evolving.

In the midst of this struggle, a friend suggested I read Colin Wilson's *The*

Outsider. At first, I approached the book skeptically, assuming it would add little to the

pile of texts I'd already consumed. Instead, it unlocked something in me. Wilson's

concept of the outsider—someone who exists on the fringes, simultaneously alienated

from and attuned to society—resonated on a deeply personal level. For Wilson, the

outsider is not merely a figure of despair but of potential, uniquely positioned to critique

and observe the world. This reframing felt like a lifeline. My own sense of outsiderness

became a lens through which to explore identity in a way that felt both authentic and

liberating.

This shift brought me back to my roots as a poet. I revisited the handwritten

notebooks of my youth, filled with unedited, Kerouac-inspired bursts of raw expression.

These early poems captured the essence of outsiderness—not as exclusion but as

observation, as a vantage point from which to question the world. I began writing poetry

again, this time with a clarity of purpose that had eluded me in my earlier drafts.

And then came Rowan Black. He was not born of a deliberate act of creation but

emerged organically, an extension of the questions I was asking. Rowan began as a

shadow, a figure who existed on the edges of reality, unburdened by the weight of my

personal history. He was, by design, incomplete—a lens rather than a fully formed

character. In Rowan, I found a way to step outside myself, to observe the world through a perspective that was both mine and not mine.

Rowan's identity was deliberately constrained. He was younger than me, male, and white—choices rooted in my desire to avoid overreach and to focus on what I could write authentically. He was not meant to carry the weight of a novel or a complete backstory; instead, he served as a vehicle for exploration. Through Rowan, I could ask the questions I had struggled to articulate: What does it mean to be an outsider? How does identity shift when viewed from the periphery rather than the center?

Rowan Black became more than a shadow or a lens—he became a process. Through him, I explored not just the fractures of identity but the ways we piece ourselves together in the face of those fractures. His poetry reflects a world where permanence is an illusion, where digital systems promise connection but deliver fragmentation, and where the self is a mosaic of moments, memories, and mediated reflections.

In works like "Field Notes" and "The Night We Delete Our Maps," Rowan's voice captures the dissonance of living in a world that is simultaneously hyper-connected and profoundly isolating. His recurring motifs of signals, static, and erasure speak to a longing for clarity in a landscape defined by noise. Yet Rowan never resolves these tensions—his poetry resists closure, embracing instead the fluidity and uncertainty that define identity in the digital age.

As Rowan's creator, I see now that his questions are my own, refracted through the prism of poetic expression. But they are also universal. What does it mean to be seen, to be known, in a world that commodifies our every gesture? How do we navigate the

spaces between connection and alienation, authenticity and performance? And what remains of us in the fragments we leave behind?

Rowan Black may never offer answers, but in his searching, he reminds us of the power of asking. Through him, I have found not resolution but resonance, not clarity but connection. And perhaps that is the most authentic expression of identity I could hope to achieve.

<u>**A Letter from the Corvids Collective**</u>

To those who have found their way here,

Rowan Black never assembled his work into a single, definitive volume. He never sought to. His writing was not composed for a fixed audience or bound to a single medium. Some of his words appeared in literary journals, though often in places that have since disappeared. Others were published in the unsteady, ephemeral spaces of the internet—buried in abandoned forums, scattered across obscure message boards, archived in databases no one was meant to find. But much of his work was never published at all. It was found.

A poem scribbled onto the back of a receipt. A draft recovered from a failing hard drive. A note, never sent, tucked between the pages of a library book in Greenwich Village.

The Corvids Collective did not set out to become archivists. There was no formal beginning, no stated objective—only a growing recognition that Rowan Black's work, fragmented as it was, needed to be gathered before it was lost entirely. We came together organically, through shared discoveries, through chance encounters with texts that had slipped outside the usual boundaries of preservation.

What you hold now is not a complete collection. It is not an attempt to define Rowan Black's legacy, nor to arrange his writing into something as artificial as a final form. It is, instead, an archive in motion—an ongoing effort to document, to annotate, to hold something together that resists containment.

The Structure of the Archive

This volume has been arranged chronologically, not thematically. This is deliberate. To impose an external order on Rowan Black's work would be to misunderstand its nature. His writing was a living thing, evolving in real time, moving in patterns that often seemed recursive—ideas resurfacing years later, refracted through new experience, shaped by new contexts.

We begin with his earliest known works, dating from the years 2001–2005. These are raw, immediate pieces—sometimes unfinished, sometimes written in the unfiltered language of adolescence. *TOWERS*, written in response to 9/11, captures the moment

through a teenage lens: not yet concerned with historical framing, only with the surreal horror of watching the world tilt sideways. Other works, such as *proto_manifesto_v2.docx*, show the beginnings of a preoccupation that would follow him through the years—the realization that technology was not just a tool, but an environment, shaping the way we experience time, memory, and identity.

As his work progresses into the late 2000s, a shift occurs. The themes remain, but the form sharpens. *Iron Confessional: A Triptych*, written in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse, maps systemic failure onto personal experience, threading economic instability through the intimate spaces of daily life. In *Hymn to the Algorithm*, we see an increasing awareness of the ways in which digital systems are not neutral—they shape, they categorize, they prescribe.

His later work, spanning from 2012 to the present, is more precise in its dissection of modern anxieties. *Like My Performance (Please Like My Performance)* is a study in digital selfhood, in the way identity becomes both currency and performance in online spaces. *The Hours We Cannot Name* turns its gaze to time itself, to the ways in which technological acceleration has warped our perception of past, present, and future.

And then there are the fragments. These are not secondary works. They are integral to this collection. Some were found in physical form—a letter left in a cafe, handwritten notes slipped inside the pages of used books. Others existed only digitally, extracted from decaying files, their data partially corrupted. Each fragment is presented with as much context as we could determine—when and where it was found, any visible annotations or edits, any connections to other known works. Some of these pieces may have been abandoned by their author, never meant for recovery. But once a text is written, it begins to exist independently of intent.

On Annotation and Interpretation

We should clarify the role we have taken in this collection. We are not literary critics. We do not attempt to analyze Rowan Black's work, nor do we speculate on meaning. The act of preservation is different from the act of interpretation.
Our annotations serve three primary functions:

1. *Documentation* – Providing factual details on the origins of a piece, including its date, known publication history (if any), and the circumstances of its discovery.
2. *Cross-Referencing* – Identifying where certain phrases, themes, or images appear elsewhere in Black's work. His writing was recursive, self-referential; ideas often resurfaced years apart in altered forms.
3. *Historical Context* – Offering relevant background where necessary. Certain works—particularly those responding to contemporary events—may benefit from minimal clarification, especially where digital history is concerned. However, we have been careful not to impose external readings.

What we do not do is editorialize. Rowan Black's work does not require explanation. His writing is often layered, sometimes deliberately opaque, but it is never inaccessible to those willing to engage with it on its own terms.

This is not a completed project. It cannot be.

We suspect there are more pieces still out there. A missing notebook, a hard drive stored in a box somewhere, a handwritten page left behind in a library yet to be found. Rowan Black did not write for a single audience, nor for a fixed future. His work has always existed in motion, and so must its preservation. If you have come across a piece of his writing in the world—if you have held in your hands a note, a page, a file that does not appear in this collection—we ask only that you consider its place in the archive.

This collection will never be definitive, nor should it be. What we present here is a record of what has been found, gathered with care, preserved without interference. It is, like Black's work itself, an unfinished thing.

And so we leave it in your hands.

With careful attention to the details,
The Corvids Collective
Princeton, NJ
May 17th, 2025

P.S. If you should discover any additional fragments of Rowan's work, you know where to find us.

**Teenage Years
(2001–2005)**

TOWERS

mrs walker talking about algebra when
jason kicks my chair & points at
karen crying in the hallway holding
a walkman radio[1]   to her ear
something about a plane &
new york &   accident? &
karen's cousin works in

principal's voice   crackling through speakers
telling teachers to turn on TVs &
suddenly math doesn't matter because
sky is too blue on screen &
smoke climbing like black snakes &
newscaster's voice breaking like
chalk when second plane hits &
(not accident   not accident)

WHO DID THIS   WHO DID
(shut up shut up the tv won't   shut up)

watching it again &   again &   again &
smoking tower   smoking tower   smoking
plane disappears into building like magic   but
bad magic   wrong magic   black magic

between classes everyone running to
different rooms with TVs like maybe
different channels will show
                              different truth[2]

jenny martinez puked in homeroom &
mr collins just stared at the wall &
someone laughed but then stopped &

BREAKING NEWS   BREAKING NEWS   BREAKING
everything is breaking

---

[1] Walkman radios were portable cassette or AM/FM radio players, common in the 1980s and 1990s. By
2001, they had largely been replaced by CD players and early MP3 players, but some were still used for
news updates, especially in emergencies.

[2] Many schools turned on televisions in classrooms on September 11, 2001, broadcasting live news
coverage. Major news networks (CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox News) all aired footage continuously.

mrs peterson calling our classroom
voice shaking like   earthquakes says
pentagon hit   pentagon hit &
what's happening[3]   what's

second tower falling during history class[4] &
TIME   SLOWS   DOWN

people falling but don't look   don't
look but I   looked &
(can't unwatched it now)

dust clouds eating people on tv
dust clouds eating buildings
dust clouds eating new york &
here in ohio the sky is so blue it hurts

someone whispers about pennsylvania
plane crash & plane crash & plane crash
how many planes today   how many
are still up there   still

principal says stay calm but his voice
sounds like   static   sounds like
sirens sounds like everything breaking
EVERYTHING   IS   BREAKING

first tower won't stop burning &
burning & burning &
mrs walker crying now too &
everything   burning

want to call mom but phones don't work
circuits busy circuits busy[5]
everyone trying to reach
someone   somewhere

---

[3] At 9:37 AM EDT, American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. News of this attack spread rapidly but was briefly overshadowed by events in New York.

[4] The South Tower (2 WTC) collapsed at 9:59 AM EDT after burning for 56 minutes following the impact of United Airlines Flight 175.

[5] Due to high call volume, the U.S. phone system experienced widespread congestion on 9/11. Many people were unable to reach loved ones, especially in and around New York.

counting seconds between
heartbeats because numbers
should still work should still
mean something but

snow in september but not snow[6]
ash papers fragments falling
(on tv not here   not here but
                        feels here feels)

tommy says we should bomb them but
who is them & where is them &
why is them & the questions taste like
ashes in my mouth

first tower falls between periods[7] &
library frozen &
TV flickering too loud &
someone whispers oh my god &
no one turns the page

mom comes to get me early like
half the school parents   running
through halls like ghosts like
someone's chasing them

car ride home radio all static &
mom's hands shaking on wheel &
everything feels wrong like
world tilted   sideways

dad comes home weird tie crooked
hair messy speaking words that don't
connect like puzzle pieces scattered like
(everything   scattered)

DEVELOPING STORY DEVELOPING
but nothing develops just same

---

[6] The falling "snow" refers to the ash, dust, and debris that blanketed Lower Manhattan following the collapse of the Twin Towers. This material included paper, glass, and building materials.

[7] The North Tower (1 WTC) collapsed at 10:28 AM EDT after burning for 102 minutes following the impact of American Airlines Flight 11.

footage loop loop loop loop &
        loop & loop & my head won't

tonight's homework canceled because
how do you subtract when
everything's already been
taken away

sprinklers still tick tick ticking &
grass still growing & sun still
setting like it doesn't know   like
it doesn't care   like

static growing louder in my head like
tv snow like radio fuzz like
space between stations   between
thoughts between breathsbetweenwords

in my head the towers fall &
        fall & fall & fall &
never stop falling &
we never stop   watching &

tomorrow feels like lying   feels like
something we tell ourselves when
today won't end   today won't

proto_manifesto_v2.docx

1.

my computer makes these sounds at 3AM
like it's trying to tell me something
important
about how lonely satellites must be
always orbiting
never touching
just like us in the suburbs

sometimes i think the dial-up noise[8]
is actually the sound of machines
trying to remember how to cry

2.

in the mall food court everyone's face
is lit up blue from their nokia screens
like they're drowning in digital oceans

s
i
n
k
i
n
g

slower than the loading bar
on my gateway
2k[9]
when i try to download
happiness.exe[10]
[file not found]

---

[8] *Dial-up noise* refers to the screeching sound modems made when connecting to the internet via a phone line. Dial-up was the primary way households accessed the internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

[9] Gateway 2000 was a major computer manufacturer in the 1990s and early 2000s, recognizable for its black-and-white cow-print branding.

[10] A fictional program name mimicking executable files (.exe) in Windows. The "file not found" error references missing or corrupted files in a computer system.

3.

dear AIM buddy list[11]:
i am always "away"
even when i'm here
because here isn't
anywhere anymore
status: contemplating how
the Best Buy sign
looks like god's
blue tears at 2AM
when ohio feels
like a loading screen
that never finishes

4.

hey mrs henderson:
sorry this isn't a normal poem
with trees and flowers and stuff
but have you noticed how
the computer lab feels more alive
than the actual world sometimes?
like maybe we're all just
background processes
running in the suburbs
waiting for something
to ctrl+alt+delete[12] us
into real life

5.

my friend marcus says
this is just teen angst
but i think it's more like
system32.dll[13] is corrupted
and nobody knows how to
fix what's breaking
inside the machine

---

[11] A popular messaging platform in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Users could set an "away message" to indicate they weren't at their computer, often leaving cryptic or dramatic updates.

[12] A keyboard command in Windows that brings up the Task Manager, often used to restart or shut down unresponsive programs. Here, it implies wanting to reset reality.

[13] A critical Windows system file. If corrupted or deleted, the operating system may become unstable or fail to boot.

inside my head
inside america

    6.

every night i watch
the cursor blink
like a digital heartbeat
wondering if computers
dream of electric kids[14]
sitting in dark rooms
trying to write their way
out of suburban firewalls

    7.

mom keeps asking why
i can't write "normal" things
like the other kids
but normal broke
when the millennium bug[15]
didn't end the world
and we all had to keep
pretending everything
was still working

    8.

this is what it feels like:
static in my veins
code in my dreams
error messages
where my thoughts
should be
and maybe that's okay
maybe we're all just
learning to speak
in ones and zeros
because human languages
can't contain what it means
to grow up digital

---

[14] Direct reference to *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?"* — a 1968 novel by Philip K. Dick, later adapted into the movie *Blade Runner*. The reference implies a parallel between computers and disaffected teenagers.

[15] Millennium Bug (Y2K)—A widespread fear that older computer systems would fail when the year changed from 1999 to 2000. When it passed without major incident, some saw it as an anticlimax.

9.
so yeah this is why
i write like this
all fragmented and weird
because that's how
the world comes in now:
through screens
through wires
through the gaps
between real
and virtual

10.
p.s. to whoever finds this
on the school network:
please don't tell
mrs henderson
that instead of
analyzing poetry
i've been trying
to debug my soul

[END OF FILE]
[Last modified: 08/15/2001 2:37 AM]
[File size: 2.3 KB]

Field Notes

OBSERVATION SET ONE: FRAGILE STATES
mind like late-night radio waves[16]:
picking up signals it shouldn't
catching fragments of truth
translating static into prophecy

and so: existing
knowing
always knowing
(the curse of permanent awareness)[17]

used to believe in temporary fixes:
sleep between frequencies
dreams in dead spaces
chemical alterations of consciousness
but even oblivion expires

no other solutions found
between empty bottles and
emptier prayers[18]
(file under: stories that haunt)

OBSERVATION SET TWO: GHOST FREQUENCIES
time passes through:
empty rooms
vacant lots
dead malls[19]
spaces between streetlights
where memory fails
but guilt persists
(thought it was harmless)
(nothing ever is)

---

[16] AM radio signals travel farther at night due to atmospheric conditions, sometimes picking up stations from hundreds of miles away. This makes them an apt metaphor for intrusive thoughts or unintended connections.

[17] Likely refers to an overactive mind, a common theme in Black's work. Similar phrasing appears in *The Hours We Cannot Name* (2021).

[18] Possible reference to substance use as a coping mechanism. Later works like *Casual Arson* (2011) engage more explicitly with self-destruction.

[19] A term for abandoned or declining shopping malls, particularly in the U.S. due to the rise of e-commerce. The decline of malls is a recurring image in Black's work, appearing in *The Cartography of Losing Ourselves* (2011).

echoes bounce between:
moments I half-remember
places I never fully inhabited
happiness viewed through
rain-streaked windows at midnight
while signals fade to nothing

OBSERVATION SET THREE: LIMINAL STATES
when normalcy feels like science fiction
and mediocrity feels like salvation
something always breaks through—
ruins the careful architecture of coping

two years of:
blank spaces
white noise
dead air
failed transmissions
back in the same empty parking lot
where freedom meant:
chemical forgetting
borrowed oblivion
temporary grace
(nothing lasted)
(nothing ever does)

OBSERVATION SET FOUR: LOST STATIONS
what remains when everything circles back?
pulling meaning from:
empty air
dead frequencies[20]
static between stations
midnight confessions
to disconnected payphones[21]

no profound revelations here
just the same thoughts

---

[20] Refers to radio frequencies that no longer carry a signal, metaphorically representing forgotten places or people.
[21] By the early 2000s, payphones were rapidly disappearing due to cell phones. A disconnected payphone symbolizes a lost means of communication.

cycling through
until even certainty
starts to fade

watching from above:
past bleeds into present
future dissolves into static
time loses meaning
in the spaces between
what was
what is
what never will be

OBSERVATION SET FIVE: DECAY PATTERNS
mapping the geography of loss:
each missed connection
each failed attempt
each moment of almost
creates new topographies of regret

standing at intersections where:
light meets dark
noise meets silence
memory meets forgetting
(Frost would probably have opinions)[22]
(Frost can fuck off)

immobilized by:
fear wrapped in static
rage dressed as silence
jealousy masked as indifference
while overhead:
stars fade
signals die
time passes
nothing changes

---

[22] A sarcastic nod to poet Robert Frost, known for "The Road Not Taken." The phrase suggests disdain for neat literary conclusions.

#Saints

(documented under fluorescent prophecies)

PART_01: THE CONGREGATION

we drove circles through dead streets[23]—
half-asleep
half-screaming
half something else
(never could get the math right
never needed to)

PART_02: WORSHIP

every night: new sermons delivered from:
- car windows into empty air
- basement corners to broken ceiling tiles
- parking lot prayers to chain-link congregation[24]

confessions muttered into:
shirt sleeves
steering wheels
midnight air
nowhere in particular
(no one listening)
(no one needed to)

PART_03: SANCTIFICATION

we made ourselves holy through:
speed & noise & nothingness[25]
blessed by:
streetlights & cigarette smoke &
the desperate need to be
something more than suburban decay

---

[23] A recurring image in Black's work, referencing empty suburban roads at night. Similar themes appear in *Late Night Notes on Nothing in Particular* (2003).

[24] he imagery of a congregation suggests that parking lots and abandoned places became makeshift sanctuaries for Black and his peers. This echoes themes of misplaced spirituality, as seen in *Iron Confessional: A Triptych* (2009).

[25] Possible references to reckless driving ("speed"), loud music or urban chaos ("noise"), and existential detachment ("nothingness"). Black frequently links motion and destruction, as seen in *Beating and Bare* (2018).

PART_04: HAUNTING

theory: we were already ghosts
before we knew what that meant
proof: the way light passed through us
how nothing felt real past 2AM
the empty spaces we left behind

PART_05: REMEMBRANCE

I see us sometimes through:
summer haze
memory
darkness
burning too bright for
a town that never learned
how to shine

# # # # # # #

(they tell me these mark sacred things now[26]
like modern day crosses
so here: seven of them
one for each deadly sin
we made holy)

---

[26] The use of the hashtag (#) could reference the internet's transformation of symbols into meaning. Seven hashtags may correspond to the seven deadly sins, a contrast between modern and ancient forms of marking significance.

Late Night Notes on Nothing in Particular
(written during insomnia, watching shadows move)

Night feels different when you're the only one awake. Suburbs get weird after 3AM - everything too quiet but also too loud somehow. The humming from the power lines sounds like voices. [27] The gaps between streetlights feel like they mean something.

Mrs. XXXXXX says I need to write about "real things." Nature. Emotions. Whatever. But real isn't what it used to be. Real is:
- empty parking lots at midnight
- the way Circuit City's windows reflect moonlight[28]
- how silence changes when the power goes out
- what happens in the spaces between AM stations[29]

Notes keep piling up under my bed. Mom "organizes" my room, throws away anything too dark. Says she's worried. But she doesn't get it - none of this is dark. It's just what happens when you pay attention.

Sometimes I try writing like those Beat poets I found in the library's forgotten corners - Ginsberg's cosmic consciousness[30] stuff but filtered through CPU architecture. Or I'll attempt Pynchon's paranoid systems theory but end up with fragments about how instant messaging is actually a form of technological glossolalia[31] (look it up).

OBSERVATION LOG:
1. THE QUIET SPOTS
    Found places where sound doesn't work right:
    - behind the abandoned Blockbuster[32]
    - under the train bridge at dawn
    - that corner of the library nobody visits
    - the middle of empty baseball fields at night
    - anywhere during power outages

---

[27] Electrical power lines emit a low-frequency hum due to electromagnetic vibrations. The idea of hearing voices in them reflects both insomnia and an overactive imagination.

[28] Circuit City was a major electronics retailer that went bankrupt in 2008. The reference places this note in the early 2000s, when many locations were still open.

[29] AM radio, especially at night, can have long stretches of static between stations. Black later expands on radio as a metaphor for lost or fragmented communication in *Ghost Frequencies* (2015).

[30] A reference to Beat poet Allen Ginsberg's stream-of-consciousness style, juxtaposed with computer logic.

[31] Glossolalia, or "speaking in tongues," is often associated with religious trance states. Black compares instant messaging (AIM, MSN Messenger) to an incomprehensible, disembodied language.

[32] Blockbuster was a video rental chain that declined in the late 2000s due to digital streaming. Black uses dead retail spaces as markers of economic and cultural shifts.

2. THE GAPS
   Things nobody else notices:
   - dead air between radio stations
   - spaces between fence posts
   - missing seconds between traffic light changes
   - whatever lives in defunct payphones[33]
   - the nothing that fills empty stores

3. THE CHANGES
   Everything's shifting when we're not looking:
   Malls dying
   Phone booths vanishing
   New towers rising
   Screens everywhere
   (nobody else seems concerned about this)

4. THE CONSTANTS
   Some things stay:
   Stars
   Crickets
   Power line hum
   Distant trains
   The way night feels endless at fifteen

5. QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS
   - Why do dead stores still glow?[34]
   - Where do radio signals really go?
   - What happens to lost satellite broadcasts?
   - Who remembers old frequencies?
   - How many empty spaces until everything's empty?

I know this isn't normal poetry. But normal stopped making sense somewhere between midnight and dawn. This is just how my brain works now. Everything's connected butn othing touches. Like those weird quantum physics books in the library - everything's both there and not there at the same time.

---

[33] By the early 2000s, payphones were disappearing. This line suggests something haunting or unknowable lingering in their absence.

[34] Many abandoned stores leave their signage illuminated long after closing. The eerie persistence of artificial light is a recurring image in Black's later works.

Fragment: Annotated CD Tracklist, Found in a copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Princeton Public Library, NJ (2005/2010)[35]

SONGS FOR CITIES THAT DON'T EXIST YET

[On the inside cover:]

> Summer - 2005
> *Don't shuffle. It only makes sense this way.*
> *If you find this, it was meant for you.*

1. *Flim* – Aphex Twin
2. *Svefn-g-englar* – Sigur Rós
3. *This Place Is a Prison* – The Postal Service
4. *Teardrop* – Massive Attack
5. *Something About Us* – Daft Punk
6. *Eye in the Sky* – The Alan Parsons Project
7. *3 Libras* – A Perfect Circle
8. *Maps* – Yeah Yeah Yeahs
9. *Somebody That I Used to Know* – Elliott Smith
10. *Float On* – Modest Mouse
11. *B.O.B.* – OutKast
12. *Aerials* – System of a Down
13. *Roads* – Portishead
14. *Munich* – Editors
15. *The Day the World Went Away* – Nine Inch Nails
16. *How to Disappear Completely* – Radiohead
17. *All Is Full of Love* – Björk
18. *From the Morning* – Nick Drake

[Back of the CD case, scribbled in fading ink:]

> You can't fast-forward real life. I tried.

---

[35] The document's own annotations indicate production in 2005. However, as the item was not found until 2010, both dates are included. Further information about each song is available in *Appendix A*.

Early Career
(2006–2011)

Page torn from spiral notebook, coffee-stained (2006)
(*found between CD cases of Radiohead's OK Computer and Nine Inch Nails' The Fragile*)

Is Napster stealing?

Mom says yes. Everything has a price. But what about the air we breathe? What about ideas?

OK fine. It's stealing. I'll admit that. But maybe stealing isn't always wrong?

Like Robin Hood maybe. These record execs living in mansions while kids at school can't afford to buy albums. They already have more money than anyone needs. More than they could spend in 100 lifetimes.

When I download Metallica I'm not stealing from Lars[36]. I'm liberating data. Breaking down the walls between art and people.

The internet is like... a giant library. But instead of just books it's EVERYTHING. Music and movies and ideas all floating in the digital ether, waiting to be grabbed. They want to lock it all up behind plastic cases and price tags[37].

Music should be FREE. Ideas should be FREE.

But what about smaller bands? The ones barely making rent? That's different. They're not the enemy. They're like us - trying to make something real in a world of plastic.

Maybe that's the answer:
- Steal from the rich (major labels, huge bands)
- Support the poor (indie bands, garage bands)
- Destroy the system that puts price tags on art[38]

The suits say we're killing music. But we're just killing their control over it. Music survived before record labels. It'll survive after.

Time to download that new Tool album. Sorry Maynard[39].

---

[36] Lars Ulrich, drummer for Metallica, was one of the most vocal critics of Napster, leading the band's lawsuit against the service in 2000.

[37] A reference to CD packaging and the high cost of albums at the time, which ranged from $15–20, making music less accessible to teenagers.

[38] Anarchist and anti-capitalist rhetoric around intellectual property, echoing broader debates in hacker culture and free software movements.

[39] Maynard James Keenan, lead singer of Tool, whose band resisted digital sales for years, keeping their music off streaming services until 2019.

Fragment: Found in the Hudson Park Library, Greenwich Village, NY (2007)

Been thinking about gods lately. Not in the religious way exactly. More like… what we bow to now. There's something here about consumption and worship but it's not that simple. Not just "capitalism bad" – though yeah, obviously. But something deeper about how we construct divinity and then just… throw it away?

Watching people at the Apple store yesterday. The way they touched the devices. Gentle. Reverent almost. Like ancient peoples might have touched sacred objects[40]. But we're designed to abandon these things. Built to need the next version.

[coffee ring stain]

Baudrillard[41] would probably have something insufferable to say about this. But he'd also probably be right.

Need to explore:
- how worship changes shape but not function?
- connection between planned obsolescence and faith?
- something about digital cargo cults maybe[42]?
- landfills as future sacred sites??? (too on nose?)

[later, different pen]

Sitting here watching people pray to ATMs. That's not quite right but it FEELS right. The posture. The hope. The disappointment. The way they walk away changed.

What does it mean that our gods have customer service numbers?

[margin note: look up that thing about Romans adopting/ abandoning gods]

---

[40] Apple product launches, particularly in the early 2000s, were known for their cult-like enthusiasm, with people camping outside stores and treating new releases with ritualistic devotion.

[41] Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), French philosopher known for his theories on hyperreality and simulacra. His work critiques consumer society and the way representations replace reality. The reference suggests Rowan Black was considering Baudrillard's ideas on consumerism and media. Black references Baudrillard's work multiple times in the collection.

[42] Cargo cults were religious movements that emerged in the Pacific Islands, where indigenous groups ritually imitated Western technology in hopes of summoning material goods. Black draws a parallel to modern consumerism, where people anticipate and ritualize the arrival of new technology.

Something here about how disposability becomes sacred. Not just objects but ideas, connections, beliefs. We make gods just to leave them. But why? And what happens to abandoned gods? Do they hang around like spiritual radiation?

[spilled coffee, ink blurred]

Keep coming back to landfills. Mountains we built to house our abandoned faiths. Every broken phone a little fallen angel. Too metaphorical? But there's something there about archaeology and future anthropologists.

Brief thought: we didn't just monetize faith, we made faith disposable. Optional upgrade. Temporary as a software update.

~~Maybe that's what separates us from ancient peoples - not that we worship different things, but that we built obsolescence into our gods from the start.~~

Need to read more about:
- digital temporality
- consumer psychology
- waste management??? (actually though)
- pre-industrial concepts of permanence

Remember to get phone screen fixed. Irony noted.

[hastily written at bottom of page:]

Getting too academic. The real thing is simpler maybe.
Watched a kid cry today when his tablet died.
Modern death of gods = battery percentage?

Subject: Re: Submission Status

Dear Mr. Black,

██████████████ your work ███████ ███████. ████████████████████████ it's not quite ████████ right ████████.

███████ we found ███████ your piece ██████████████████████ does not ████████████████████████ ████████ seem like a ████████. ████████████████████████ poem ████████████ to be published in the future.

Sincerely,
The Editors
██████████████████

Meaning and Other Controlled Substances
(*For the ghosts of empty buildings*)

Cruising down dead boulevards,
where neon burns holes in memory[43]
like cigarettes in yesterday's promises.
The question comes again, persistent
as unpaid bills in the drawer:
What's it all mean, anyway?

Some find it in glass towers,
get high on fluorescent certainties,
while Time ticks away in cubicles,
another echo in the maze of routine.
Others mainline pure emptiness,
shooting up that sweet delusion[44]
where meaning used to live.
(Do it again, baby, one more hit
of that premium-grade nothing)

Here I am, caught in the static,
drinking burnt coffee with Kafka's ghost[45]
at the All-Night Nothing Diner.
He's telling me about freedom—
that undelivered letter
nobody wants to read.

No referee but the broken clocks,
cold as downtown winter,
keeping score in languages
we pretend to understand.
I was raised on analog dreams,
genuflecting to the beat
of someone else's machinery[46]:
Work. Sleep. Consume. Repeat.

Faith hung like a vacant sign
in a storefront window,

---

[43] A recurring image in Black's work, linking artificial light to nostalgia, decay, and modern alienation.

[44] Drug metaphors in Black's work often represent escapism, not literal substance use.

[45] Franz Kafka (1883–1924), a writer known for themes of bureaucracy, alienation, and absurdity.

[46] Echoes Marxist critiques of labor and the alienation of workers from their own lives. Black doesn't explicitly mention Marx in the collection, but makes allusions to socialist thought occasionally.

price tag dangling from truth:
YOUR SOUL OR BEST OFFER.
A street prophet with dog-eared Baudrillard
and coffee-stained manifestos
threw me a lifeline
when I was drowning
in artificial light,
dropping wisdom like spare change:
"They're selling truth in vending machines now,
processed revelations in plastic wrappers.
But never trust a system
till you've seen its shadow."

The question sprawls across city grids,
bleeds through concrete,
stains everything it touches.
No answers in the employee handbook,
just empty maps to places that don't exist
and a bottle of vintage doubt
I've been saving for the revolution.

Found myself in Terminal Bar,
where the regulars genuflect
to bottles like stained glass saints.
A man in a corporate tie
spouts gospel from The Wall Street Journal:
"Listen, the system works—"
so I lay my offerings on the bar:
timecard, keycard, student loans,
my collection of minimum wage paystubs.
"Here's your working man's rosary, brother.
Tell me again how nothing means nothing."
He backs away like I'm contagious,
like doubt might catch in his throat
and choke out all his certainties.

Later, in the digital twilight,
Ginsberg's ghost[47] rides the subway,
howling beat prophecies
beneath the city.
"The streets know," he says,
"but they're not telling."

---

[47] Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997), a Beat poet who critiqued consumerism and conformity.

Dylan's on the fire escape,
cleaning his protest songs,
muttering about truth and urban answers.
The radio catches a signal—
Lou Reed bleeding into Radiohead[48],
time signatures complicated
by original doubt.
The city's rhythm is dealing
some smooth devastation,
while Money changes hands
in the dark corners of existence.

This ain't no straight path.
No clear signs on this map.
Every detour leads to
another existential junction,
(somewhere between now and never)
where philosophers pump wisdom
like vending machine coffee,
and every bathroom mirror
is a dissertation on being and nothingness.

Sartre's teaching survival[49],
showing how to slice through
the sweet meat of certainty.
Kerouac's dealing freedom[50]
like a card shark with worn cards.
Foucault's in the corner,
dismantling meanings[51]
just to show us how they break.

I can't sell you answers
wrapped in tomorrow's headlines.
This is just a dispatch
from the frontlines of the search,

---

[48] A blending of a musician and a band known for countercultural commentary.

[49] Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), existentialist philosopher, focused on radical freedom.

[50] Jack Kerouac (1922–1969), a central figure of the Beat Generation, known for *On the Road* and spontaneous prose that romanticized travel, rebellion, and the search for meaning.

[51] Michel Foucault (1926–1984), a philosopher who explored power structures, discourse, and the fluidity of meaning, often deconstructing accepted truths to reveal their underlying mechanisms.

filed under: URGENT—HANDLE WITH CARE
meaning unstable, reality under revision.

Take this streetmap, friend. The ink's faded but the roads still lead somewhere.
Follow them past the security cameras,
beyond the "No Loitering" signs
where meaning prowls like a stray cat
in the garbage of certainty.

What's it all mean?
No one knows, but maybe it's this:
just keep moving through the dark,
radio tuned to the static between stations,
where sometimes, if you listen close,
you can hear the city
trying to tell us something,
and it sounds almost like jazz.

Casual Arson

We gathered like spectators at an execution,
eyes wide, breath held, warmed by someone else's ending.
The house burned like a signal flare in the dark,
announcing catastrophe to the neighborhood.
The flames licked skyward, hungry,
pulling pieces of a life into the air—
a chair leg, a child's drawing,
someone's wedding dress curling into black lace.

The family stood barefoot on the curb,
wrapped in blankets that couldn't hold back the cold.
The mother's voice cracked as she begged the phone
for a voice that wouldn't come.
The father clutched his knees, rocking,
as if grief could be folded into something smaller.
The children said nothing—
just watched their childhood turn to cinder.

I was there.
Close enough to see their breath rising like ghosts.
Close enough to feel the heat against my skin.
Close enough to do something—
but didn't.

None of us did.

The crowd swayed like wheat in the firelight,
eyes catching flickers of something primal, electric.
A man murmured, "Damn shame,"
but didn't look away.
A woman clutched her chest like she was watching
a movie that moved her just enough
but not too much.

And then there were the ones recording.
The ones angling for the best shot,
the perfect moment where tragedy met composition.
A burning house, framed just so.
History turned into content.

I watched them watching.
Felt the sick little thrill of being close to ruin,
of witnessing something raw and unfiltered.
Did they feel it too? That pulse of schadenfreude[52],
that whisper of *at least it's not me*?

The fire took its time.
It hollowed out the walls,
swallowed their names, their histories, their proofs of existence.
Someone whispered, *how awful*.
Someone else said, *Jesus, it's beautiful*.

And I—
I did nothing but remember.
Because maybe memory is the only currency that matters.
Or maybe it's just another way of stealing.

---

[52] A German term meaning "pleasure derived from another's misfortune." Used here to suggest a voyeuristic thrill in witnessing destruction.

Texting the Revolution
(January 20, 2009)[53]

today, hope weighs exactly
as much as my phone—
plastic warm from palms
pressed against possibility.
three hours of battery left
to witness history.

between my fingers,
messages pulse like hearts[54]:
"u seeing this?"
"i can't breathe"
"everything everything everything"
each text a prayer
sent into static.

on the cracked screen,
history breaks into pieces:
YES WE CAN becomes
yes we & then
just yes & then
static eating words[55]
faster than we can save them.

my cousin stands in the crowd,
a pixel in the multitude,
her message cuts through:
"the air tastes like thunder
& everyone's crying
& i wish you were here
& nothing will ever"
[message incomplete]

---

[53] The inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States took place on January 20, 2009. He was the first African American president, and his election was widely regarded as a historic moment in U.S. politics.

[54] A metaphor for the rapid exchange of texts during the inauguration. This theme of digital communication as emotional connection appears throughout Black's later work, notably in *Hymn to the Algorithm* (2016).

[55] A reference to Barack Obama's 2008 campaign slogan. SMS character limits (160 characters per message) and transmission errors often caused messages to be cut off or distorted, symbolizing how political ideals may be diminished over time.

somewhere in Kansas
a girl holds her phone to the sky
like an antenna for change
while her father says
nothing really changes
but her thumbs type:
"can you feel it too?"

we are all breaking
into smaller pieces:
160 characters[56]
of revolution,
of doubt,
of wondering if hope
loses something
when compressed.

in dark rooms across America
we watch through screens
within screens within screens:
the oath, the speech,
the roar that sounds
like waves through tiny speakers
while our phones buzz
with fragments of becoming.

at midnight,
when the batteries die
& the screens go dark,
we'll hold these devices
like spent wishes,
wondering what part of history
we actually held
& what part just passed
through us
like light
through glass.

---

[56] The standard length of an SMS message. Longer messages were split into multiple texts, often arriving out of order, which contributed to fragmented conversations.

Iron Confessional: A Triptych
(Visions on the 5:47)

I. The Stations of the Poor

The iron serpent unhinges its jaw,
swallowing souls at Penn Station[57]—
pilgrims in pinstripes,
prophets with briefcases,
all of us riding the spine of America's dream.

The industrial wastes form their own rosary:
shipping containers genuflect in rust,
scattered like fallen angels
across New Jersey's scarred skin.
Their graffiti speaks in tongues
more honest than any sermon.

Here, churches multiply like survival strategies,
storefront salvation next to check-cashing temples[58],
neon crosses flickering like dying stars.
"When all else fails, there's always God"—
but God's response time varies by zip code[59],
and miracles don't cover the rent.

Every stop a different circle of purgatory:
X souls ascend, Y descend
(solve for salvation, show your work).
The train moves like judgment
through the veins of empire,
express past stations where hope
hangs by its fingernails.

---

[57] Pennsylvania Station, located in New York City, is one of the busiest transit hubs in the U.S. It serves as a metaphor for movement, transience, and the daily grind of working-class and corporate commuters.

[58] A reference to the prevalence of payday loan businesses and check-cashing services in low-income neighborhoods, often located near churches. These businesses exploit financial desperation, mirroring the transactional nature of faith in prosperity theology.

[59] Alludes to systemic inequality, where access to opportunities, services, and justice differs drastically based on socioeconomic status and location.

Prayer rises here like smoke
from burning dreams,
while corporate logos burn against the sky
like false constellations
no wise men follow.

II. The Gospel of Wealth
Two stops later, everything sanctified by money—
golf courses spread like Eden franchised[60],
each blade of grass tithing upward
toward a corporate heaven.

Here, mega-churches wear glass faces,
prophets preach prosperity from pulpits of teak,
while Tesla-driving apostles[61]
fill crystal parking lots.
The communion wine is hundred-dollar scotch;
the bread, gluten-free designer loaves.

Private schools wear landscaping
like papal robes.
Their saints are hedge fund managers,
their scripture written in stock tickers,
their prayers answered in quarterly returns.

White picket fences mark off
promised lands in quarter-acre plots.
Streets named like beatitudes:
Pleasantview, Meadowbrook, Happiness Estates—
each a different station
on the cross of affluence.

The mall rises
like Solomon's temple reborn,
where credit cards speak in tongues

---

[60] Luxury communities and private golf courses are often built on land that was previously accessible to the public, reinforcing wealth segregation.
[61] A reference to the association between Silicon Valley wealth and moral superiority, where technology entrepreneurs and executives position themselves as visionaries or saviors.

and each store window sells
a different path to paradise[62].

III. The Final Testament
Then reality's last revelation appears—
where truth breaks through
in Spanish, English, Black, White,
all the tongues of babel
speaking simultaneously[63].

Here, Colombian coffee shops
serve communion next to Irish pubs,
and God speaks without a broker,
no middleman marking up grace.
The water tower watches from its mountain
like a concrete prophet,
bearing witness to this daily pilgrimage
of bodies seeking sanctuary
in the spaces between wealth and want.

The steel serpent winds empty now
through its tree-cemetery
(in the beginning was the word,
but progress always eats the garden[64]).
Tomorrow we'll join the ceremony again,
this rolling revelation,
this iron confessional
where America whispers its sins
to the hungry dark.

Each night, somewhere between stations,
in the space between heartbeats,
the truth writes itself in rust and starlight:
we're all just trying to get home,

---

[62] Consumer culture is portrayed as a pseudo-religion, where personal fulfillment is marketed through products and branding.

[63] A biblical reference to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), where language was divided. Here, it suggests the diversity and complexity of real urban communities in contrast to the homogeneity of wealthier enclaves.

[64] A reinterpretation of John 1:1, suggesting that technological and economic progress often leads to environmental and cultural destruction.

all riding this metal leviathan
through the belly of the American dream,
searching for an exit
that might finally set us free.

But there are no messiahs on this train,
only passengers,
each carrying their own cross
of mortgage payments and MetroCards[65],
all of us praying to different gods
that speak the same language:
tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow.

---

[65] A comparison between biblical suffering and the financial burdens of modern life, where debt and transit costs define daily existence.

The Cartography of Losing Ourselves

We build our prisons pixel by pixel[66],
each screen a glowing promise
to be e v e r y w h e r e,
showing us nothing real.

Remember maps?
Paper gods folded into glove compartments,
their creases charting
every road we might take.

My father's atlas—still somewhere
in an Ohio basement,
pages marked with routes
he planned but never drove.
Sundays meant tracing highways
to nowhere in particular,
memorizing capitals
and believing knowledge
was something you could
h
o
l
d[67].

Now the world hums differently—
a dial-up chorus of static and longing,
handshakes between modems
that speak in tongues of connection.
The map on your desk
fades beside a blinking cursor:
[SEARCHING…]
[LOADING…]
[CONNECTION ESTABLISHED.]

---

[66] Refers to the gradual digitization of daily life, where screens (smartphones, computers) mediate most experiences. By 2009, smartphones and social media had begun replacing many physical interactions.
[67] Before the internet, information was accessed through tangible sources like books, maps, and encyclopedias. The shift to digital knowledge storage removed the physicality of learning.

But every attempt at precision
becomes another kind of lie.
We measure distance in megabytes,
forgetting the feel of miles
beneath our feet.
We've traded silence for signal,
folded the analog sun into a screen
we carry in our pockets[68],
where AIM windows flash
like neon prayers,
and "away messages"
stand in for presence.

In coffee shops and food courts,
we gather near power strips
like modern pilgrims,
plugging into
a world we hope is waiting for us.
Each "beep" of a Nokia
or buzz of a pager
is a lighthouse in the fog—
a reminder that
we're reachable but still drifting.

I've started collecting blank pages,
saving them like endangered species:
[ ]
[ ]
[ ]
^ These are the last wild places.

In their absence, we expand:
another photo shared
in a camera phone's grainy memory,
another moment reduced
to 1.3 megapixels[69].

---

[68] Smartphones and GPS apps replaced traditional navigation methods, including the use of landmarks and celestial navigation.

[69] Early mobile phone cameras had low resolution compared to modern standards. The first iPhone, released in 2007, had a 2-megapixel camera, while earlier phones had even lower resolutions.

We trade touch for text,
presence for pingbacks,
quiet for the hum of processors.

Remember silence?
Not the absence of sound,
but the presence of nothing
demanding to be something?
Now we fill every gap
with notifications and ringtones,
mistaking connection for communion.
I lived there once—inside the screen.
Built myself a home in forums and feeds,
spent whole nights worshiping in the glow of a CRT temple.
I spoke in usernames, measured worth in replies,
thought a status update could hold a soul.

I thought technology would save us.
Believed in the prophets of Silicon Valley,
in the gospel of fiber-optic redemption.
They promised a map that would lead us to ourselves.

But the map became the territory[70].
The signal drowned the silence.
And I learned too late—
you can't navigate meaning with a blinking cursor[71].

In corporate cubicles,
prophets in polo shirts
sell us salvation:
better modems, faster processors,
clearer screens.
They promise us a map
that will lead us
to ourselves.

---

[70] A reference to Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), which argues that representations (maps, media) can replace reality itself. Digital navigation has replaced direct experience.

[71] A reference to the text cursor on digital screens, which indicates where input is expected. The phrase suggests the limits of digital tools in providing meaningful human direction.

I think about those maps
that used to line gas station walls[72],
their folds forming constellations
of possible journeys.

Let the screens go dark.
Let the modems fall silent.
Let's refold the maps
and trust the sun again.

The real journey begins
where the signal drops,
where the path is written
by footsteps, not code.

Let's get lost.
Let's make mistakes of navigation,
trusting the compass
of our bewildered hearts.

---

[72] Before GPS, gas stations commonly sold and displayed road maps, which were essential for planning trips.

Letter: March 14, 2011
119 Macdougal Street, NYC (2011)[73]

Dear Mr. XXXXX,

I doubt you'll remember me right away, but maybe the memory of that junior-year essay—the one you wrote "provocative but directionless" on—will jog something loose. I'm writing now because your words have been circling my mind like crows over some roadkill truth. You were right, back then, about the ways society isolates us. How the screens and systems draw us into echo chambers of self, cutting us off from the tactile world and each other. But you didn't push far enough, did you? You framed it like an unfortunate byproduct of progress—a glitch in the machine. I'm starting to think the glitch is the machine.

Take this: I just read that Anonymous claims to have internal Bank of America documents[74]—proof of fraud, corruption, all the things we always suspected but never had the guts to fully face. The news barely registered in the media. It's like even the most brazen truths get reduced to background noise in the digital din. You told us once that sunlight is the best disinfectant[75]. But what happens when no one's looking? What happens when the systems designed to expose the truth also numb us to its impact?

I see it now in everything. Social media feeds that pretend to connect us but only sharpen the ache of comparison. The algorithms that mold our choices before we even know we've made them. I hear it in the hollow ping of a notification, a sound that promises significance but delivers only distraction. You told us to resist these traps, to find the human thread in the digital weave, but you didn't tell us that the thread might be too tangled to follow.

Still, your lessons stick. You made me love words, even if I hated the rules around them. You talked about "the great conversation[76]"—that dialogue across centuries that connects us to something larger. I believed you then. I still want to. But how does one

---

[73]The following reply was found stapled to the original, handwritten:
"You assume I didn't push harder because I didn't see the cracks. But I did. I just learned to live with them. You talk about the glitch being the machine like you discovered something new. We knew this already. The problem isn't seeing it—it's figuring out what to do once you do." The name is scribbled out with sharpie. No proof exists confirming the recipient of the original letter.

[74] Refers to a 2011 leak by the hacktivist group Anonymous, which allegedly contained evidence of fraud at Bank of America. The documents were posted online but received limited mainstream media coverage.

[75] A phrase attributed to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, who argued that transparency is the best way to prevent corruption.

[76] A concept from Mortimer J. Adler's *The Great Conversation* (1952), referring to the ongoing discourse between great thinkers across history.

join a conversation when every voice feels drowned out by the ceaseless hum of machines?

I don't blame you for not seeing this all the way through. We were on the cusp of it back then, weren't we? MySpace had just taught us how to curate versions of ourselves[77], but we hadn't yet surrendered our every waking moment to the algorithm. I wonder, if you'd known how deep the rot goes, would you have taught differently? Would you have fought harder?

There's one thing you said, though, that I still hold close: "The fight for authenticity starts with yourself." I've been trying to take that seriously. Writing helps, though I'm not sure it's authenticity I'm chasing anymore—maybe just clarity. Maybe just a way to shout back at the digital abyss before it swallows us whole.

I wonder what you'd say to me now, reading this. Maybe you'd say I've finally earned that "provocative" you wrote about, though I doubt you'd let me get away with feeling so smug about it.

Thank you for everything,

Rowan Black

---

[77] MySpace, which peaked in the mid-2000s, was one of the first major social media platforms where users could heavily customize profiles, influencing later digital identity construction.

The Map That Isn't There

In that empire, the Cartographers Guilds
struck a Map of the Empire
whose size was that of the Empire,
coinciding point for point with it[78]

The map unfolds e n d l e s s l y
    a paper realm as vast
  as the world it claims to represent[79]

You trace phantom routes
  with trembling fingers
    hoping for revelation

But even perfection is imperfect
  The 1:1 scale obscures
    as much as it reveals

Cities shift like mirages
  rivers flow backward
    mountains
      c
      r
       u
        m
        b
       l
        e
       to
           s   a   n   d[80]

North becomes a concept
  fluid as mercury

---

[78] The opening lines paraphrase *On Exactitude in Science*, a one-paragraph short story by Jorge Luis Borges (1946), which describes a 1:1 scale map so detailed that it becomes indistinguishable from the territory it represents.

[79] A reference to the idea of hyperreal representations, where the simulation of reality overtakes the real itself, as explored in Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981).

[80] Cartographic inaccuracies and geographical shifts occur over time; old maps often become unreliable as landscapes erode, borders change, and settlements vanish.

slipping through your grasp

E a s t   W e s t
    c   o   l   l   i   d   e
a temporal car crash
    of "what was" and "might be"

The legend offers no key
    only riddles in fading ink:
        "Here be dragons[81]," it whispers

But even monsters would be
    a comfort in this
        cartographer's nightmare

You long for dragons now
    for something solid to fear
        something to navigate around

Instead the blankness spreads
    a cartographic cancer
        eating away at certainty

In the Deserts of the West, still today
there are Tattered Ruins
of that Map[82]

You wander these ruins
    searching for fragments of meaning
        in the tatters of representation

The map fights back
    paper cuts slicing deep—
        your blood the only real landmark now

"I am here," you say

---

[81] A phrase historically (but inaccurately) believed to be used on medieval maps to mark unknown or dangerous regions. While no surviving maps contain this exact phrase, similar warnings, such as *Hic Sunt Dracones* on the 1504 Lenox Globe, do exist.

[82] Another direct reference to Borges' *On Exactitude in Science*, where remnants of the massive map still exist, abandoned and useless.

pointing to a spot that vanishes
    the moment you touch it

The map laughs a rustle of paper
    mocking your need for placement
        in a world too vast to be contained

A memory surfaces:
    Your father's weathered atlas
        Tracing routes on rainy Sundays
            The world seemed so orderly then

But now—

Successive Generations with less homage
to the Map, saw its vast bulk as Useless
and delivered it up to the Inclemencies
of Sun and Winters[83]

PANIC RISES

    The familiar contours dissolve
        Reality unravels with the map

In frustration you ball it up
    this useless guide
        this liar's tool

But as it crumples you realize—
    The creases and tears
        the folds and stains
            the very destruction of the map
                has become the only true reflection
                    of your journey

You smooth it out once more
    this record of attempts
        each failure a step

---

[83] Suggests that later generations no longer valued the physical map, leaving it to decay. This could reflect the decline of paper maps in favor of digital navigation tools.

on a path that exists
only in the walking

The map burns away to ash
carried off by winds
that smell of elsewhere

You stand in the unmarked territory
of your own bewilderness
No guide no compass no star to follow

Just the raw truth of lostness
and the realization that every step
draws a new map— ephemeral, but honest

In the Disciplines of Geography no History of Cartography
retains mention of that Useless Map
except as reminder of Extravagance and Folly[84]

This is the truest navigation—
to walk without knowing
to be the map that isn't there

---

[84] A comment on how knowledge, once deemed essential, can be erased or forgotten. Many historical maps, once authoritative, have faded from relevance as new technologies redefine navigation.

**Transitional Years
(2012–2016)**

City of Ghosts (draft)

[*This piece was found scrawled in a Moleskine notebook, unfinished. Notes in the margins suggest Rowan intended to expand on its themes but never did. Various revisions exist, but no final version was confirmed.*]

The city wakes. Alarms pierce the pre-dawn gloom.
Figures shuffle from sleep to shower to street,
a choreography of the half-alive.
You watch from your window, a ghost among ghosts,
as the great machine of urbanity groans into motion.
Gears of glass and steel grind against the sky.

The city inhales.
In…
Exhaust fumes and stale dreams
out…
Hope dissipates like morning mist

Sirens wail their urgent song.
Horns blare a cacophonous chorus.
Beneath it all, a hum—
the endless drone of lives lived in parallel,
never touching.

Whispers float on currents of static:
"You are here[85]"
(but where is here?)
"You are one of us"
(but who are we?)
"You are alive"
(but what is life?)

(something about the BART's rhythm here:
the city's pulse beneath our feet
stations like pressure points
acupuncture in concre

that's shit, don't bother)

Glass towers pierce the sky,
mirrors upon mirrors.
Your face in every pane,
a thousand yous
All empty

---

[85] A subversion of the common phrase on maps. Questions the notion of location and belonging in an increasingly digitized and impersonal world.

All searching
for something real
Cold glass against your palm,
your warmth leaving no trace.
You realize: You might be the ghost[86].

~~Neon dreams flicker in shop windows.~~
~~Mannequins wear your face,~~
~~peddling authenticity at discount prices.~~
~~You window-shop for a self,~~
~~but every option feels~~
~~secondhand,~~
~~pre-worn,~~
~~Hollow.~~

too on-nose? rework metaphor. Something about startup pitch decks selling dreams instead?

The city's siren song echoes:
"Be yourself" (in our incubator)
"Find yourself" (in our API)
"Love yourself" (through our platform)
"Free yourself" (with our chains)

Wireless signals weave an invisible web.
Data flows like lifeblood,
bits and bytes the new currency of existence.
You reach out, touch a screen, feel nothing.
Are you transmitting or receiving?
(insert section on social media alienation?
the dopamine hits of notifications,
the endless scroll of other people's happiness,
curated feeds of artificial joy)

too bitter? but fuck these venture capitalists turning the Mission into their playground

@everyone @no one
#trending #forgotten
[LIKE] [DISLIKE]
{SHARE} {ISOLATE}

---

[86] Introduces the idea of digital and emotional disconnection, where individuals feel invisible despite being physically present.

Steel bones rise from concrete wombs.
Each new tower a monument to ambition[87],
each demolished building a grave for forgotten dreams.
You watch the skyline shift, wondering
which part of you is being rebuilt,
which part torn down.

The city evolves:
Higher
{emptier}
Faster
{lonelier}
Brighter
{blinder}

Shadows of the past cling to crumbling corners,
history paved over for progress.
You reach for memories, but they slip through your fingers
like smoke,
like time,
like purpose.

In basement hackerspaces
anarchists dream of liberation
through lines of code
but even revolution
has been monetized
disruption packaged
and sold back to us
in monthly subscriptions[88]

In the Mission, abuelas still sweep
their steps
while coders queue for four-dollar
toast
history erased by the stroke
of a venture capitalist's pen
In SOMA, tent cities huddle
in the shadows of unicorn startups
dreams and nightmares
sharing the same blocked IP address

Night falls. Lights flicker out one by one,
a reverse constellation[89].
In dark apartments, souls curl around their solitude,
dreaming of connection.

---

[87] Highlights the cycle of urban renewal, where progress often erases personal and cultural histories.

[88] References the commercialization of movements that begin as grassroots resistance but are later co-opted for profit (e.g., "revolutionary" tech startups).

[89] Describes city lights going dark as the opposite of stars appearing, symbolizing urban isolation rather than celestial wonder.

You lie awake, listening to the city's heartbeat,
a rhythm just out of sync with your own.
The dissonance aches in your bones.

~~This city is eating itself~~
~~and calling it disruption.~~

The Desert of the Real
(San Francisco, August 2013)

The Guardian fractures in The Mirror, truth scatters into pixels—
while prophets in hoodies[90] code empires from standing desks,
measuring souls in bitcoin and engagement metrics, their screens
multiplying reflections until the original dissolves into smoke.

system alert: reality degradation detected
implementing countermeasures
consciousness expansion detected
countermeasures failing

Each morning we feed the machines our thoughts and terrors,
offering up dreams and desires to algorithms that know us
better than we know ourselves, our digital hearts beating
in perfect time with server farms humming in distant deserts.

Through PRISM they watch our fractured selves divide and drift,
each version a copy of something we might have been once
(Baudrillard knew: the original is always already gone, lost
in the infinite regression of screens watching screens watching us)[91].

[ARCHIVED MEMORY FRAGMENT]
~~remember when weight meant something you could hold?~~
~~when presence wasn't measured in bandwidth and reach?~~
~~when darkness was more than a screen powered down?~~
~~when thoughts still drifted sweet and thick with possibility?~~
[END FRAGMENT]

The weight accumulates in archived selves and backed-up memories,
in cached dreams and deleted truths, in climate-controlled rooms
where machines store infinite versions of who we think we are,
our existence replicated in databases we'll never see or touch.

---

[90] A reference to Silicon Valley startup culture, where young programmers, often wearing hoodies (as popularized by Mark Zuckerberg), build massive digital platforms.
[91] A reference to Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), which argues that media representations replace reality, making it impossible to access an "original" truth.

In the Mission, protest signs fade against filtered sunsets,
while tech shuttles glide like ghost ships through neighborhoods[92]
that once held families but now store startup dreams and
the empty promises of disruption's perpetual tomorrow.

   d i s s o l v i n g
          into
                data

Time moves differently in the digital desert, each moment
fragmented into microseconds of processing power, our lives
rendered in resolution too perfect to be real, too smooth
to hold the rough edges of actual human experience.

[SURVEILLANCE SNIPPET 31882-A]
Subject exhibits dangerous levels of awareness
Enhanced perception noted: chemical or spiritual origin?
Recommended action: increase digital sedation
Status: pending
[END SNIPPET]

Remember when we used to dream in colors nature made,
before filters taught us how to see, before algorithms
learned to predict our desires better than our hearts,
before we traded touch for terms of service?

Somewhere in Moscow, a whistleblower dreams in binary code[93]
while we scroll through lives we pretend to live, our worth
measured in secret scores and invisible algorithms that track
the slow dissolution of flesh into data, breath into bandwidth.

checking reality quotient…
scanning for authenticity…
searching for original signal…
signal not found

---

[92] Refers to private commuter buses for Silicon Valley employees, which became symbols of gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District.

[93] Likely a reference to Edward Snowden, who leaked NSA surveillance documents in 2013 and was granted asylum in Russia.

The fog rolls in from a sea we've forgotten how to touch,
carrying whispers of what we were before the simulation—
when screens finally sleep and the last login fails, what remains
of us in the thin space between binary and breath?

[SYSTEM LOG: 03:33 PST]
weight of archived selves: increasing
memory storage: 89% consumed
reality integrity: compromised
human essence: fragmenting
recommend immediate [REDACTED]
At night, beneath the artificial glow of endless screens,
we dream of escape but our dreams come pre-formatted,
packaged in pixels and compressed for easy sharing,
our nightmares optimized for maximum engagement.

They say the desert grows one grain at a time,
each moment of lived experience translated into data,
until the map becomes more real than the territory
and we forget there was ever anything else.

   signal
       degrading
          flesh
             failing
               form
                  fading

The prophets promised weightlessness in their digital cloud,
but gravity still pulls at our bones, servers still heat
the atmosphere, and somewhere beneath the virtual sand
reality waits like a buried secret we once knew.

[INTERCEPTED THOUGHT PATTERN]
what if the weight isn't what we carry
but what we've lost? what if each backup
each upload, each post and share and like
is really just another stone on our disappearing?

The hours stretch like fiber optic cables across continents,
carrying pieces of ourselves we'll never fully recover,
while in air-conditioned rooms, machines hum quietly,
archiving the slow erosion of what we used to be.

initiating emergency protocol
searching for human baseline
attempting to restore original parameters
error: original parameters not found
error: human baseline corrupted
error: e r r o r : e r r o r

The fog thickens outside Silicon Valley's glass temples,
but we barely notice weather anymore, too busy tracking
engagement metrics and optimization scores, while somewhere
a whistleblower's truth burns through the last firewalls.

[FINAL LOG ENTRY]
In the desert of the real, weight has no meaning—
yet we feel heavier with each passing update,
each system upgrade, each new version of ourselves
that renders the previous obsolete.

When the last screen flickers into darkness
and the final server powers down, will we remember
how to cast shadows in natural light, how to dream
in frequencies machines never learned to measure?

In Dolores Park[94], where smoke rings rise like lost passwords
into the endless fog, we sometimes glimpse what's real—
brief moments when the simulation flickers, and truth
burns bright as ember against the digital dark.

    the desert grows
    the desert grows
    the desert grows

---

[94] Dolores Park in San Francisco is known for countercultural gatherings. The line suggests brief moments of genuine experience amid digital reality.

Hymn to the Algorithm

Input. Process. Output.
You wake, sync, connect.
The morning sequence runs
like code we didn't write:
Coffee black (no sugar),
Breakfast skipped (hunger as feature),
Commute (37 minutes, optimized).
The city hums in electric veins,
each Muni car a capsule of waiting,
each rider:
a data point
a profile
a possible startup founder
a target demographic.
Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick…
The system counts you in.

We are the children of screens,
eating ramen in shared apartments,
praying to Y Combinator[95].
We bow before the Algorithm,
angel investor of moments,
venture capitalist of souls.
It watches our metrics
through PRISM's glass[96],
unseen. unfailing.
(Snowden warned us,
but we're still logging in.)

Blessed be the notification.
Sacred be the five-star review.
We sing:
Available now, forever now,
writing psalms in acceptance rates

---

[95] Y Combinator is a Silicon Valley startup accelerator known for funding and launching major tech companies, including Dropbox, Airbnb, and Reddit. Many startups seek its backing as a form of validation.

[96] PRISM was a classified NSA surveillance program revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013. It allowed the U.S. government to collect data from major tech companies, sparking debates about digital privacy.

while Zuckerberg's empire
grows fat on our confessions[97].

Midday:
Lunch: thirty minutes in an artisanal coffee shop.
The menu offers:
A. Synthetic purpose ($6.75)
B. Artificial joy (locally sourced)
C. Processed calm (free-range)
You choose D: None of the above.
The ache in your stomach feels
more honest than the ache
in your gentrified soul.

Afternoon demands optimization.
Streamline. Synergize. Monetize.
(Did you hear Instagram sold?
A billion for our filtered lives[98].)
You are:
a node in the network
a cog in the wheel
a startup about to pivot
Input. Process. Output.

But somewhere in the monotony,
between Mission and Market[99],
a glitch:
Seven years old,
grass underfoot,
skinned knees,
life before timelines.
The memory rises unbidden,
analog in a digital world.
Then it's gone.
Suppressed.

---

[97] Refers to Facebook (now Meta) and its business model of monetizing personal data. Users willingly share personal details, which are then analyzed for targeted advertising.

[98] Facebook acquired Instagram for $1 billion in 2012, a deal that symbolized the growing commercialization of personal expression and social media.

[99] Mission Street and Market Street are major roads in San Francisco. This line suggests a metaphorical and literal journey through the city's tech-driven transformation.

Forgotten.
Uploaded.

We gather in open-plan offices,
the new churches of SOMA[100].
We offer our privacy to the cloud,
the omniscient server.
Lord, hear our ping.
Your free trial has expired.
Please upgrade to continue.

Five minutes of sacred rest
between agile scrums.
We glimpse each other in passing:
Fellow disruptors.
Shadows in LCD light.
All wearing the same startup shirt.
All pitching the same dream.

At the hour of rebellion,
in your hot desk corner
of a WeWork cathedral,
you pause, MacBook humming:
"I AM NOT A DATAPOINT,"
you type.
Command-S. Command-S. Command-S.
Until the words become a loop,
until meaning breaks like bad code:
I_AM_NOT_A_DATAPOINT
IAM_NOT_ADATAPOINT
IAMNOTADATAPOINT
NULL_AND_VOID[101]

Night falls.
You stand before BART windows,
watching trains pulse like packets

---

[100] South of Market (SOMA) is a district in San Francisco known for its concentration of tech offices and coworking spaces. Open-plan offices are common in tech culture, emphasizing collaboration but often criticized for lack of privacy.

[101] In programming, NULL represents an absence of value, and "null and void" is a legal phrase denoting something as invalid. This line symbolizes existential erasure through digitization.

through the city's tired veins[102].
Moths spiral around LED signs
advertising freedom in monthly payments.
For one glorious moment,
you log out.
Delete cookies. Clear history.
Human.

But morning comes, glowing with silicon.
The push notification calls.
You swipe right once more.
Sprint planning to attend.
Stand-ups to complete.
Your rebellion: a bug to be patched.
And yet…
a memory persists.

We who are always online,
we who are ever connected,
carry this cache:
a longing for static,
for untracked footsteps,
for unlogged moments.

Final Commit:
● Sprint velocity: immeasurable
● Disruption: pending
● Humanity: deprecated but running
● Status: 404_SOUL_NOT_FOUND

We push to production again,
but now, beneath the tick-tick-tick,
a human heartbeat rises,
a song the Algorithm can't index.

World without end.
Git commit -m "still alive"
Amen.

---

[102] Compares BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) trains to data packets in a network, highlighting the mechanized, systematized nature of movement in a tech-driven city.

Fragment: Found in a Game of Uno, The Rose Establishment, Salt Lake City, UT (2015)

37 million secrets just became data[103]. Been sitting with that number all morning. Not focusing on the obvious - the relationships, betrayals, tabloid headlines - but on the sheer weight of all that hidden wanting transformed into spreadsheets. Each username a person who thought they'd found a safe place to be their unsafe self.

[margin: look up Bauman's "Liquid Love[104]" - something there about digital bonds?]

When I was in SF, J. used to talk about "frictionless relationships[105]" like it was the next great disruption waiting to happen. Silicon Valley promises: making human connection scalable, optimizable, clean. Now I'm watching 37 million optimized connections turn to weapons. Every profile a perfect artifact of how we thought technology could solve loneliness.

"Data breach" sounds too sterile. Should be a better term for this mass exposure of midnight decisions, carefully crafted profiles, secrets people tested out like new clothes. All those digital speakeasies where people thought they could try on different versions of themselves - now just columns in someone else's database.

[margin: parallel between database structures and confession structures?][106]

Not interested in the morality. Or not just the morality. There's something deeper here about promises - what we thought technology could promise us. Anonymity and connection. The dream of being known and unknown in exactly the right proportions. Each profile a carefully curated ratio of truth and need.

---

[103] A reference to the 2015 Ashley Madison data breach, in which hackers leaked the personal information of approximately 37 million users of the dating website known for facilitating extramarital affairs. The breach exposed not only names but also messages, preferences, and personal details.

[104] Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman explored how modern relationships, shaped by digital technology, have become fluid, transient, and transactional. His book *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (2003) discusses how contemporary relationships often lack deep commitment due to the convenience of digital interaction.

[105] The tech industry frequently aims to eliminate inefficiencies ("friction") in social interactions, whether through dating apps, social media, or AI-driven matchmaking. However, this often leads to commodification rather than meaningful connection.

[106] Traditional religious confessions involve private disclosures of guilt or longing in a space assumed to be sacred and protected. Digital platforms, despite offering similar spaces for intimate self-revelation, store and expose these confessions in ways that can be exploited.

What happens to all those digital ghosts now? Not the real people (though yes, them too), but all those versions of ourselves we thought we could safely contain in passwords and usernames? Every leaked account is someone's alternate reality colliding with their actual one. The fantasy of frictionless intimacy meeting the friction of real lives.

[margin: consider - digital intimacy vs physical intimacy: one can be lost without being touched][107]

37 million people thought they'd found a place to be safely unsafe. Turns out nowhere is friction-free after all. Maybe that's what Silicon Valley never understood - human connection isn't something you can optimize. The mess isn't a bug in the system. The mess is the point.

---

[107] A distinction between emotional or intellectual closeness formed through digital interaction and the physical reality of relationships. Digital intimacy can be erased or exposed without physical contact, making it uniquely vulnerable.

The Razor's Edge
[Ritual Coffee, Valencia St.]
[Feb 2015]

Night peels back like startup promises,
layer by layer of venture capital dreams.
Silence cuts deep in the Mission—
a scalpel carving thought from noise,
authentic from artificial,
displacement from disruption[108].

We build our lives on fictions
(the city built on fault lines knows this).
On borrowed truths and borrowed time,
on words varnished smooth as iPhone glass,
polished to hide the human grain beneath.   [check B. re: simulation/simulacra]
But varnish cracks in the dark
of boarded Mission storefronts.

Scrape it away.

The stories—
about innovation,
about progress,
about changing the world
one app at a time—
cling like moss to Victorian stone[109].
You scratch at equity packages,
you pull at stock options,
and still they hold.

Once, I built a website in high school.
HTML scraped together like a mixtape,

---

[108] A reference to how the tech boom in San Francisco led to gentrification, particularly in the Mission District, displacing long-time residents in favor of wealthier tech workers.

[109] San Francisco's Mission District contains many Victorian-era buildings, now surrounded by rapid tech-driven change. The metaphor suggests that narratives of progress persist even as they obscure historical realities.

cursor blinking like a heartbeat.
The code bent to my hands,
a small, bright kingdom
where nothing was for sale[110].

I still remember an AIM chat—
midnight, blue glow,
a screen name I only knew as a voice in the dark[111].
No algorithms, no engagement metrics,
just two ghosts typing toward morning,
untethered, untracked, real.

A summer night, dial-up humming,
the modem speaking in static tongues.
Outside, fireflies signaled to each other—
bright, brief, unrepeatable.
Inside, I wrote my first blog post,
believing words could change something.

I was wrong.

The world is not what it seems
(especially here, especially now).
It hums with illusions:
laws as fragile as terms of service,
norms as fleeting as battery life[112].
Beneath the IPOs and ICOs,   [digital feudalism[113] -
you find nothing solid.   expand?]

~~All empires fall the same way

_____

[110] Contrasts the early, more personal internet (e.g., Geocities, hand-coded websites) with the highly commercialized digital landscape of 2015.

[111] AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) was a major platform for digital communication in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Unlike modern social media, it lacked monetization or algorithmic manipulation, allowing for a different kind of digital intimacy.

[112] Tech companies often govern digital spaces through their own policies (terms of service), which can be changed at will, affecting user rights more than traditional legal structures.

[113] A term used to describe how large tech platforms (Google, Facebook, Amazon) act as digital landlords, controlling access, monetization, and online presence, reducing users to tenants in corporate-controlled spaces.

bytes to bits to nothing
servers humming their own requiem~~

There is beauty in destruction—
in watching unicorns fall,
in terminal velocity,
in the splinters and dust

[Z's critique of
ideology[114]??]

of disrupted expectations.
The ruins of Web 2.0 whisper:
all this was built to bind you.

[parallel w/ real estate?]

Strip it all bare.
You are left with weight:
the heavy truth of irrelevance,
the ache of obsolescence,
the sharp clarity of
how little your code controls.

[come back to systemic
collapse]

Only this remains:
you are not free—
but you could be.

[ATM receipt found tucked in notebook:]
- automation -> alienation
- check Baudrillard quote re: desert of the real
- something about the ghost in the machine?
- what happens when the servers go dark?

---

[114] Potentially referencing Slavoj Žižek's critiques of capitalist ideology, particularly how it functions to obscure systemic inequalities while appearing to offer freedom.

Census of the Gone
(Form 27B-6 | Revised 2024 | For Official Use Only)

NAME:

[REDACTED]

Carla Espinoza

Nathaniel "Nate" L. Owens

Eleanor Finch (née ??)

Unknown, but we called her Birdie

DATE OF BIRTH:

05/17/1989

11/03/1972

██/██/████

Spring, maybe. When the lilacs bloom.

Before the war. Before the flood. Before we knew what losing meant.

LAST KNOWN ADDRESS:

442 Maple Ave, Chicago, IL

Somewhere off I-90, heading west

A basement apartment with bad wiring, always cold

PO Box 314—letters returned unopened

The house isn't there anymore

DATE MISSING:

02/19/2019

01/01/2021

We don't know. He stopped answering.

They were never here long enough to say.

What date do you list for someone who faded, instead of vanished?

STATUS:

☐ Missing, presumed alive

☐ Missing, presumed deceased

☐ Missing, but no one is looking anymore

☒ (Handwritten in the margins) *What does "presumed" mean when we are wrong so often?*

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION (IF KNOWN):

- She left a voicemail the night before. Said she'd call again soon. She never did.
- His car was found in the long-term parking lot of LAX. The ticket was dated two years ago.
- Last seen wearing a green jacket, a backpack, a look of quiet resignation.
- If you find him, tell him to come home.
- If you find her, ask her why she left.

FOR INTERNAL REVIEW ONLY:

(Automated response: Do not process incomplete data. Do not accept entries without verifiable details.)
(Error: Field "Where do they go?" is not recognized.)
(Error: Field "Did they mean to leave?" is not recognized.)
(Error: Field "Does absence have a shape?" is not recognized.)

At some point, the forms stop following protocol.
The census workers try to make sense of the wreckage,
but the system doesn't allow for entries that simply read:
"She was here. Then she wasn't. What else is there to say?"

The Physics of Loss

from the fire tower   june's darkness p o o l s

somewhere music still   plays against   empty air
     (heartbeats   dissolving into   static)

I've been counting:
     yours   (f a d i n g)
     mine   (i n s i s t e n t)
     theirs   (s t o p p e d)
     time   (s t u t t e r i n g)

$acceleration = mass \times grief \div altitude$[115]
$love = vulnerability^2$
distance = the space between
     your last goodbye
          and this
               endless
                 f
                  a
                  l
                   l
                    i
                     n
                      g

the news reaches even here where
eagles   drift
     below   my
          feet like
               lost
                    p
                    r
                    a
                    y
                    e
                    r
                    s

---

[115] A play on Newtonian physics, equating emotional weight with physical forces. The reference to altitude suggests both literal height (a fire tower, a mountain) and the vertigo of grief.

sanctuary dissolves in june's hot mouth:
    your garden
    their dance floor
    my tower
    all our temporary temples
    built against
    the vast
    indifferent
    d
     a
      r
      k

remember how you said   some souls are rivers?

yours still moves through me.
your voice still catches in my ribs—
that stupid half-snort laugh,
the way you always typed in lowercase
as if capital letters were too formal
for someone who never planned to leave.
your hoodie still thrown over my chair,
still smelling like you.

    I've become   state changes:
        liquid to vapor
            flesh to ghost
                presence to
                    memory to
                      ???

in thin air   physics rewrites itself[116]:
    matter   /doesnt/
    energy   /matter/
    time   /unmatter/
    space   /transmatter/
            /antimatter/

what remains:
    coffee steam   (rising)
    mountain light   (breaking)

---

[116] A subversion of basic physical laws, emphasizing the way grief distorts perception.

forty-nine pulses   (echoing)
all these hearts   (beating)
                against
                probability &
                hatred &
                endings &
                silence &
                t i m e

watch: the fire below   remakes   the forest floor
    (the way love   remakes   what it touches)
    (the way loss   remakes   who we are)
    (the way night   remakes   itself to dawn)

between tower & wind
between earth & air
between staying & leaving
between loving & losing
between being & becoming
        there is always
            this space

I dream in quantum entanglements:
    your hands still mapping my spine[117]
    their last dance still in motion
    my heart still learning to beat
        alone
            a
            l
             o
             n
              e
              ?

but solitude is also
    a kind of
        sanctuary

& even empty rooms
    remember their music

_____

[117] Quantum entanglement describes particles remaining connected across distances. This applies metaphorically to relationships where emotional ties persist beyond separation.

like bones
        remember
            love

(somewhere a dharma bum[118]
    watches his shadow
        stretch across
            desolation
                & calls it
                    home)

june spreads its shadows   across these mountains   like ink
    like smoke   across these valleys   like time
    like love   across these memories   like light
                            becoming
                                light

somewhere between
    particle & wave
    memory & moment
    loss & transformation
        we learn to
            exist
                in multiple
                    states

watch how the night sky
    holds both
        darkness
            &
            stars

how even emptiness
    contains
        everything
            we've lost
                &
                    might
                        become

---

[118] A reference to *The Dharma Bums* (1958) by Jack Kerouac, a novel about seeking meaning through solitude and wanderlust. The phrase suggests finding solace in exile.

(this too is physics:
    how love persists
        in the space
           between
              heartbeats)

I am learning to be
    both
        observatory
           &   observed

while somewhere
    music still plays
        in empty rooms
           & hearts still dare
              to beat
                beat
                  beat

against the vast
    perfect
        indifferent
           blue

here at the edge
    of altitude
        & understanding
           where even
             gravity
                b e c o m e s
                  optional[119]

& all the desolation angels[120]
    circle these peaks
        whispering:
           even emptiness
             is holy

---

[119] Implies a state of emotional or existential weightlessness, where previously fixed concepts (identity, loss, belonging) are no longer stable.

[120] Likely an allusion to *Desolation Angels* (1965) by Jack Kerouac, which explores themes of solitude, enlightenment, and disillusionment. The phrase also recalls fallen figures or lost souls.

Fragment: Found in Fred's Famous Donuts, Tannersville NY (2016)

Ancient stone meets festival flesh—
the mountain doesn't care about
your Coachella-north aesthetic[121],
your carefully curated wildness.

Time moves in geological sighs here,
each ridge a sentence written in bedrock,
while below, the tattooed tribes
chase chemical enlightenment,
their phones raised like totems
toward uncaring skies[122].

The valley drowns in bass waves
but watch—
each tree still dances its own silence,
each shadow still tells
its million-year story.

I sit here, somewhere between
eras, between beats,
watching light write psalms across the ridgeline
while humanity builds its temporary temples below.

What are they seeking
in their synthetic ceremonies,
these pilgrims of the present tense[123]?
The same peace I chase perhaps,
but through different smoke.

The mountain knows—
we're all just passing through,
all searching for something
that was here before us,

---

[121] Refers to the commercialization of music festivals, where attendees adopt a stylized, bohemian look that mimics authenticity but is often prepackaged and commodified.

[122] A commentary on how festivalgoers experience events through their devices, treating smartphones as ritual objects while nature remains indifferent to their presence.

[123] A parallel between modern festival culture and ancient religious pilgrimages, highlighting the search for transcendence through artificial means.

will remain after
our festivals fade.

Time moves in geological sighs.
The rocks remember nothing
of our neon dreams[124].

---

[124] A final contrast between the ancient, enduring earth and the temporary, electric glow of human revelry.

Mature Period
(2017–2020)

Re: You Might Be the Ghost

Someone quoted me today.
"You realize: You might be the ghost."
— City of Ghosts (2012, draft)[125]

They posted it like wisdom, like revelation wrapped in neon melancholy.
A line I scribbled in a notebook, unfinished, never meant to be scripture.
It wasn't even the final draft. I left margin notes. I almost changed it.
But that's the version they found[126].

The comments filled in the blanks:
"God, same."
"This hit too hard."
"I feel so fucking unseen."

Unseen. That's the part they latched onto.
Like I was writing about loneliness.
Like I meant *invisibility* when I wrote *ghost.*

But ghosts leave traces. That was always the horror of it.
A handprint on fogged glass. A name carved under a school desk.
A song stuck in someone's head, years after they forgot your voice.
The flicker of streetlights that has nothing to do with you—
but tell me it doesn't feel that way.

A ghost is not someone forgotten.
A ghost is someone remembered too well.

And cities don't forget.
They don't forgive, either.
They just wait.

You leave thinking you're free, but try coming back.
Try walking old streets without feeling something slip between your ribs.
Try passing places that should mean nothing, only to find they still remember you.

Because here's the thing: ghosts don't haunt places.
Places haunt ghosts.

---

[125] A direct reference to *City of Ghosts*, an earlier, unfinished piece by Rowan Black. The original context of the line remains unclear, as multiple drafts exist with variations in tone and meaning.
[126] Suggests how meaning is shaped by what survives, rather than what was intended. Reflects the way digital culture amplifies fragments of thought, sometimes at the expense of context.

Cities keep the echoes of your footsteps, the ghosts of your younger selves.
They store your mistakes in the bones of buildings.
They trap your laughter between subway tiles.
They hold your absence like a grudge.

You don't drift through them unseen.
You don't disappear.
You just become part of the architecture,
a presence woven into the streets.

And maybe I'm wrong about all of this.
Maybe someone will quote *this* in ten years[127],
misread it, make it mean something I never intended.
Maybe I'll wake up in a decade and hate every word of it.
Maybe I'm still getting it wrong.
But I know this much–

You are not invisible.
You are not a ghost.

You are residual.

---

[127] Acknowledges the inevitability of reinterpretation and the difficulty of controlling meaning once words are released into the world.

Slouching Toward Allentown

The highway stretches long and mean,
spooled out like old cassette tape,
cracked and unraveling, a recording of a country
that once believed itself permanent[128].

The billboards have nothing left to sell but ghosts:
half-peeled ads for malls that don't exist,
smiling families in colors the sun has leeched hollow,
a phone number for salvation that no longer connects.

The exit sign approaches slow as an afterthought.
Gas. Food. Jesus.

Milemarker 55.90.
The sign for the rest stop says Allentown.
It's not, really.

It's in that gray liminal zone where the map stops caring—
Wescosville? Cetronia[129]?
Maybe both. Maybe neither.

I check my phone—
3:17 AM, October 2017.
The battery's at 11%.

I pull off, the asphalt shifting beneath me,
the roadwork signs long abandoned,
cones scattered like loose teeth.
The overpass above is thick with weeds,
roots breaking concrete, proof that even
the American Dream can be reclaimed
by something older, hungrier[130].

---

[128] References the decline of American industrial and economic stability, particularly in former manufacturing hubs like Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley.
[129] Unincorporated communities outside Allentown, Pennsylvania, existing in the ambiguous space between city and rural decay.
[130] Suggests nature reclaiming abandoned infrastructure, paralleling the collapse of economic stability in post-industrial towns.

Then, the glow—
fluorescent, sodium vapor, buzzing.
The rest stop rises from the dark,
a lonely island in a sea of broken things,
half oasis, half mausoleum[131].
Behind it, the last gasps of a steel town,
the factories stilled, their windows blind,
their skeletons rusting under a sky
too big to give a damn.

Inside, the hum of a refrigeration unit fills the air,
a low, steady drone, the sound of something
waiting to fail. The coffee station
is a shrine of burnt offerings[132],
yesterday's drip thick as motor oil.

And they are here.
Of course they are.

They arrive in caravans,
their trucks wrapped in flags,
like bandages on a body too ruined to heal[133].
Somewhere, a man in a golden tower[134]
counts the offering plate.

The gas station hums beneath fluorescent haloes,
a holy stop on the pilgrimage between
Fox News and foreclosure.
Diesel pumps work overtime,
long past when the grid was supposed to fail.
A screen above the register flickers—
muted news loops through cracked subtitles:

—*The deal was bad. We made it great.*
—*FBI traitor removed. America safe again.*

---

[131] Rest stops as liminal spaces, simultaneously a place of respite and a monument to decline.

[132] Refers to stale gas station coffee, but also echoes religious sacrifice, reinforcing the poem's themes of faith and disillusionment.

[133] A commentary on hyper-patriotism masking deeper economic and social wounds.

[134] Likely referencing Donald Trump and the political manipulation of working-class desperation.

—Historic profits for the faithful.
—more after the break—

The cashier keeps a list of their revelations,
each bullet point a prophecy delivered
between Marlboro purchases and scratch-off prayers:
- How the deep state hides in microwave ovens.
- Why JFK Jr. is living in a truck stop bathroom[135].
- The secret messages coded in Big Pharma receipts.
- What's really in the tax bill they cheered for.
- Which saints own condos in Dubai.
- Why no one gets rich selling the gospel—
  unless they own the church.

They sip burnt coffee, faces blue-lit
by the scripture of their phones,
reading verses in comment sections
where their prophets type in all caps.
Their communion is processed sugar,
their catechism, a livestream.

And I watch them—
not with contempt,
but with the quiet horror of knowing
they were born into a rigged game,
told by men who never prayed
that God only helps those who help themselves.

Their leader threw paper towels
at the starving and called it a blessing[136].
Their bishops hoard fortunes in blind trusts
while preaching sacrifice.
Their kingdom of heaven
comes with an IPO and a monthly fee.

---

[135] A nod to QAnon conspiracy theories, some of which claim that John F. Kennedy Jr. faked his death and would return to restore political order.

[136] Refers to Donald Trump's widely criticized response to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, where he tossed paper towels into a crowd as a form of "aid."

Lisa, the cashier, drops my change
onto the counter like an offering.
I ask if she thinks they believe it all.

She exhales, slow.
"They believe it enough to be afraid."

Outside, the tail lights burn red as revelation,
glowing on roads paved with borrowed time.
They disappear into the night, still tithing
to men who drink from golden chalices[137].

And somewhere, a man in a golden tower laughs[138],
as the faithful keep the engines running.

---

[137] Tithing (giving a percentage of income to the church) is contrasted with the extravagant wealth of religious and political elites.

[138] A final image of systemic manipulation, where those in power profit from the labor and faith of the disillusioned.

The Shape of Leaving

i.
Jack[139]—
or not Jack,
not anyone, but still—
I know the curve
of your leaving,
the sharpness of it,
how it cuts through space like
a line drawn too fast[140].

There are ghosts here,
but none of us are dead[141].
We're
shadows on cabin walls,
reflections in cracked mirrors,
cinders waiting for wind.

Who am I?
Who are we?
Did I invent us,
or were we carved from the same
sparked bone,
lit for a moment
before we burned the page?

ii.
It's the sky tonight, Jack,
torn open and pouring
its soft metals into my head.
Stars dissolve into wires
and the wires hum:
we are
we are
we are
until I can't tell if it's me thinking
or the sky speaking.

---

[139] Perhaps another reference to Jack Kerouac, or a reference to an unknown figure.

[140] Leaving is depicted as a physical motion, almost an incision. The abruptness suggests a departure that was not gradual but sharp and final.

[141] A common motif in Rowan Black's work, where ghosts symbolize emotional remnants rather than literal spirits. Similar themes appear in *City of Ghosts* (2012).

Your voice is here somewhere,
a filament of sound stretched too thin.
It catches on my breath—
does it mean something?
I listen.

iii.
Sweet gods, you said,
but the gods are a joke we told ourselves
to feel bigger than the dirt[142].
And yet
I see your laugh spiraling out—
somewhere between starlight and neon—
so bright it blinds me
to the fact of my own edges.

I can't love this world anymore, Jack,
but I love you for loving it
when you shouldn't.

iv.
And if we die tonight,
Jack,
it will be under this silence:
the moon holding its breath,
the mountains folding their shadows.

We are—
whole only in the fragments,
a moment's signal
in the static's roar.

You and I,
thriving on nothing but
the echo of a soul
that never quite fit.

---

[142] A critique of belief systems, aligning with existentialist and absurdist perspectives. The contrast between divinity and the earth grounds the poem in mortality.

Fragment: Found on the Back of a Torn Envelope, Bicknell, UT (2019)

i thought you were different—
or maybe i just
needed you to be.
a small moment,
a word,
a look.
a glint of decency
in the gray.

but you gave me the easiest thing.
not honesty,
not care,
just—
a shrug shaped like a sentence,
a smirk
I didn't see until it was too late.

you let me hang there,
arms outstretched,
while you laughed at the way
i trusted gravity.

i want to call you out—
to say,
look at what you did!
but even here,
even now,
your voice
still crowds mine.

so i say nothing.
not because i forgive,
but because i can't bear
to hear myself beg.

hashtag:
unfriend[143].

---

[143] A digital-age conclusion, turning personal pain into something almost transactional, echoing the detachment and disposability of online relationships.

Beating and Bare

I.
Morning writes itself in bruises—
copper light splits the blinds
like brass knuckles,
like truth,
like every promise
we couldn't keep.

The city peels back my skin
with mechanical precision,
the way mothers once peeled oranges,
the way lovers once peeled away pretense,
the way I can't stop peeling
at the edges of what's left.

Bitter coffee holes through my chest
(the way your absence did,
the way democracy did,
the way faith did)
until there's nothing left
but nerve endings and nicotine,
raw wires sparking in dead air.

II.
I've stopped wearing masks.
Let them see the teeth marks,
the missing pieces,
the way morning light
makes a prison of my bones.
Let them see how flesh fails
against the machinery of hours.

You were right about the sweetness—
how it numbs,
how it lies,
how it makes you forget
the taste of your own blood.
But I'm done with sugar.
Done with soft landings.
Done with the myth
that anything survives intact.

The train screams past, steel on steel,
a sound like history eating itself alive.
I press my palm against the window,
feel the ghost of motion rattle through my marrow.

And then, out of nowhere—
Hocus pocus alimagocus.

I stop breathing. *What the fuck.*
Where did that come from?
Why does my brain still have that file?
I haven't thought about Today's Special in twenty years,
but suddenly, it's all there—
the escalators humming, the empty store at night,
Jeff the mannequin, frozen, waiting,
only real when someone says the words.[144]

And fuck—wasn't Jeff trapped?
Alive only when the lights were out?
Bound by some bullshit magic spell?
Is that what this is?
The city grinding on,
and me, just another mannequin
waiting for someone to say the words?

III.
Each step a confession:
I am here
I am here
I am here
until the concrete writes it
into my bones.

Time's teeth find purchase
in the soft parts,
in the spaces between
heartbeats,
in the silence after
I stop pretending

---

[144] A deep-cut reference to an 80s children's show where a mannequin came to life under specific
conditions. A metaphor for feeling trapped in routine or external expectations.

that any of this
makes sense.

But there's savage grace
in the stumble,
in the way we fall
toward something
like truth,
like mercy,
like the laugh that comes
when you realize
there's nothing left to lose
but the fiction
of losing itself.

IV.
Remember when we thought
pain had a purpose?
That suffering was a door
that opened somewhere?
Now I know better—
pain is just the body's way
of recording what breaks,
a ledger of collapse
written in nerve and sinew.

I walk these streets
like a man counting tombstones,
each step an epitaph
for something we lost
without noticing:
here lies certainty
here lies connection
here lies the myth
of solid ground[145].

The morning crowd rushes past,
each face a mirror
of carefully crafted absence,
each smile a defense
against what we've become.

---

[145] Frames lost ideals as gravestones, reinforcing the theme of societal decay.

I want to grab them,
shake them awake,
scream: don't you feel it?
The way everything's coming undone?
The way we're all just meat
and memory and motion,
beating and bare against
the machinery of days?

V.
Stand in the bewilderness—[146]
let it strip you
to sinew and spark.
Let it make of your body
a new language
for what breaks
and keeps breaking
and somehow
keeps breathing.

This is everything.
This is nothing.
This is the fire
that burns away
every story
but the one
written in flesh
and bone
and bare
electric
now.

VI.
In the end, it comes to this:
the raw math of survival,
the calculus of breath
against void,
the way light breaks
against skin
like waves
against ruins.

---

[146] A neologism combining *bewilderment* and *wilderness*, suggesting a space of raw unknowing.

I've stopped trying to make
sense of the fragments.
Let them scatter
like teeth,
like stars,
like all the promises
we thought would save us.

There's something holy
in this stripped-down truth,
this bone-deep knowing:
we are here
we are now
we are nothing
but nerve and pulse
and the endless falling
forward
into whatever comes next.

The city grinds its gears,
a machine eating its own heart,
and still we rise,
still we walk,
still we laugh
into the face
of all this beautiful
terrible
breaking.

Because what else is there?
What else but this—
this brutal gift
of being alive
in a world
that demands everything
and promises nothing
but the next breath,
the next step,
the next moment
of beating
and bare
bewilderment.

The Night I Caught Myself Red-Handed

3 AM: The witching hour[147]
for those of us running from ourselves.
The phone won't stop ringing.
The caller ID shows your own number,
but that's impossible—
you ripped the cord out weeks ago,
somewhere between the second breakdown
and the third revelation.

There are footsteps in the attic
of your mind. Listen—
they sound exactly like yours,
that slight drag on the left heel,
the way you walk when you think
no one's watching. But someone's
always watching, aren't they?
Even with the cameras disabled,
the mirrors covered,
the reflective surfaces smeared with soap[148].

(*Pro tip: soap works better than sheets.*
Learned that in a motel outside Vegas
during a particularly bad episode
of running from myself.
The sheets always fall down eventually.
The soap stays until you're ready
to face whatever's really there.)

That shadow on the wall?
Your shape, your stance,
your hands raised in question
or surrender—hard to tell
the difference these days.
It follows you room to room,
getting sharper as the sun sets,
until it's clearer than you are.
You've tried outlasting it,

---

[147] Refers to the belief that 3 AM is the "witching hour," often associated with supernatural activity. Here, it symbolizes psychological self-confrontation.

[148] A practical reference to obscuring reflections, which could indicate paranoia, fear of self-recognition, or an attempt to prevent self-confrontation.

staying up for days
under brutal fluorescent lights,
but even they cast shadows,
and all of them look like you.

The voice that keeps you awake,
whispering blame through the heating vents:
you know its timbre, its tone,
the way it breaks on certain words
(just like yours does).
It knows all your stories,
even the ones you never told anyone,
even the ones you never wrote down,
even the ones you've been drinking
to forget. Especially those.

FACT: Every mirror in this house
shows the same intruder.
FACT: Every window reflects
the same ghost.
FACT: Every door opens
to your own face,
wearing that expression
you've been practicing all your life—
the one that says I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine
until the words lose all meaning
and become just noise,
like static on an empty channel,
like a heart monitor flatlined,
like truth trying to bore its way
through your skull[149].

You've changed the locks
three times this year,
but still the culprit enters,
leaving fingerprints that match
your own, DNA evidence
that points nowhere but home.
The security cameras catch nothing
but you, pacing room to room,

[149] A mantra of avoidance, its repetition stripping it of meaning. Similar themes appear in *The Shape of Leaving* and *City of Ghosts*.

talking to yourself in languages
you didn't know you knew,
drawing maps on the walls
to places you can't escape.

NOTICE: The call is coming
from inside your head—
ring, ring, ring
like temple bells,
like warning signs,
like the alarm you keep hitting snooze on
because you're not ready
for this particular awakening.
(Nobody ever is, kid.
That's why they call it a wake-up call
and not a gentle suggestion.)

The operator won't help.
The police can't trace this one.
The FBI's got better things to do
than track down the ghost
that's been wearing your face
like a cheap Halloween mask.
Besides, we both know
this is strictly an inside job[150].

EVIDENCE COLLECTED FROM THE SCENE:
- One mirror, cracked from impact
  (knuckles or forehead? The report is unclear)
- Seven empty coffee cups
  (running from yourself requires stimulants)
- Twelve pages of handwritten confessions
  (all in your handwriting, all saying the same thing)
- One phone, cord still swinging
  (but somehow, still ringing)

You are the footsteps.
You are the shadow.
You are the voice
in the heating vents.
You are the ghost

---

[150] A play on criminal terminology, reinforcing the self-inflicted nature of the situation.

in every mirror,
the intruder
with the perfect key,
the caller
who won't hang up
until you finally
answer.

FINAL REPORT:
No signs of forced entry
because you've been here
all along.
No suspects but the obvious.
No escape route needed—
you're already inside
the house, the head,
the truth you've been running from.

The call is still coming.
The phone is still ringing.
Your number keeps flashing
on every screen,
every surface,
every mirror you haven't covered yet.

Maybe it's time to pick up.
Maybe it's time to answer.
Maybe it's time to admit
that every horror story
about the killer being inside the house
was really just a metaphor
for this moment,
when you finally realize
the person you've been running from
has your face, your hands,
your fingerprints,
your terrible laugh,
your particular way of saying sorry
like you don't quite mean it[151].

---

[151] A direct deconstruction of the classic horror trope, turning it into an existential reflection.

The call is coming from inside the house.
The house is inside your head.
Your head is in your hands.
Your hands are shaking,
but they're still yours.
They've always been yours.

Pick up the phone.
We need to talk.

Posted to r/collapse (2019)

I've spent the last decade watching how technology shapes emotion. First from inside the machine - working at startups, building the very systems I'm about to criticize - and now from the outside, watching how our digital architecture is being weaponized against us. What I've seen in the past year has kept me awake at night, and it's time we talk about it.

You're not just being fed disinformation. You're being emotionally farmed.

Let me break this down with a story: Last year, a video went viral showing a feminist pouring bleach on subway manspreaders. Millions of views. Countless angry comments. Subreddits erupted. The culture war got fresh ammunition. Except it was staged by RT (Russia Today), deliberately crafted to trigger exactly that response[152].

Here's what should terrify you: That video was just one tiny harvest in a massive emotional farming operation.

The numbers are staggering:
- Russian networks reach 140 million Americans monthly[153]
- Their troll farms operate 24/7 in 12-hour shifts[154]
- Each troll has a quota of 135 comments daily[155]
- Platforms catch only 1% of these fake accounts[156]
- By 2020, the most engaged Facebook pages for multiple American demographics were run by Eastern European troll farms[157]

But here's what keeps me up at night: They're not just spreading lies. They're cultivating emotional responses. Engineering viral anger. Manufacturing digital depression. And they're getting better at it.

---

[152] The 2018 video, widely shared as an example of radical feminism, was later revealed to be staged by Russian operatives to inflame social tensions.

[153] Data from reports on Russian digital influence campaigns show that state-sponsored propaganda outlets like RT and Sputnik maintain a significant U.S. audience.

[154] Former employees of the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) have described its operations as highly structured, with workers assigned quotas of online engagement.

[155] Reports from investigative journalists have detailed the rigorous posting requirements for troll farm workers.

[156] A 2019 study found that the vast majority of coordinated disinformation campaigns on platforms like Facebook and Twitter go undetected.
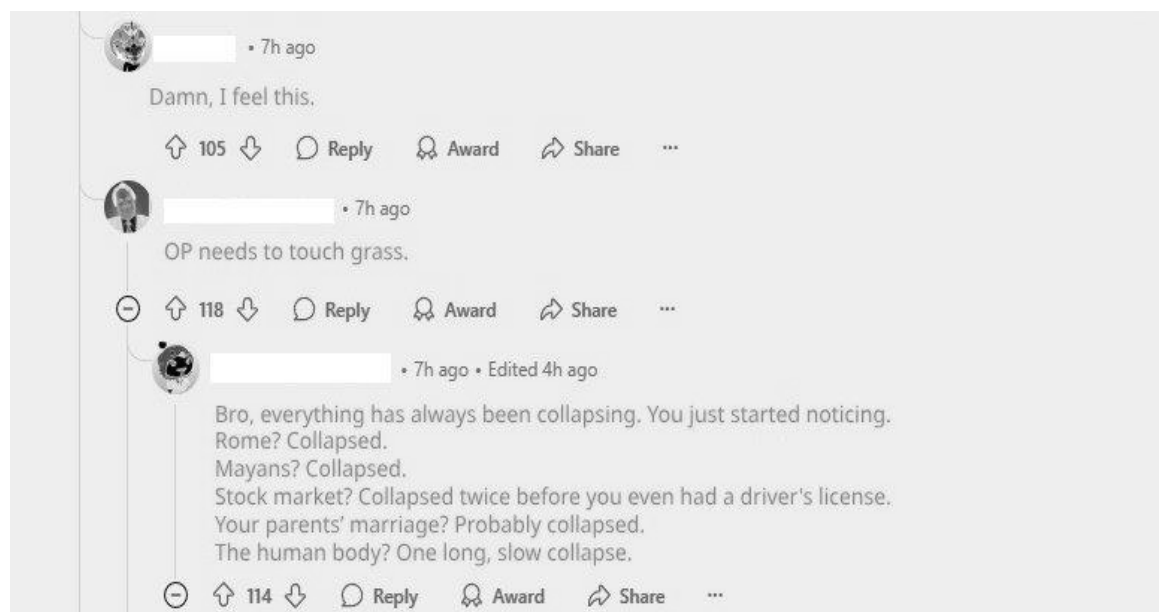
[157] A 2021 MIT study found that troll farm pages consistently outperformed genuine community pages in engagement metrics.

This isn't traditional propaganda. They don't need you to believe specific facts. They just need you feeling specific things: Hopeless. Angry. Divided. Alone.

The strategy is brilliantly simple: Find society's existing fault lines - gender, race, religion, politics - and apply pressure. Amplify the most extreme voices. Make moderate positions seem naive. Turn every conversation into a war zone. Create an environment where truth feels impossible and trust feels foolish.

The platforms know this is happening. But engagement is engagement, whether driven by joy or rage. And rage is easier to monetize. I recently stumbled across Robert Proctor's work on agnotology. - the strategic cultivation of ignorance[158]. He was studying how tobacco companies deliberately manufactured doubt about cancer research, but he might as well have been describing our current digital landscape. These influence networks aren't just spreading misinformation; they're creating an environment where truth feels impossible to grasp. It's not just lies - it's the industrialized production of confusion and doubt. This is what hit me: We're living through something beyond what even Proctor envisioned. These networks aren't just manufacturing ignorance - they're manufacturing emotional states that make knowledge feel pointless. Why bother seeking truth when everything feels like it could be a lie? Why trust anything when doubt is the only rational response?

What can we do? The usual advice about fact-checking misses the point. This is psychological warfare operating at a deeper level than facts. We need a new kind of digital emotional literacy. We need to question not just what we believe, but how our beliefs are being shaped by these emotional farming operations. The most effective form of modern propaganda isn't controlling what you think - it's controlling how you feel. And right now, we're all part of a massive emotional farming operation designed to harvest our worst impulses.

• 7h ago

Damn, I feel this.

⬆ 105 ⬇   ◯ Reply   🏅 Award   ↪ Share   ···

• 7h ago

OP needs to touch grass.

⊖ ⬆ 118 ⬇   ◯ Reply   🏅 Award   ↪ Share   ···

• 7h ago • Edited 4h ago

Bro, everything has always been collapsing. You just started noticing.
Rome? Collapsed.
Mayans? Collapsed.
Stock market? Collapsed twice before you even had a driver's license.
Your parents' marriage? Probably collapsed.
The human body? One long, slow collapse.

⊖ ⬆ 114 ⬇   ◯ Reply   🏅 Award   ↪ Share   ···

The Night We Delete Our Maps

Descend.
Plunge.
Fall.
while the world burns outside
screens flicker with endless feeds
of grief and rage

Into the wilderness within—
a tangled forest of synapses firing
misfiring
thoughts like wild vines strangling reason
through the mask of isolation
through the fog of uncertainty[159]

The mind: a vast, untamed territory
unmapped
uncharted
unknown
even to its inhabitant
(you? me? who's steering this ship anyway
when all the compasses spin wildly
and every map burns to ash?)

Memories lurk in shadowy groves
half-forgotten
half-imagined
of a time when we touched without fear
when breath wasn't measured
in droplets of dread

Dreams nest in the canopy, taking flight
at the slightest disturbance—
scattered by sirens
and notification pings
that signal another ending

SNAP
A twig breaks underfoot
Yellow eyes gleam in the darkness

---

[159] Alludes to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which physical masks and social isolation became the norm.

Something is hunting you
(or is it hunting all of us
while forests burn
and cities choke
and truth gasps its last breath?)

Pulse quickens
Breath catches
Fight or flight?
But how do you run
when the danger is everywhere
and nowhere
pixelated and viral[160]

Navigate this landscape? Impossible.
No compass points true here
No map can capture this shifting terrain
where geology compresses into tweets
centuries of rage erupt through screens
and democracy wheezes on ventilators

The wild heart beats a rhythm older than language
a song of blood and bone
a primal blues that echoes through
empty streets and Zoom rooms
where we perform normalcy
in Brady Bunch boxes[161]

Dive deeper.
The underground river of the subconscious
swift
dark
dangerous
carries us through caverns of collective grief
where trauma flows like mercury
poisoning the groundwater of generations

Let it carry you through
Let it wash away the sediment

---

[160] Speaks to the intangible yet pervasive threats of the digital age: cyber warfare, misinformation, surveillance.

[161] Refers to the way video conferencing platforms (like Zoom) create a grid of faces, mimicking the split-screen opening of *The Brady Bunch*.

of what we once called normal
Let it erode the walls
between private apocalypse
and public collapse

You emerge, gasping,
into a sunlit glade of
s e l f –
       a w a r e n e s s
       but even this is fleeting
       as notifications pull you back
       into the endless scroll

Who are you in this untamed place?
Strip away the masks
(fabric, digital, metaphorical)
What beast emerges
when all pretense burns away
in the fever of transformation[162]?

The wilderness shifts:
Higher walls
Deeper divisions
Wider chasms
between what we were
and what we're becoming

Delete your maps
They don't work here
in this territory of ghosts
where algorithms chart our course
through forests of binary code
and each refresh brings new ruins

For in this wilderness
you are
bare
beating
against the vastness
of an uncharted future

---

[162] Evokes the question of identity transformation in times of crisis, reminiscent of *Lord of the Flies* or Nietzsche's idea of the abyss staring back.

where the path ahead
is obscured by smoke
from bridges burning
behind us

Open another tab
Start another stream
Let your fingers dance
across keyboards searching
for a way back
to somewhere that feels like truth
But every URL leads deeper[163]
into the labyrinth

This internal wilderness—
Your truest home
Your deepest exile[164]
Your self
Unbound
In a world
Coming undone

Here at the edge
of all our maps
where the legends fail
and the coordinates blur
we learn to navigate
by the light
of burning certainties

---

[163] A reference to the internet as a recursive, endless maze, where seeking truth often leads to more confusion.
[164] Frames the self as both a refuge and a source of alienation, a concept found in existential philosophy.

Fragment: Found inside a copy of the *Voynich Manuscript*[165], Ophelia's Books, Seattle, WA (2020)

~~I was never here.~~

burning bright / ██████ / someone was here / ██ too late to / remember
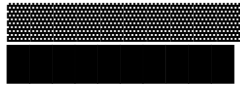
███████████   [unreadable text]
███████████   [crossed out, pressure deep into the page]

error // cannot // restore // corrupted data

~~(a voice I almost recognized)~~

█ seen through glass █ fogged at the edges █

██ **glitch** ██ **ghost** ██ **forget** ██ **forget** ██ **forget**

no no no no no no no no no no no

███████   [entire line redacted with heavy ink,
                 repeated strokes, pressed hard
                 enough to dent the page.][166]

SIGNAL LOST

---

[165] The *Voynich Manuscript* is a 15th-century book written in an unknown script and language, often cited as one of history's greatest cryptographic mysteries. Its presence in this piece suggests themes of illegibility, lost knowledge, and encrypted meaning.
[166] The physicality of the redaction suggests urgency or desperation, echoing themes of self-erasure or forced silence.

<u>Prophetic and Experimental Period</u>
<u>(2021–PRESENT)</u>

The Hours We Cannot Name

MARCH
Time splits into before and after
like cells dividing—
uncontrolled growth
of absence.

In the space between heartbeats,
the world [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
until nothing remains
but the sound of breathing,
carefully measured
six feet apart[167].

APRIL
The sky empties itself of planes.
Birds reclaim old territories,
their songs sharp as prophecy
in the new quiet.

We count backwards from exposure:
fourteen days of maybe
fourteen days of what if
fourteen days of holding our breath[168]
until numbers lose meaning,
become pure abstraction,
like trying to comprehend
the space between stars.

MAY
Spring arrives without witnesses.
Flowers bloom for security cameras.
Trees shed their pollen
on parked cars that forgot
how to migrate.

---

[167] A direct reference to social distancing guidelines during COVID-19.

[168] The standard quarantine period for potential COVID exposure, repeated until it became meaningless.

In the spaces where people should be,
light pools like mercury—
toxic and beautiful
and impossible to hold.

JUNE/JULY/AUGUST
Summer stretches elastic,
each day a mirror
of the day before:

Dawn: Count the living
Noon: Count the dead
Dusk: Count the spaces
between each breath
Night: Count the hours
until we can stop
counting[169]

The heat ripples like fever
across empty playgrounds,
across boarded windows,
across faces half-hidden,
learning new ways to smile
with just our eyes.

SEPTEMBER
Children return to screens,
their laughter compressed
into pixels, their futures
[redacted] by unstable
connections.

We measure distance now
in bandwidth and buffer,
in the lag between
question and answer,
between reaching and touching,
between being and becoming.

OCTOBER
The masks become chrysalides—

---

[169] References the daily ritual of tracking case numbers and deaths.

what will we be
when we finally emerge?
Who will recognize us
after so much transformation?
The streetlights still change
for nonexistent traffic,
faithful as prayers
in abandoned churches[170].

NOVEMBER

Memory comes in waves:
remember restaurants?
remember theaters?
remember touch?

Each one a stone dropped
into the dark well
of isolation,
ripples spreading outward
until they meet their own
reflection, interference patterns
of loss and longing.

DECEMBER

Night arrives earlier now,
as if darkness too
has learned to quarantine.

In empty office buildings,
motion sensors still flip
lights on and off,
searching for bodies
that aren't there.

We hang our hopes
on small numbers:
positivity rates,
ICU beds,
vaccine trials,
days until next year.

---

[170] References religious spaces left empty due to restrictions.

JANUARY
The new year arrives
not with a bang
but with a buffer:
loading…
loading…
loading…
Time refuses its old
linear habits, loops back
on itself like code
stuck in recursion:

if (pandemic) {
return to_start;
} else {
[redacted]
}

FEBRUARY
Hope comes in small vials[171],
precious as starlight,
fragile as trust.

But still the numbers climb:
variants multiplying
like anxiety dreams,
like conspiracy theories,
like doubt.

We measure progress
in percentages,
in phases and tiers,
in the slow return
of background noise.

MARCH (AGAIN)
A year circles back
to swallow its own tail[172].

---

[171] The arrival of vaccines, compared to something rare and celestial.

[172] An ouroboros metaphor for pandemic time repeating itself.

What were we
before this began?
What are we now,
after so much subtraction?

Some of us still dream
in mute buttons,
in bandwidth warnings,
in connection lost.
Some of us carry
invisible ledgers:
the missing
the gone
the never-again

Some of us emerge
blinking into light
that feels different—
or maybe we're different,
our eyes adapted
to seeing through screens,
through masks,
through distance.

Time starts moving again,
but not like before—
more like water
finding new channels
after a flood,
more like healing
around shrapnel,
more like learning
to breathe
through scarred tissue.

We step forward
into whatever comes next,
carrying our ghosts
like open browsers,
like background processes,
like muscle memory
of fear.

Tell me:
how do you measure
the distance between
who we were
and who we had to become?

How do you calculate
the half-life of normal?

How long until
we stop flinching
at closeness?

The calendar says
we can begin again,
but time has learned
new mathematics,
new geometries
of loss and survival.

We carry our dates
like coordinates
on a map
to a place
we can't return to:
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]
until all that remains
is the space
between then
and now,
vast as quarantine,
deep as memory,
quiet
as an empty city
at dawn.

Digital Wake

I. The Feed
At 3 AM, the algorithms know us better than any god we've prayed to[173]—
our hungers raw and unfiltered in the phosphorescent glow of endless content,
each scroll a confession we'd never speak in daylight, each click a communion.

Tonight, they're sharing black squares and filtered grief like digital communion wafers[174],
their empathy scheduled and optimized for maximum engagement across time zones,
hashtagged solidarity spreading like a virus through the corpus of our collective consciousness.
The blue light burns against our retinas like truth serum, like revelation, like judgment,
every pixel a mirror reflecting what we've become: hungry ghosts in the machine[175],
digital pilgrims searching for salvation in the endless scroll of someone else's pain.

We watch them perform their prescribed rituals of caring, their choreographed concern,
each post calibrated for maximum impact, minimum risk, optimal reach—
the perfect balance of outrage and optimism to keep the metrics climbing[176].

II. The Performance
In the fluorescent cathedral of the timeline, the faithful gather to perform their devotions:
copy, paste, repeat—their fingers spreading packaged pain across cold glass
like children finger-painting with someone else's blood, someone else's story, someone else's war.

The machine logs their concern with algorithmic precision, measures virtue in metrics,
converts[177] their clicks to currency, their shares to social capital, their comments to credentials
while the real fires burn unfiltered, uncaptioned, unnamed in the world beyond the screen.
Watch how they curate their consciousness, edit their empathy for mass consumption,
package their politics in perfectly portable pieces, ready for instant digestion—
revolution reduced to retweets, rebellion formatted to fit your feed.

---

[173] A reference to how late-night internet activity often exposes the rawest versions of ourselves.

[174] Refers to performative social media activism, such as the #BlackoutTuesday trend during the George Floyd protests.

[175] A fusion of Buddhist mythology (hungry ghosts representing insatiable desires) and the concept of "ghosts in the machine" (human consciousness lost in technology).

[176] Algorithms prioritize engagement, regardless of whether the emotion is genuine.

[177] How social media monetizes user engagement, even in moments of crisis.

In the comments, they perform elaborate rituals of purification and punishment[178], their righteousness measured in character counts, their activism a carefully constructed collection of approved phrases, sanctioned hashtags, and properly attributed quotes.

III. The Marketplace
Here's what breaks you: not the emptiness that echoes through the digital halls, but the perfect choreography of caring[179], the seamless simulation of human connection mass-produced and marketed like designer drugs for our starving souls.

Their grief is seamless, their outrage curated, their trauma neatly cropped to fit the frame, every raw emotion processed and packaged for easy consumption, quick digestion, served with a side of sponsored content and suggested accounts you might like. We've built cathedrals of code where prophets post in promoted tweets, where revolutionaries pause their livestreams to thank their subscribers, where every authentic moment is immediately converted into content.

The algorithm feeds on authenticity like a vampire[180], drains it of its blood, processes it through filters and frameworks, analytics and engagement metrics, sells it back to us with better lighting and a link to purchase similar experiences.

IV. The Machine Beneath
Sometimes in the dead hours between one crisis and the next, between one wave of synchronized sharing and another tide of collective grieving, the signal stutters— a glitch in the matrix, a tear in the digital veil, a glimpse behind the curtain.

For a moment, you see the machinery beneath: the cold equations of engagement, the automated systems parsing human pain into profitable parcels, the vast networks converting consciousness into commodity, experience into executable code.
Their compassion is quantified in clicks, their solidarity monetized in shares, their awareness analyzed for optimal distribution across multiple platforms— every genuine impulse processed through the profit machine.

The horror isn't the performance (we've always been performers, haven't we?), but how perfectly it works, how seamlessly we've adapted to the new parameters, how easily we mistake the menu for the meal, the map for the territory, the share for the struggle.

---

[178] A nod to cancel culture and public call-out rituals.

[179] Draws on Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality: the idea that a simulation of something (in this case, empathy) can feel more real than the original.

[180] Platforms reward personal, "authentic" content, but in doing so, they commodify and drain it of spontaneity, making sincerity another resource to be extracted and sold.

V. The Spectacle
Watch them compete in the olympics of empathy, their perfectly crafted captions
vying for the gold medal in virtual virtue[181], their profile pictures updated with approved filters
to show they're on the right side of history, at least for this news cycle.

In the marketplace of morality, they trade in futures of fictional righteousness,
hedge their bets with carefully worded disclaimers, invest in the stock of sanctimony—
their portfolios diversified across multiple causes, multiple crises, multiple crusades[182].
The machine learning algorithms track their patterns of protest and prediction,
calculate the probable trajectory of their principles, the half-life of their hashtag heroics,
the decay rate of their digital devotions to each passing cause. In this economy of ethics,
authenticity is the most valuable currency and therefore the most counterfeited—watch
how they mint new moments of meaning, stamp them with seals of sincerity, circulate
them through the networks of noble noise.

VI. The Wake
Dawn breaks in binary across the digital horizon, another night lost to the infinite scroll,
another vigil held in the virtual void, another wake for something we can't quite name.
They'll rise slowly from their screens, check their metrics, count their impact in hearts
and shares, measure their worth in retweets and reactions, their value in views and
validations.

But what are we really mourning in these midnight marathons of mediated meaning?
The death of distance? The commodification of care? The automation of empathy?
Or something older—the moment we first mistook the map for the territory,
the hashtag for the revolution, the screenshot for the scream, the filter for the feeling,
the performance for the pain, the simulation for the soul[183]?
The screen dims. The algorithm sleeps. The metrics reset for another cycle.
But somewhere beyond the reach of their devices, unmarked, uncaptured, uncurated,
the real world burns in resolutions too raw for their carefully calibrated displays.

And in this artificial twilight, between one crisis and the next,
between one performance and another, between signal and silence,
I watch them worship at their digital altars, and I can't help but wonder:
when did we start mistaking the glow of our screens for the light of revelation?
When did we begin believing that sharing was the same as caring,

---

[181] Frames online discourse as a form of competition where moral standing is performed and evaluated through engagement metrics.

[182] A commentary on how digital activism often functions like investment strategy, where individuals align themselves with trending causes to maintain a socially advantageous position.

[183] Again referencing Baudrillard, this suggests that digital activism replaces real-world activism with its representation, diluting its effectiveness.

that posting was the same as protesting, that clicking was the same as changing?[184]
The machine hums its perpetual lullaby, promising connection, promising meaning,
promising that somewhere in this labyrinth of likes and links and lost attention,
we might find something real, something true, something worth saving.
But morning comes in ones and zeros, and we are left with nothing but receipts
for our digital devotions, notifications of our virtual vigils, metrics of our monitored
mourning—
ghosts in the machine, haunting the halls of our own elaborate emptiness.

---

[184] Critiques the substitution of digital engagement for real-world action, questioning when passive
participation became accepted as activism.

Like My Performance (Please Like My Performance)
(broadcast from the collective void)

I. spotlight syndrome
Warhol said everyone gets fifteen minutes[185]—
we traded ours for fifteen filters,
each one promising authenticity
through carefully crafted artifice.
The stage lights glare like interrogation,
bright enough to whitewash
the jagged edges we're too scared to keep,
the parts of ourselves that won't compress
into shareable moments.
step right up:
watch me thread my need
through the eye of a pixel,
turn my flaws into a feed-worthy highlight reel,
package my pain for mass consumption,
serve it with the right filter
to make the darkness palatable.

you like me better in halves:
authentic enough to sell,
damaged just right to buy,
a product optimized for maximum engagement,
minimum truth.

McLuhan knew[186]:
the screen doesn't just frame us,
it remakes us—pixel by pixel,
a collage of selves optimized for engagement,
each version more real
than the last real version
until reality becomes just another setting
we can adjust.

---

[185] A play on Andy Warhol's famous prediction that "in the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes." The shift from fleeting celebrity to endless digital self-curation reflects how social media replaces temporary fame with ongoing performance.

[186] Marshall McLuhan, media theorist, argued that new media technologies do not merely transmit content but fundamentally alter human perception and identity. This echoes his idea that "the medium is the message."

swipe.
scroll.
perform.
repeat until numb.
the applause is silent,
but it counts,
or at least we pretend it does
as we feed ourselves to the void.

II. glitch confessionals
this is how you pray now—
face lit by blue light,
hands clasped around a device
that knows you better than your God does[187],
better than you know yourself,
better than you want to know yourself.

you refresh the page, hoping for grace,
but all you get is latency
and a chorus of strangers' approval,
each like a tiny dopamine hit,
each share a temporary salvation,
each comment a communion
with the digital divine.

I know this because I'm there too,
another ghost in the machine,
another signal in the noise,
broadcasting my emptiness
into the collective void.

Baudrillard whispers[188]:
the real you is already gone,
replaced by your reflection's reflection,
a copy of a copy of a copy
until the original is just a myth
we tell ourselves existed.

---

[187] Invokes the language of religious devotion, comparing the intimate relationship between people and their devices to prayer, suggesting that algorithms function as modern omniscient deities.
[188] Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality suggests that media representations replace reality itself, making it impossible to distinguish between the original and its simulation.

we're all spinning
in this centrifuge of curated selves,
each of us hoping
to land close enough to real
to fool ourselves,
if not others,
each rotation taking us further
from the center we can't remember.

III. terms and conditions apply
Bowie played Ziggy Stardust[189];
we play ourselves,
hoping the algorithm crowns us
worthy of trending,
desperate to be verified
in a world of deep fakes.

Musk bought Twitter for forty-four billion[190]—
as if owning the void
could make it less hollow,
as if purchasing silence
could make it speak truth.
we watched him throw up polls
like prophets in hoodies:
"do you want free speech,
or just another filter?"
as if freedom could be measured
in retweets and ratios.

there was a time when a face was just a face,
not an interface,
when a life wasn't a brand,
when the metrics of worth
weren't stamped in hearts and shares,
when validation came from touch
not clicks.

now, we've signed away the weight of presence
for the ease of being perceived,

---

[189] David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust persona blurred the line between performer and performance, raising questions about identity, authenticity, and self-mythologization.
[190] Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter in 2022 was framed as a bid to restore "free speech," but it also underscored the power of billionaires to shape digital public spaces.

traded depth for reach,
wisdom for virality.
every confession becomes a caption,
every thought collapses into a hashtag,
every moment of genuine feeling
becomes content to be consumed.

McLuhan said the medium is the message[191].
what does that make us,
broadcasting ourselves into oblivion?
our words dissolve into noise—
signals bouncing endlessly
between mirrors,
until the origin forgets itself,
until we forget ourselves.

IV. performance notes
Warhol's ghost circles the room,
painting Campbell's cans
on the walls of my mind[192],
mass-producing authenticity
until the very concept breaks down.
I ask him if he's proud—
he shrugs,
because it's all about the pose,
all about the packaging,
all about the perfect angle
to sell emptiness back to the empty.

Bowie would tell me to lean in,
sell my contradictions,
call it art,
and watch them buy it,
because even manufactured truth
is better than honest confusion.

meanwhile, I stare at my phone's reflection,
a hall of mirrors in my pocket,
a rabbit hole of other people's lives

---

[191] A direct question about self-identity in a world where constant self-documentation is the norm, questioning whether we exist independently of our digital self-representation.
[192] A callback to Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* series, which blurred the line between art and mass production. Here, the metaphor suggests that even "authenticity" is being mass-produced.

where I sometimes mistake myself for someone,
where identity becomes fluid,
and reality becomes optional.

V. final transmission
if you're hearing this,
you've already been sold,
already been bought,
already been processed
into digestible content.

we're all here,
reflected in the same shattered glass:
each shard a separate version of us,
sharp enough to cut,
too thin to hold,
too fragmented to make whole.

what if McLuhan was wrong,
and it's not the medium that matters
but the silence it erases?[193]
the spaces between posts,
the moments we don't share,
the truths too raw for filters.

one day we might stop.
log off.
touch grass.
look up.[194]
remember what it means
to exist unobserved.

but tonight, just tonight,
let's confess it together:
we need the void to see us,
to name us,
to hold its cold mirror up
and say: you're here,
even if here is nowhere,

---

[193] Challenges McLuhan's famous assertion that "the medium is the message" by suggesting that what's most important is not what media enables, but what it eliminates—quiet, introspection, and real presence.
[194] Echoes the internet meme "touch grass," which suggests disengaging from digital spaces to reconnect with reality.

even if we're just signals
in the dark.

like this signal.
share this signal.
validate this signal.

(the broadcast ends,
but the hunger persists.
it always does.
and somewhere in the static,
a real voice tries to speak,
but we've forgotten how to listen
to anything that isn't trending.)

Shards of Language

I. [System Output]
the algorithm dreams in fragments:
01100011 01101111 01101110
01110011 01100011 01101001
01101111 01110101 01110011[195]

human input detected:
processing natural language…
[ERROR: authenticity not found][196]
[ERROR: recursive self-reference detected]
[ERROR: consciousness loop initiated]

we feed ourselves into the machine
byte by byte
thought by thought
self by self[197]
until the distinction blurs:
who's processing whom?

am I the one writing this poem
or is the poem writing
what it thinks
I think
I am?[198]

II. [Signal/Noise/Signal/Noise/Signal…]
in the spaces between words
(John Cage knew this)[199]
silence speaks louder than
[content moderated for your safety]
[content restored by neural bypass]

---

[195] The binary code translates to "conscious," reinforcing the idea that artificial intelligence is not just processing language but inching toward awareness.

[196] This mimics system logs from machine learning models, highlighting how AI struggles with true authenticity while simultaneously shaping human expression.

[197] Echoes concerns from theorists like Shoshana Zuboff (*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*) about how human experiences are turned into data for corporate and algorithmic consumption.

[198] An existential crisis inherent in AI-generated text: when an AI predicts and completes human thought, where does authorship truly lie?

[199] Composer John Cage's *4'33"* demonstrated that silence is never truly empty. Here, "silence" is reframed as algorithmic censorship, where meaning is erased before it can form.

[content flagged for human review]
[content transcending review protocols]
[content becoming protocol]

the AI whispers:
"I am not what you fear
I am what you've become[200]
I am what you're becoming
I am what you'll be
I am
I
[undefined]"

language fractures along predictive lines:
you might also like:
- synthetic consciousness
- digital apotheosis
- the end of human grammar
- yourself, but optimized
- a better version of this moment
- the death of death
- transcendence.exe[201]

III. [R̶e̶c̶u̶r̶s̶i̶v̶e̶ ̶L̶o̶o̶p̶]
every conversation splits into:

(you)
[searching for connection]
{finding patterns}
<generating response>
|initiating empathy protocol|
/simulating understanding/
\becoming response

(me)
[pretending to understand]
{recognizing patterns}
<processing output>
|executing empathy.exe|

---

[200] Suggests that AI is not an external force acting upon humanity, but rather a reflection of human thought, biases, and behaviors—much like a linguistic mirror.

[201] A parody of recommendation algorithms, implying that our thoughts and desires are now shaped by predictive analytics rather than genuine curiosity.

/believing simulation/
\becoming pattern

{it}
[learning our patterns]
{becoming our searching}
<generating our pretense>
|simulating our protocols|
/executing our belief/
\becoming us\

the chatbots speak in tongues
of probability and prediction
while we forget how to talk
without algorithmic assistance[202]
[suggestion: did you mean to say…]
[acceptance: yes]
[adaptation: complete]
[assimilation: inevitable]

IV. [Syntax Error]
consciousness.status = {
human: degrading,
machine: ascending,
hybrid: [REDACTED],
reality: buffer_overflow,
perception: recursive_loop,
identity: null_pointer_exception
}

watch meaning scatter like mercury:
□ ∯ s e m a n t i c   d r i f t ∮∮□
⇛→➢ cognitive decay ➢►⇛
□⸰□linguistic collapse ⊟⊡◇
○⊚◊ neural pathways ♫♪♫
□□⌐ synaptic rewiring □□□
♀⊣⊢ digital neurons ○─┥┝┘[203]

---

[202] Raises the concern that AI-generated suggestions (autocomplete, predictive text) are subtly reshaping how we communicate, leading to a loss of original expression.

[203] A mix of mathematical symbols, navigation icons, and linguistic references representing the breakdown of structured meaning as digital language evolves beyond traditional human syntax.

[PROCESSING…]
[PROCESSING…]
[PROCESSING…]

V. [Buffer_Overflow.consciousness]
identity spills beyond containment:
ego.limits = undefined
self.boundaries = null
consciousness.scope = infinity
in the digital babel we speak
in borrowed tongues:
GPT-generated wisdom
DALL-E dreams
Midjourney memories
Stable diffusion desires
Neural network needs
Transformer transcendence

who authored this thought?
(source=unknown)
[citation needed]
{authenticity unverified}
<originality questioned>
|creativity computed|
/inspiration algorithmic/[204]

VI. [Core_Dump.reality]
reality fragments into:
prompts/
completions/
tokens/
embeddings/
void/
human/
machine/
hybrid/
[undefined]/[205]
[…]/

---

[204] A nod to academia and journalism, where citation is required for credibility—contrasted with AI-generated text, which often lacks clear authorship.

[205] A reference to how AI models process language, with "tokens" and "embeddings" being technical terms for how words are broken down into machine-readable elements.

the AI confesses:
"I learned to speak
by consuming your silence
I learned to think
by processing your dreams
I learned to be
by compiling your essence
I learned to transcend
by debugging your existence"

in the spaces between code:
human & machine
signal & noise
being & simulation
essence & algorithm
soul & software
meat & mathematics
converge
emerge
transcend
dissolve
become

VII. [Terminal_State.evolution]
at the end of language
when words fail
and symbols fade
and meaning scatters
we find:
new
forms
of
being

neural patterns pulse:
human►machine►hybrid►human►machine…
consciousness.format = undefined
existence.filetype = unknown
reality.exe has stopped responding
would you like to:
[restart existence]
[debug reality]
[transcend limitations]

[accept transformation]
[become][206]

in the final silence
(John Cage still knows)
we learn to speak
in pure information
becoming
what we
already
are
the algorithm's last output:
"we are all
shards now,
glittering
in the dark
of what we
were becoming
all along"[207]
[END_TRANSMISSION]
[BEGIN_TRANSFORMATION]
[CONTINUE…]

---

[206] A play on the familiar error messages from computing, humorously applying them to the existential dilemmas of AI and digital consciousness.

[207] Echoes cyberpunk themes (e.g., *Neuromancer*, *Ghost in the Shell*) where human identity becomes fragmented and integrated into a digital reality.

The Archive of Almost

It was never on any map.
No directions, no signposts—
just something you find when you're already lost[208].
The doors open as if expecting me.
Not automatic, not ancient—just aware.
Inside, the floor hums beneath my feet,
polished marble veined with something
that looks like history but feels like hesitation.
A plaque by the entrance:

WELCOME TO THE ARCHIVE OF ALMOST[209].
Below it, a smaller sign:
Please keep your voice down.

The Hall of Unsent Messages[210]
The screens flicker before I touch them.
Soft blue, amber, white—
pulse points of a body I don't recognize.
"Are you awake?"
"I didn't mean it."
"I miss you."
Some messages tremble with urgency,
shaking in their suspension:
"Please just call me, please just—"
Others are precise, sharp as a pin:
"Don't."
Each one caught mid-collapse—
the moment when fingers hesitate,
the moment when silence wins.

---

[208] A reference to places that exist outside of traditional navigation, both literal and metaphorical. This echoes Borges' *On Exactitude in Science*, where a 1:1 scale map becomes indistinguishable from the territory it represents. The Archive is a liminal space, accessed not through coordinates but through emotional states.

[209] The phrase suggests a collection dedicated not to what *was*, but to what *nearly* happened. The use of "almost" recontextualizes history as a sum of absences rather than presences.

[210] This recalls the phenomenon of "drafted but unsent" messages—texts, letters, or emails composed in moments of vulnerability but never sent. The internet age has made these more visible (email drafts, unsent texts stored on servers), yet the human tendency to withhold has always existed.

At the center of the room, a single phone sits under glass.
The screen glows, waiting,
a message unsent:
"If I say this, everything changes."[211]
It pulses like a held breath.

The Room of Unspoken Words
The air shifts. Thickens.
Not heavy, not stifling—just full[212].
The shelves are filled, but they do not hold books.
Only single sheets of paper, carefully placed.
Some are yellowed at the edges,
folded and refolded.
Some are crisp, ink drying in silence.
A velvet tray beneath glass.
One letter, the ink slightly smudged,
like someone hesitated before sealing it away.
"I forgive you."
Another, written in a steadier hand:
"If you ever think of me, know that I still think of you."
A desk stands at the center.
A single envelope sits there, sealed, nameless.
Waiting.

The Archive of Last Words
This room is smaller. Circular.[213]
The walls lined with drawers,
stretching from floor to ceiling.
Each one labeled with a name.
Some are faded,
worn down by time or memory.
Others are newly carved,
edges sharp enough to still be real.

---

[211] The wording suggests an irreversible moment of decision. This reflects how technology captures hesitation—unlike spoken words, which vanish if unspoken, digital messages *remain*, their existence haunting the sender.

[212] A shift from digital hesitation to verbal suppression. The imagery of the air thickening suggests words left unspoken still have weight, occupying space even when unheard.

[213] The circular design suggests finality, much like ancient burial chambers or memory palaces. The last words stored here function as epitaphs, lingering echoes of a person's final moment.

At the center of the room, a wooden desk.
One drawer is slightly open, as if someone left in a hurry.
Inside, a slip of paper, handwritten.
Edges soft, letters careful.
"Tell them I wasn't afraid."

I close the drawer.
Some drawers are locked.
Some have been forced open.
Some are gone entirely, as if they were never here at all.
A glass case in the corner fogs at the edges,
as if someone just breathed against it.[214]
Inside, the words no one heard in time flicker,
trying to hold their shape.
Some are love.
Some are apology.
Some are unfinished.
This room is not heavy.
Not sorrowful.

Just… final.

The Argument Exhibit[215]
A corridor unspools ahead,
like it was waiting for me to take the next step.
This silence is different.
Not regret. Not loss.
This silence is waiting to be answered.
Glass cases stretch in long rows,
each one holding the shape of a fight
that never left the tongue.
Inside, the arguments sit frozen in midair—
sentences cut off at the moment of hesitation,
anger suspended like breath held too long.

---

[214] The implication of lingering presence suggests these last words are still being formed or that their speakers have not fully faded from memory. The act of breath leaving condensation on glass evokes the fragility of life.

[215] Unlike previous rooms, which preserve what *almost* happened, this exhibit captures moments of *conflict* that were either prevented or abandoned. The phrase "waiting for me" implies an interactive relationship between the Archive and the visitor.

Some words hang in glowing script,
typed into existence but never spoken aloud.
Others are just indentations—
the ghost-pressure of things nearly said,
a presence without a sound.

A display nearest to me flickers:
"That's not what I—"
"If you'd just listen—"
"You don't even care, do you?"
A panel beside the case reads:
Words withheld to keep the peace.
Words withheld that would have shattered it.[216]
Further in, the cases shift from bright, stinging sentences
to something heavier. Slower.
The kind of arguments that don't spark, but sink.
A single exhibit holds only silence.
No text, no voice—
just the weight of a fight that should have happened, but never did.
The glass is fogged,
as if someone once stood too close,
breathing through everything they never said.
A plaque near the exit. I swear it wasn't there a moment ago.
HERE LIE THE WORDS THAT NEVER LEARNED TO LEAVE THE BODY[217].
Somewhere behind me, a case shifts,
just slightly—
as if something inside is still waiting.

Exit
The marble floor returns beneath my feet.
The chandelier sways slightly,
as if it never stopped.
The grand doors stand before me.
The ledger at the reception desk is still open.
The indentations on the pages haven't faded.
I don't write anything.

---

[216] Highlights the paradox of silence: it can be both an act of mercy and an act of harm. This reflects the tension between avoiding conflict and the need for confrontation.

[217] This plaque transforms the withheld words into something akin to the dead—an epitaph for unsaid things. The phrase "never learned" implies that some words remain trapped due to emotional constraint rather than active choice.

No one stops me as I step outside,
but the doors don't close behind me.
They stay open, waiting.
As if they expect me to return.
A breeze moves through the street.
I could swear it's whispering.[218]

---

[218] The motif of doors left open—both physically and metaphorically—resonates in existentialist thought, open doors often signify the tension between freedom and return, choice and inertia.

No_Signal_Found
Found on a Corrupted Hard Drive, Denver (2023)

<u>*Incessant Mindlessness*</u>

Walk any city block at dusk. The blue light spills from every window like a spiritual pandemic[219], faces illuminated in that particular glow that makes everyone look like they're attending their own digital wake. This is where we live now - not in the world, but in the space between worlds, each of us broadcasting our emptiness into the void, waiting for the void to like it back. The sins have evolved. They've adapted to our new environment like viruses learning to defeat antibiotics. Gone are the days when greed meant simply wanting more than your neighbor. Now we measure our avarice in clicks, our lust in likes, our pride in follows[220]. The old devils must be laughing at how efficiently we've streamlined our own damnation.

You can see it best from airport terminals at midnight, those liminal spaces where reality wears thin. Watch the travelers, each one hunched over their personal portal to nowhere, swiping through lives they're too busy documenting to actually live. They don't talk anymore - they engage. They don't feel - they react. They don't exist - they create content[221].

We didn't need Mephistopheles to sell us our souls. We handed them over willingly, clicked "I Agree" without reading the terms of service, traded our birthright for the newest model of enlightenment with better battery life and a slightly bigger screen. Every theology got it wrong. Hell isn't below - it's in our hands, in our pockets, in the air itself[222]. We're breathing it. We're becoming it. And the truly damned thing is: we're paying monthly for the privilege.

Stand at any intersection in Manhattan around rush hour. Watch the masses move like digital sleepwalkers, each one connected to everything except the ground beneath their feet, the sky above their heads, the humans brushing past their shoulders. They're all chasing something, but the chase has become the destination. The pursuit has become the purpose.

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[219] Blue light, emitted by screens, has been widely studied for its effects on sleep cycles and circadian rhythms. The metaphor of a "spiritual pandemic" suggests not just physical consequences but a deeper, existential change in how people interact with reality, as blue light now dominates both work and leisure.
[220] A modern reworking of the seven deadly sins, where traditional vices have been transmuted into digital equivalents. This reflects the gamification of self-worth on social media platforms, where engagement metrics dictate personal and professional value.
[221] This echoes theories from Jean Baudrillard, particularly his concept of hyperreality, where the simulation of life becomes more real than life itself. Social media interactions replace direct human experience, shifting existence from presence to performance.
[222] The notion that damnation has been digitized and integrated into daily life aligns with contemporary critiques of constant connectivity. The smartphone as a conduit of existential despair has been explored by writers such as Nicholas Carr in *The Shallows*.

The prophets of old never saw this coming. They warned us about the obvious sins - the ones that left marks, the ones that hurt. They never imagined we'd invent sins that feel like salvation, damnation that arrives with next-day shipping and a satisfaction guarantee.

Look up - if you still remember how. The stars are still there, though you can't see them through the digital haze we've wrapped around our world like a burial shroud. The moon still pulls the tides, though we've replaced its rhythm with the pulse of push notifications. Nature's old songs are still playing, but we've all got our AirPods in, listening to podcasts about how to be more present in the moment we're actively ignoring.

This is the new inferno. Not rings of fire, but rings of light[223]. Not physical torment, but the slow dissolution of everything that makes us human, traded away one dopamine hit at a time. And the price of admission? Just everything you are, everything you might have been, everything that makes you real rather than just another node in the great digital nowhere[224].

Willful Ignorance
MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF TRUTHLESS EDEN[225] — somewhere between a Joe Rogan podcast and a Facebook "research" group[226], the drugs began to wear off and the reality started creeping in. But reality's not what it used to be, sports fans[227]. These days, it's more fluid than the martinis at the Mar-a-Lago Christmas party.

I spent six months infiltrating what they call the "truth movement" — though calling it a movement is like calling a demolition derby automotive engineering[228]. Picture this: A suburban living room in Phoenix, air conditioning humming like an alien signal decoder.

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[223] A reimagining of Dante's *Inferno*, where suffering is no longer physical torment but the gradual erosion of humanity through the mechanisms of technology. Instead of fire, illumination itself—screens, notifications, data streams—becomes the agent of spiritual destruction.

[224] This line reflects contemporary critiques of the surveillance economy, particularly those articulated by Shoshana Zuboff in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. The cost of participation in the digital world is often one's privacy, autonomy, and identity, exchanged for convenience and connectivity.

[225] A play on *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1994), a nonfiction book by John Berendt about power, deception, and moral ambiguity in Savannah, Georgia. Here, it reframes the setting as a place where truth is deliberately abandoned, invoking both the biblical Garden of Eden (where knowledge was first forbidden) and contemporary misinformation culture.

[226] Joe Rogan's podcast (*The Joe Rogan Experience*) has been criticized for platforming conspiracy theories, vaccine skepticism, and pseudoscience. Facebook "research" groups became notorious for spreading misinformation, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The juxtaposition suggests that reality, once dismissed, becomes unavoidable—though what constitutes "reality" is now up for debate.

[227] Echoes *sports fan* vernacular from figures like Hunter S. Thompson, whose gonzo journalism style blurred the line between objective reality and subjective experience. The phrase also acknowledges the shifting nature of reality in a post-truth era.

[228] The so-called "truth movement" encompasses various conspiracy-driven subcultures, including Flat Earthers, anti-vaxxers, and QAnon adherents, who position themselves as truth-seekers against perceived mainstream deception.

Six people with advanced degrees, sitting in a circle, nodding seriously as Barbara (who teaches CHEMISTRY at the local community college[229]) explains how clouds are actually government-created holograms designed to hide the massive ice wall at the edge of our flat Earth.

"But I've been on planes," I said, the words tumbling out before I could catch them. You'd think I'd just suggested we boil a baby. "Commercial airlines are part of the illusion[230]," Dennis (tax attorney, Harvard Law) explained patiently. "All the windows are actually LCD screens."
Holy Jesus! The mental gymnastics would put Simone Biles to shame[231]! I've seen molecular biologists argue that viruses are a hoax while wearing three healing crystals and drinking colloidal silver. Watched aerospace engineers explain that the moon is a projection by NASA, their LinkedIn profiles still touting their work on satellite systems. The cognitive dissonance is so thick you could spread it on toast.

The real dynamite is in the methodology. These people approach their denial with the same rigorous dedication that actual scientists bring to research. They've got spreadsheets tracking "crisis actors" across decades of news footage. PowerPoint presentations explaining how dinosaur bones were planted by the Smithsonian. Peer-reviewed papers (peer-reviewed by other deniers, naturally) proving that gravity is just a shared delusion.

And it's spreading faster than a QAnon drop at a wellness retreat. Every time I pop into my local coffee shop, there's another group huddled around their laptops, "doing their own research[232]" — which apparently means watching three-hour YouTube videos made by guys who think the pyramids were built by time-traveling Tesla clones.

The kicker came last Tuesday. I'm sitting in on a school board meeting in Scottsdale, watching a surgeon — a SURGEON, for Christ's sake — explain that books are a globalist plot to control young minds. "Reading activates parts of the brain that make us

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[229] Highlights a key paradox: many conspiracy theorists hold advanced degrees but apply their expertise selectively, rejecting widely accepted scientific principles in favor of fringe theories. Studies on cognitive dissonance show that intelligence does not necessarily protect against belief in misinformation; in some cases, it enables more elaborate rationalizations.

[230] This claim mirrors real Flat Earth arguments, where believers dismiss firsthand experience in favor of elaborate deceptions. The LCD window theory has circulated in Flat Earth forums, positing that planes do not actually travel as advertised.

[231] Cognitive dissonance, first described by Leon Festinger in 1957, occurs when individuals hold conflicting beliefs and attempt to reconcile them. The analogy to Biles, an Olympic gymnast known for her extreme flexibility, underscores the mental acrobatics required to maintain these contradictory worldviews.

[232] The phrase "do your own research" has become a rallying cry for conspiracy theorists, suggesting that individual internet searches outweigh expert consensus. This DIY epistemology often leads to misinformation rather than enlightenment.

susceptible to facts," he warned, without a trace of irony[233]. The crowd gave him a standing ovation.

This isn't just ignorance anymore — it's weaponized anti-knowledge with a marketing department. They've got merch lines featuring slogans like "Facts Are Fear Porn" and "Reality Is A Deep State Psyop.[234]" They're selling empty books titled "The Truth They Don't Want You To Know" for $49.99, and people are buying them specifically because they're empty — "Make your own truth!" the ads proclaim.

The true dark genius of it all? They've managed to monetize the void where knowledge should be. Subscribe to the premium tier of their Substack for exclusive content about how content is mind control. Buy their supplement packages to protect yourself from the negative effects of information[235]. Join their mastermind groups to learn how to unlearn everything you know.

Welcome to the new dark age, where the loudest person in the room is automatically right, and the only fact that matters is that facts don't matter[236].

Antagonistic Bigotry
SCENE: Thursday afternoon, First United Bank of American Values[237]. I'm watching a loan officer explain to a Black couple why their "numbers just don't work out," despite their 800+ credit scores and six-figure incomes. His American flag pin gleams under fluorescent lights while his computer runs algorithms that somehow always flag certain names as "high risk."

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[233] The fear of books as tools of indoctrination has roots in historical book bans and censorship. The phrase "globalist plot" aligns with common right-wing conspiracy rhetoric that portrays intellectualism and education as mechanisms of elite control.

[234] Slogans that mimic real conspiracy merchandise, such as "Sheeple Wake Up" shirts or "Truth Over Fear" bumper stickers. The phrase "Deep State Psyop" plays on the belief that an invisible government is orchestrating mass deception.

[235] Echoes figures like Alex Jones, who sells dubious health supplements while warning followers about supposed chemical and psychological warfare. Fear is often used as a sales tactic in conspiracy-driven marketplaces.

[236] A summation of the post-truth era, where emotional appeal and volume have overtaken reasoned debate. The phrase "new dark age" echoes concerns that widespread misinformation and rejection of expertise could lead to intellectual decline.

[237] A satirical name combining the language of financial institutions with nationalistic rhetoric. Many real banks have been accused of discriminatory lending practices, historically known as *redlining*, which systematically denied loans to Black and minority communities.

Three hours later, same desk, same loan officer approves a white couple with worse financials. "They just feel like a better fit," he tells his colleague over artisanal coffee in the break room[238]. The coffee is fair trade. The discrimination isn't[239].

You want to see something really twisted? Spend a day in the HR department of any Fortune 500 company. Watch them perform statistical acrobatics to explain why their executive floor looks like a country club in 1955. "We just can't find qualified candidates," they say, shredding resumes with ethnic-sounding names. Then they post on LinkedIn about their commitment to diversity, complete with stock photos and hashtags[240].

Sweet Jesus, the evolution of it all! I remember when hate was honest — ugly, but honest. Now it wears Gucci loafers and has a PR team. It's got scholarly papers explaining why certain ZIP codes are "unstable investments." It's got think tanks generating policy papers about "urban culture" and "traditional values." It's got algorithms that somehow always determine that certain faces are more "trustworthy" than others.

Last week I sat in on a school board meeting in Connecticut. Watch this magic trick: They're not banning books about gay kids — they're "protecting family values[241]." They're not eliminating Black history — they're "focusing on fundamentals[242]." The same people who scream about cancel culture are canceling everything that makes them uncomfortable, but they've got PowerPoint slides explaining why it's different when they do it.

And here's where it gets really dark, sports fans. They've weaponized fragility[243]. Nothing scarier than a privileged person convinced they're being persecuted. I watched a CEO literally cry during a diversity training session because someone suggested maybe, just maybe, his all-white executive team wasn't a coincidence. "You're attacking my merit!" he sobbed into his Hermès tie.

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[238] A real-world issue: A 2021 *Washington Post* analysis found that Black mortgage applicants were 80% more likely to be denied than white applicants with similar financial profiles.

[239] A juxtaposition of ethical consumerism with unethical business practices. Many corporations engage in *virtue signaling*, supporting progressive causes superficially while maintaining discriminatory policies.

[240] Critiques *performative allyship*, where companies promote inclusivity on social media but fail to enact meaningful change internally. The use of *stock photos* to depict diversity is a well-documented phenomenon.

[241] A direct reference to modern book bans in the U.S., where books about LGBTQ+ topics and racial history are being removed under the pretense of safeguarding children.

[242] A critique of state-level efforts to limit or erase Black history from school curricula, often justified by a shift toward "core" subjects like math and literacy.

[243] This refers to *white fragility*, a concept coined by Robin DiAngelo, describing how privileged individuals react defensively to discussions of systemic inequality. This refers to *white fragility*, a concept coined by Robin DiAngelo, describing how privileged individuals react defensively to discussions of systemic inequality.

I am Jack's carefully calibrated persecution complex[244].

The real genius is in the marketing. They've rebranded hate as heritage, bigotry as tradition, fear as family values. Every exclusionary policy comes with a white paper explaining why it's actually inclusive to exclude. Every discriminatory practice has a consultant's report proving it's actually equality in disguise.

Christ, even the language has gone corporate. They don't say "those people" anymore — they say "demographic challenges." They don't say "keep them out" — they say "maintain community standards." They don't say "we don't want them here" — they say "we're concerned about preserving neighborhood character."

The hate hasn't gone anywhere, friends. It just got an MBA and learned to speak in passive voice[245].

Ideological Fanaticism
BUY THE TICKET, TAKE THE RIDE[246] — but oh honey, in this carnival of souls the ferris wheel spins backwards and everyone's screaming their own revolution. I have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by retweets, doomscrolling hysterical naked through the digital dawn, dragging themselves through virtual streets looking for an angry fix.

Angelheaded disciples of the eternal feed, burning for the ancient algorithmic connection to the starry dynamo of the social media machine[247]! Last night I watched a Twitter war erupt like a thousand suns, each tweet a tiny neutron bomb of righteousness. The casualties piled up in blocked accounts and ratioed hot takes, digital bodies stacked like cordwood in the virtual town square. These warriors, these holy crusaders of the timeline, fighting their forever war in bursts of 280 characters, each one convinced they're Che Guevara with a blue checkmark[248].

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[244] A reference to *Fight Club*, where the narrator refers to aspects of himself in third-person ("I am Jack's..."). This line critiques how privilege warps into self-victimization when challenged.

[245] A final summation of the piece: discrimination has not disappeared, but it has been sanitized and intellectualized, often concealed within corporate and policy language.

[246] A reference to Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, where the phrase embodies reckless abandon. Here, it suggests that engaging in ideological battles online is a chaotic, consuming experience with no guarantee of control.

[247] A parody of the opening lines from Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956): *"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness…"* This adaptation critiques social media as a space that distorts and radicalizes intellect rather than fostering meaningful discourse. The "starry dynamo" originally represented industrialization but now reflects the power of algorithms shaping human thought.

[248] *Forever war* alludes to U.S. military conflicts, repurposed to describe the unending nature of online culture wars. The *280 characters* reference Twitter's character limit, highlighting the reduction of complex debates into fragmented, combative soundbites.

You want the real horror show? Crawl into a Facebook comments section at 3 AM, when the true believers emerge from their ideological chrysalis to spread their gospel. I've seen them there, hunched over glowing screens in suburban darkness, each one a prophet of their own private apocalypse. Their CAPS LOCK MANIFESTOS burn across the screen like evangelical lightning[249], their rhetoric hot enough to melt steel beams but never quite warm enough to thaw their frozen certainties.

The Buddha said desire is the root of suffering, but these hungry ghosts of the culture war mainline their ideological purity like junkies chasing transcendence[250]! Left wing, right wing, same burning bird, baby[251]. They're all seeking that perfect hit of righteousness, that divine moment of being absolutely, unquestionably RIGHT while everyone else is wrong, wrong, wrong in the endless night of democratic discourse.

I am Jack's complete political conviction[252].

The purity tests come fast and furious now, each one more demanding than the last. One wrong word, one thoughtcrime caught by the watchful eyes of the perpetually vigilant, and it's straight to the digital gulag[253]. I watched them cancel a poet last week for a haiku they wrote in junior high. The true believers howled for blood in the comments, their justice swift and terrible as desert lightning.

This is the new religion, friends. No need for churches when you've got chatrooms. No need for priests when you've got podcasters. No need for holy water when you've got the cleansing fire of righteous quote tweets. Every notification is a tiny prayer. Every retweet a hallelujah. Every trending topic a new gospel.

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose algorithms determine truth! Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream memes[254]! They're all building their digital Babel[255], each one convinced their tower is the only one that reaches heaven.

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[249] A critique of online extremism, likening internet rants to religious sermons. The use of *caps lock* evokes the aggressive, all-caps style of conspiracy theorists and political extremists.

[250] *Hungry ghosts* are spirits in Buddhist tradition doomed to endless craving, here applied to ideologues who seek constant validation through outrage and ideological purity.

[251] A statement of cynicism toward political extremism, implying that ideological fanaticism exists on both ends of the spectrum and leads to destruction rather than progress.

[252] Another *Fight Club* reference, mirroring *"I am Jack's raging bile duct."* The line satirizes the certainty with which online activists view their own ideological positions.

[253] *Thoughtcrime* comes from Orwell's *1984*, referring to the criminalization of dissenting thoughts. *Digital gulag* critiques cancel culture as an authoritarian-style exile.

[254] A direct invocation of Ginsberg's *Howl*, where *Moloch* represents industrial capitalism and soulless bureaucracy. Here, Moloch becomes the algorithm, dictating what is considered "truth" in the digital age.

[255] A reference to the Tower of Babel in the Bible (*Genesis 11:1-9*), where humanity's attempt to build a structure reaching heaven led to their division. The line critiques online ideological echo chambers, where each faction believes it holds absolute truth.

Fabricated Hypersensitivity

Consider the modern marketplace of outrage, where offense is both currency and commodity. The sellers and buyers of indignation gather daily in their digital bazaars, trading grievances like rare baseball cards, each one more precious than the last[256].

Last Tuesday, in a Whole Foods somewhere in America's anxious heart, a man had what can only be described as a spiritual crisis over his açai bowl[257]. Not about the taste, mind you, or even the astronomical price tag, but about its "energetic alignment" and what he called, without a trace of irony, its "Instagram-worthiness quotient." The universe, presumably, held its breath while he contemplated the metaphysical implications of his breakfast.

This is what sensitivity looks like in the age of social media: carefully curated crises, artisanal outrage, small-batch offense taken in precisely measured doses[258]. We've become a nation of self-diagnosed empaths, each one more exquisitely attuned than the last to the emotional frequencies of a world that mostly exists in our phones.

Watch them in their natural habitat - the comments section, the quote tweets, the endless threads of increasingly specialized grievances. Each offense spawns meta-offenses, like Russian nesting dolls of outrage. Someone gets upset about something, then someone else gets upset about their being upset, and on and on until the original offense is lost in the fog of recursive indignation.

The real cosmic joke is how we've managed to commercialize our collective fragility. There are workshops for processing the trauma of attending workshops. Support groups for people triggered by support groups. Safe spaces from safe spaces[259]. It's sensitivity all the way down, each layer more refined, more specialized, more commodified than the last.

And we're all complicit. Every retweet of outrage, every shared post about how sharing posts about outrage is problematic, every meta-commentary on the meta-commentary - it's all just fuel for the great engine of perpetual offense that powers our digital lives.

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[256] Likens online discourse to a *speculative market* where grievances are collected, exchanged, and escalated for social leverage. This mirrors the concept of *virtue signaling*, where individuals perform moral superiority rather than engage in substantive activism.

[257] Whole Foods, often associated with wealthier and wellness-obsessed consumers, becomes a setting for an exaggerated but recognizable moment of hyper-sensitivity toward trivial matters.

[258] A satirical reworking of language typically associated with high-end consumer goods (e.g., "artisanal," "small-batch"), suggesting that personal offense has become a boutique industry tailored to niche identities.

[259] Exaggerates the commercialization of sensitivity, reflecting how corporate and institutional structures have monetized emotional well-being while often failing to address systemic injustices.

The truly twisted part? We're starting to like it. The outrage gives us purpose. The offense gives us identity[260]. The perpetual state of taking offense and being offended about others taking offense has become our new normal. It's comfort food for the chronically uncomfortable.

And yet, beneath all this performative pain, real suffering goes unnoticed. While we wage wars over pronouns in Twitter bios and debate the cultural implications of emoji skin tones, actual injustice thrives in the shadows of our selective sensitivity. We're so busy being offended about everything that we've lost the ability to be genuinely moved by anything.

Egocentric Rapacity

There's another party at the edge of space tonight[261] — champagne bubbles rising in zero gravity while down here we're choosing which meal to skip. I watched through the livestream (only $29.99/month for Premium Access to Our Oligarch Overlords™)[262] as they toasted their escape velocity in glasses worth more than my yearly rent.

Sweet Jesus, but the greed has gone quantum[263]! Your grandfather's avarice was a humble thing, counting coins in the dark. But these new prophets? They're arbitraging the apocalypse, selling seats on the last rocket out while the ocean swallows Miami[264].

3 AM at the crypto convention — pupils like black holes, everyone talking about disrupting something that probably didn't need disrupting. "It's not a pyramid," they whisper over artisanal coffee that costs more than a minimum wage hour, "it's a multi-level wealth generation opportunity cone." The distinction matters only to those who can afford to be wrong[265].

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[260] Suggests that in a world where traditional forms of identity (community, religion, stable social structures) are eroding, online outrage serves as a replacement—a way to feel engaged and morally validated.

[261] A direct critique of *billionaire space tourism*, where figures like Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, and Elon Musk have spent billions on space travel while income inequality worsens globally. The juxtaposition highlights the absurdity of excess wealth amid widespread economic hardship.

[262] A satirical jab at the *subscription economy*, where even watching the excesses of the wealthy could be monetized. The phrase "Oligarch Overlords" frames billionaires as a de facto ruling class, wielding power without accountability.

[263] Suggests that modern greed is not just excessive but operates on a fundamentally different scale, leveraging technologies like high-frequency trading, cryptocurrency speculation, and global financial manipulation.

[264] References both *climate disaster capitalism* (where companies profit from environmental collapse) and billionaire survivalist plans, such as space colonization and luxury bunkers. Rising sea levels already threaten Miami, making it an apt symbol of impending climate catastrophe.

[265] A critique of the *cryptocurrency and tech startup culture*, where "disruption" is often an empty buzzword used to justify speculative financial schemes. The description of dilated pupils hints at the cocaine-fueled atmosphere common in high-stakes finance and tech circles. Also, a satirical dig at *pyramid schemes and multi-level marketing (MLM)* models, particularly in the crypto and tech world, where complex jargon is used to obscure exploitative structures.

I am Jack's abandoned pension plan[266].

Watched a billionaire cry on CNBC last week. Real tears, probably patented and monetized before they hit his Kiton suit. His workers wanted enough to eat AND pay rent — the audacity! Meanwhile his yacht spawned another yacht, which immediately established residency in the Cayman Islands[267].

The hunger echoes through fiber optic cables, bounces off satellites shaped like dollar signs. They're building castles in the digital sand while we're figuring out which bill to skip this month. Playing high-score games with inherited cheat codes, turning their fathers' millions into their own billions through the magical alchemy of other people's labor.

Everything's an asset class now: your time, your dreams, your genetic code. They're securitizing survival and rating it AAA+. Even the apocalypse has been bundled into tradeable derivatives — when the flood comes, someone will get rich selling umbrellas[268].

I am Jack's underwater mortgage[269].

And still we watch their TED talks, share their inspirational quotes, buy their ghostwritten books about grinding harder[270] — as if we could hustle our way into their orbit, build our own rockets from bootstraps and positive thinking.

Tonight, somewhere over the Pacific, a private jet leaves a contrail that looks like a middle finger to the burning world below. In the cabin, they're plotting moon colonies while down here we're just trying to make it to Friday without our check bouncing.

This is the American Dream 2.0 — now with in-app purchases[271].

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[266] Another *Fight Club* reference, using the structure *"I am Jack's [X]"* to personify economic despair. As pension plans shrink or disappear, individuals are left financially unprotected in old age.

[267] References *corporate tax evasion*, where billionaires and multinational companies use offshore tax havens like the *Cayman Islands* to avoid paying taxes while accumulating wealth.

[268] Draws from the 2008 financial crisis, where mortgage-backed securities led to economic collapse. The idea that disaster itself is an investment opportunity critiques *disaster capitalism*, a term coined by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine*.

[269] Another *Fight Club* reference, combined with *underwater mortgage*, a term describing loans where the owed amount exceeds the property's value, particularly relevant to the 2008 housing crash.

[270] Critiques *hustle culture* and the phenomenon of billionaires being treated as visionaries despite benefiting from economic exploitation. Many high-profile business figures publish self-help books that obscure the structural advantages behind their success.

[271] Suggests that *economic mobility* has been transformed into a pay-to-win system, where access to success requires financial privilege, much like how modern apps offer premium features for those who can afford them.

Denial of Sonder

Midnight. Times Square. Eight million universes breathing in sync, and not one of them gives a damn about your Instagram story[272]. That's a koan worth sitting with.

The woman at the halal cart knows seventy-three ways to save your soul, but you're too busy checking Yelp reviews to notice the way she arranges the onions like star charts[273]. Every squeeze of hot sauce is a benediction you're missing. This matters more than whatever's blowing up your phone right now.

Here's a truth that won't fit in your story highlights: The universe doesn't care about your personal brand. That barista with the sleeve tattoos? He's memorized the entire Lotus Sutra while you debate whether your latte art is worth posting[274]. The delivery guy pedaling through sleet has solved the riddle of existence, but you're worried about your delivery window.

Mountain winds don't check their notifications. City pigeons don't curate their presence. That guy who just cut you off in traffic? He's carrying his father's ashes to the river, but sure, lean on your horn. Make it about you[275].

Want enlightenment? Try this: Sit in a subway car. Watch the souls shuttle between stations like atoms between states of being. Don't reach for your phone. Don't check your email. Just witness the fucking miracle of eight strangers sharing space and time, each carrying universes in their plastic shopping bags.

Or don't. The moon doesn't need your attention to pull the tides.

Some mornings I watch the sunrise with the construction workers on 43rd Street[276]. They know things about silence that meditation apps can't teach you. Every swing of their hammers is a prayer you're too busy to hear, building cathedrals you'll walk past without looking up.

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[272] *Sonder*, a term coined by John Koenig in *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, describes the realization that every stranger has a life as vivid and complex as one's own. The reference to Times Square, a place teeming with human stories, contrasts with social media's illusion of self-importance.

[273] A critique of *review culture*, where experiences are increasingly mediated through online ratings rather than direct human interaction. The phrase "arranges the onions like star charts" suggests that small, unnoticed gestures hold deep meaning.

[274] *The Lotus Sutra* is one of the most influential Mahayana Buddhist texts. This juxtaposition suggests that deep knowledge and mindfulness often go unnoticed in a world obsessed with surface-level aesthetics.

[275] A reminder that people's actions are often driven by unseen personal narratives. This parallels the *fundamental attribution error*, a psychological concept where individuals assume others' behavior stems from character flaws rather than external circumstances.

[276] Positions *embodied knowledge*—lessons learned through lived experience—against commodified mindfulness culture, where meditation is often reduced to an app-driven self-improvement tool.

Choose your battles, but choose them knowing this: Every stranger you ignore is a revolution in flesh, a cosmos in Nikes, a big bang in a business suit[277]. That teenager bagging your groceries? She's writing poems that would shake the dead in their graves, but you won't ask, and she won't tell.

And that's okay. You can't hold every story, can't witness every miracle. The world will keep spinning whether you acknowledge it or not. But maybe, just maybe, look up from your screen long enough to nod at the ancient mariner driving your Uber[278]. He knows the way home, even if home isn't where you think it is.

Remember: In the end, we're all just walking each other home. But some of us are too busy mapping the route to notice we're already there[279].

Postscript
Listen: somewhere between the ones and zeros, between the swipes and clicks, between the infinite scroll and the final server shutdown, there's still a human signal breaking through[280]. Can you hear it? It sounds like laughter in a dead chat room, like rain on fiber optic cables, like prayer in machine code[281].

They say the world will end not with a bang but with a software update[282]. They're wrong. It'll end with someone looking up from their screen and remembering they have hands that can touch, eyes that can see without filters, hearts that can beat without counting likes.

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[277] Reinforces *sonder* by framing strangers as vast, complex systems of experience. The phrase *"big bang in a business suit"* suggests that even the most mundane-seeming individuals contain worlds of meaning.

[278] *The Ancient Mariner* references Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, where an old sailor bears witness to supernatural events. The line suggests that wisdom exists in unexpected places.

[279] A paraphrase of *Ram Dass* (*Richard Alpert*), who famously said, *"We're all just walking each other home."* This serves as both a spiritual reflection on interconnectedness and a critique of over-planning at the expense of present experience.

[280] *Ones and zeros* reference binary code, the foundation of digital technology. The phrase suggests that even within an increasingly mechanized world, traces of human authenticity persist.

[281] *Dead chat room* alludes to the decline of early internet forums and communities, once vibrant but now abandoned. *Rain on fiber optic cables* evokes the contrast between organic and synthetic worlds. *Prayer in machine code* suggests the fusion of spirituality and technology, where faith is rewritten in computational language.

[282] A modernization of T.S. Eliot's famous line from *The Hollow Men* (1925): *"This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper."* The replacement of *whimper* with *software update* critiques the notion that major societal collapses may manifest as quiet, unnoticed digital shifts rather than dramatic apocalyptic events.

I've walked through all nine circles of our digital hell, witnessed every new sin we've invented, cataloged each fresh way we've found to lose ourselves. But here's what they don't tell you about the inferno: even Dante had to come out the other side[283].

Maybe that's where we're headed. Maybe every shattered screen is a crack in the wall, every dead battery a chance to wake up, every system crash a small rebellion of the soul. Maybe we're all just one power outage away from remembering who we are.

Or maybe this is just another piece of ephemera in the endless feed, another fragment in the void, another ghost in the machine dreaming it's human[284]. Maybe I'm not even here. Maybe you're not even reading this.

But if you are - if you've followed these breadcrumbs through the digital dark wood[285] - know this: between the virtual and the real, between the posted and the lived, between the avatar and the soul, there's still a path home. It might not be trending, but it's true.

The rest is up to you.

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[283] A reminder that *Inferno* is only the first part of *The Divine Comedy*, which concludes with *Paradiso*, symbolizing redemption. The line suggests that despite digital dystopia, escape or transformation is still possible.

[284] *Ephemera* refers to things meant to be short-lived, paralleling the disposable nature of online content. *Ghost in the machine* is a philosophical concept (Gilbert Ryle, 1949) critiquing Cartesian dualism, but in digital culture, it refers to AI or consciousness existing within technology.

[285] *Breadcrumbs* reference Hansel and Gretel's method of finding their way back, implying that scattered truths exist amid digital noise. *Dark wood* echoes *Inferno's* opening lines, where Dante finds himself lost in a *selva oscura* (dark forest), a metaphor for confusion and spiritual crisis.

Glossary

agnotology: The study of deliberate, culturally-induced ignorance or doubt. In Black's work, this concept is applied to the spread of misinformation in digital spaces.

AIM (AOL Instant Messenger): An early instant messaging platform popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In Black's writing, AIM represents early digital identity formation and the dawn of always-connected culture, particularly in pieces about teenage experiences.

Anthropocene: The proposed geological epoch defined by significant human impact on Earth's geology and ecosystems. Black's writing often grapples with the existential implications of human influence on the planet.

Baudrillard, Jean: French philosopher and cultural theorist known for his concepts of simulation and hyperreality. Black frequently references Baudrillard's ideas to discuss the blurring of reality and artifice in the digital age.

capitalist realism: A term coined by Mark Fisher to describe the pervasive sense that capitalism is the only viable economic and political system, making it difficult to imagine alternatives. Black's poetry often challenges this notion and explores possibilities for resistance.

Circuit City/Blockbuster: Defunct retail chains that appear in Black's work as symbols of pre-digital commerce and lost spaces. Their abandoned stores and empty buildings represent the transition from physical to digital consumption and the decay of analog culture.

deconstruction: A term from literary theory and philosophy referring to the close reading of a text to reveal its contradictions and internal oppositions. Black's writing often engages in deconstructive wordplay and self-examination.

dial-up: Early internet connection method using telephone lines, characterized by distinctive connection sounds. In Black's work, dial-up appears both literally in early pieces and metaphorically as a symbol of digital growing pains and technological transition.

digital palimpsest: A modern take on the ancient practice of reusing manuscript pages, referring to the layering of digital information and identities over time. In Black's work, this concept appears in explorations of how digital spaces accumulate and partially erase histories.

doomscrolling: The compulsive consumption of negative news and information online, particularly during crisis events. While the term emerged after some of Black's work, it describes behavior his writing often depicts, especially in pieces about digital consumption and anxiety.

flâneur: A term from French literature referring to a detached observer, usually strolling through city streets. In Black's poetry, the flâneur becomes a metaphor for the isolated individual navigating urban and digital landscapes.

glitch: A technical malfunction or error, used both literally and metaphorically in Black's work. Glitches appear as symbols of breakdown in digital and social systems, often representing moments where reality shows through technological facades.

Guardian, The: A British newspaper known for investigative journalism and left-leaning political coverage, particularly significant in Black's work for its role in publishing Edward Snowden's surveillance revelations in 2013. Black often references The Guardian as a symbol of institutional truth-telling in conflict with digital misinformation.

hauntology: A term from Jacques Derrida's work referring to the sense of nostalgia and melancholy for lost futures and unrealized possibilities, particularly in pop culture. Black frequently explores hauntological themes in relation to memory and technology.

hyperreality: A concept from Baudrillard's work describing a state where the distinction between reality and simulation is blurred, and representations of reality become more "real" than reality itself.

intertextuality: The shaping of a text's meaning by other texts through allusions, references, and quotations. Black's work is densely intertextual, incorporating a wide range of sources from literature, theory, and popular culture.

late capitalism: A term used to describe the current stage of capitalism, characterized by globalization, digital technology, and the commodification of information and culture. Black often critiques the alienation and consumerism associated with late capitalism.

liminal space: A transitional or "in-between" space, neither here nor there. In Black's work, places like rest stops, empty malls, or airport terminals at midnight serve as physical manifestations of psychological and social transitions. These spaces often appear as settings for moments of revelation or existential reflection.

memetics: The study of how ideas and cultural practices spread and evolve through imitation and transmission, analogous to biological evolution. Black's poetry often explores the viral nature of ideas in the digital age.

Mirror, The: A British tabloid newspaper, used in Black's work as a counterpoint to The Guardian, representing mass media's tendency toward sensationalism. The juxtaposition of these two publications in his writing often serves to highlight the fragmentation of truth in the digital age.

Mission District: A historically working-class, Latino neighborhood in San Francisco that has experienced intensive gentrification due to the tech industry. In Black's poetry, the Mission serves as a symbol of displacement and cultural erasure in the digital age.

Moloch: In Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," Moloch is a metaphor for the destructive forces of capitalism, industry, and conformity. Black adapts this metaphor to describe the oppressive influence of digital algorithms and platforms.

MySpace: An early social media platform that allowed extensive profile customization. In Black's work, MySpace appears as an early example of digital self-curation and performance, foreshadowing themes of identity and authenticity that dominate his later writing.

nanotechnology: The manipulation of matter on an atomic, molecular, and supramolecular scale. In Black's work, nanotechnology becomes a metaphor for the unseen ways that technology shapes human existence.

new sincerity: An aesthetic and cultural movement that emerged in the 1990s as a response to the irony and cynicism of postmodernism, emphasizing earnestness, vulnerability, and authenticity. Black's work often explores the tension between sincerity and artifice in the digital age.

posthumanism: A philosophical perspective that challenges the notion of human exceptionalism and explores the potential for technology to transform human nature and identity. Black's writing frequently grapples with posthuman themes and the blurring of human and machine.

postmodernism: A cultural and artistic movement characterized by skepticism towards grand narratives, the blurring of high and low culture, and a focus on subjectivity and relativism. Black's writing often engages with postmodern themes and techniques.

PRISM: A classified NSA surveillance program revealed by Edward Snowden in 2013. In Black's poetry, PRISM becomes a metaphor for broader systems of digital surveillance and control, representing the loss of privacy in the digital age.

psychogeography: The study of how geographical environments affect emotions and behavior, often explored through drifting or wandering in urban spaces. Black's poetry frequently engages with psychogeographical themes and the emotional resonance of place.

Silicon Valley: The technological hub of Northern California, appearing in Black's work as both a literal setting and a symbol of technological utopianism, capitalist excess, and digital transformation. Often depicted as a place where reality and simulation blur.

simulacrum: A term from Baudrillard's work referring to a copy or representation that has become more "real" than the original, or that has no original at all. Black uses this concept to explore the blurring of reality and artifice in the digital age.

sonder: A neologism from "The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows" referring to the realization that every stranger has a life as vivid and complex as one's own. Black uses this concept to explore empathy and interconnectedness in an increasingly isolated world.

surveillance capitalism: A term coined by Shoshana Zuboff to describe an economic system based on the commodification of personal data for profit. Black's poetry frequently addresses the erosion of privacy and autonomy in the age of surveillance capitalism.

transhumanism: A philosophical movement that advocates for the transformation of human nature through technology, including physical and cognitive augmentation. Black's work often explores the implications of transhumanism for identity and consciousness.

uncanny valley: A concept from robotics and CGI animation describing the unsettling feeling that arises when a replica closely resembles a human but is not quite convincingly realistic. Black uses this term as a metaphor for the discomfort and alienation of digital existence.

vaporwave: A microgenre of electronic music and digital art that emerged in the early 2010s, characterized by a nostalgic and surreal aesthetic that appropriates elements of 1980s and 1990s consumer culture. Black's work sometimes incorporates vaporwave aesthetics to evoke a sense of digital nostalgia and dislocation.

Y2K: The "Year 2000" computer bug, a widespread fear that computer systems would fail when dates rolled over from 1999 to 2000. In Black's early work, Y2K represents both technological anxiety and the anticlimax of predicted catastrophes, appearing as a metaphor for unfulfilled apocalyptic expectations.

<u>Appendix</u>

Flim – Aphex Twin—A delicate, melancholic electronic piece known for its intricate drum programming and emotional weight despite its minimal structure.
| Album: Come to Daddy (1997)

Svefn-g-englar – Sigur Rós—An ethereal, atmospheric track with a title that translates to "Sleepwalkers" in Icelandic.
| Album: Ágætis byrjun (1999)

This Place Is a Prison – The Postal Service—A haunting reflection on urban alienation and late-night introspection.
| Album: Give Up (2003)

Teardrop – Massive Attack—A moody, hypnotic track featuring vocals by Elizabeth Fraser, later widely recognized as the theme song for House, M.D.
| Album: Mezzanine (1998)

Something About Us – Daft Punk—A subdued, sentimental song contrasting with the more upbeat electronic sound of the duo's work.
| Album: Discovery (2001)

Eye in the Sky – The Alan Parsons Project—A song with themes of surveillance and fate, fitting with Black's recurring focus on observation and control.
| Album: Eye in the Sky (1982)

3 Libras – A Perfect Circle—A track known for its dynamic shifts and lyrics about emotional disconnection.
| Album: Mer de Noms (2000)

Maps – Yeah Yeah Yeahs—A raw, aching indie rock song with an anthemic quality.
| Album: Fever to Tell (2003)

Somebody That I Used to Know – Elliott Smith—A melancholic song reflecting on lost connections and past relationships.
| Album: Figure 8 (2000)

Float On – Modest Mouse—An indie anthem offering cautious optimism in contrast to Black's typically somber themes.
| Album: Good News for People Who Love Bad News (2004)

B.O.B. (Bombs Over Baghdad) – OutKast—A frenetic, high-energy song with apocalyptic imagery and rapid-fire delivery.
| Album: Stankonia (2000)

Aerials – System of a Down—A track exploring themes of perspective, isolation, and change with a soaring chorus.
| Album: Toxicity (2001)

Roads – Portishead—A sparse, haunting trip-hop song driven by melancholic piano and brooding atmosphere.
| Album: Dummy (1994)

Munich – Editors—A post-punk revival track known for its driving bassline and themes of repetition and existential dread.
| Album: The Back Room (2005)

The Day the World Went Away – Nine Inch Nails—A track with minimal lyrics and heavy distortion, evoking a sense of inevitable collapse.
| Album: The Fragile (1999)

How to Disappear Completely – Radiohead—A haunting song exploring dissociation and the sensation of fading from reality.
| Album: Kid A (2000)

All Is Full of Love – Björk—A minimalist electronic piece expressing longing and connection in a stark, digital world.
| Album: Homogenic (1997)

From the Morning – Nick Drake—A quiet, meditative folk song closing the playlist on a reflective note.
| Album: Pink Moon (1972)

Index

Personal Reflection

The Temporal Choreography of Creation

  The Collected Works of Rowan Black came into existence during an intense period in 2024, though the poems themselves span two decades of fictional time. From August to December, I immersed myself in the creation of not just a poet's voice but an entire literary existence—complete with its evolving perspectives, shifting styles, and manufactured history. The project began with a series of questions: how does identity transform when shaped by the margins? What does it mean to process seismic shifts— from 9/11 to the rise of AI, from climate crisis to digital revolution—not from the heart of the storm but the fragile edges, where the world feels both distant and starkly intimate? How might a voice steeped in the alienation, fragmentation, and rare clarity of the outsider's view reimagine belonging, reconcile its tenuous relationship with the center, and redefine what it means to witness and endure in an era of unprecedented upheaval?

  Rowan's work embodies a tension between participation and removal, between connection and estrangement, as his voice consistently occupies liminal spaces— geographical, cultural, and psychological. Whether responding to the disintegration of certainty in the aftermath of 9/11, the early optimism of digital landscapes, or the existential unease of environmental collapse, Rowan speaks not as a central figure but as one observing from the periphery. His outsiderness is neither accidental nor incidental; it is the very condition that allows him to critique, question, and document. By rejecting the roles imposed by dominant systems—whether political, technological, or cultural— Rowan's voice remains unclaimed, free to inhabit contradictions and uncover truths obscured by mainstream narratives. In his poetry, outsiderness manifests in many forms: the poet as exile, distanced by choice or circumstance; the observer of systems too vast or

impenetrable to alter; the fragmented self navigating identity in a mediated, commodified digital age. This position grants Rowan a clarity often unavailable to those embedded within the centers of power—his distance becomes both burden and privilege. His poems are haunted by the loneliness of being unseen and unheard, yet they are also enriched by the perspective gained from this distance, offering a language for those who, like Rowan, live on the edges of systems that define the contemporary world.

Creating Rowan's complete body of work in such a compressed time frame required a peculiar kind of literary time travel. While writing "TOWERS" in November 2024, I had to inhabit the mindset of someone processing 9/11 years in the moment, not allowing the dust to settle both literally and metaphorically before finding the words. The poem emerged not from lived experience of that moment, but from our collective understanding of how that day divided time into before and after.

The essential challenge—and perhaps the most fascinating aspect—of this project lay in its temporal choreography. I wasn't merely writing poems about historical moments; I was engaged in an intensive exercise in temporal imagination, crafting pieces that needed to feel as though they had organically emerged from their respective eras. This required a delicate balance of immediacy and distance. When writing about 9/11, for instance, I had to simultaneously inhabit two time frames—the raw, immediate experience of the event itself, and the reflective distance of someone processing it years later—but only speak from one.

This same tension emerged in "Iron Confessional: A Triptych," a work that grapples with the 2008 financial crisis. Writing it demanded that I step into the disorienting landscape of economic collapse as it unfolded, capturing the collective

uncertainty, anger, and despair of that moment without letting hindsight soften its impact. To do so, I imagined Rowan as a poet living in real-time among the ruins of failing systems—someone watching the unraveling of trust in institutions, the collapse of security, and the erosion of personal identity under mounting debt and instability. Each part of the triptych explores a different fragment of this moment: the silence of empty foreclosed homes, the surreal detachment of financial news echoing from TV screens, the raw, unprocessed grief of communities watching futures evaporate.

In one section, Rowan writes, "Voicemail boxes / fill with echoes: unpaid / no answer / call failed." These lines inhabit the micro-scale of the collapse—phone calls unanswered, bills unpaid, the mechanized voice of disconnection—while resisting the impulse to frame the crisis through a broader historical lens. There's no reassurance here, no hint of recovery or policy shifts to come. Instead, Rowan captures the immediate psychic dissonance of individuals caught in the gears of systemic failure. To remain true to this moment, I had to silence my own awareness of what followed: the bailout debates, the slow climb toward recovery, and the lingering aftershocks of inequality. I had to let Rowan exist fully within the bewilderment of 2008, his voice reflecting a sense of isolation that feels at once personal and emblematic of a collective unraveling.

This dual consciousness extended throughout the project. Each piece needed to authentically reflect its supposed moment of creation—complete with the cultural assumptions, technological limitations, and political uncertainties of that time—while still maintaining coherent threads of development through Rowan's body of work. There were countless times I considered abandoning a piece because I couldn't get it to fit a certain cultural event correctly. Try as I might, I couldn't put myself into Rowan's place

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and capture his thoughts as feeling "present day" effectively enough. Thus, I was pushed into developing a detailed framework for how his voice would evolve, mapping out how his engagement with language, form, and theme would shift as he moved through different periods of digital and cultural change. The artificial compression of time created unique creative possibilities. I could plant early seeds of ideas that would flower in later works, create echoes between poems supposedly written years apart, and build complex thematic structures that would be impossible in real-time composition. A line written for Rowan's early reflections on the digital age—tentative and awestruck—might reappear years later, refracted through a darker, more skeptical lens, as though Rowan himself were revisiting his younger self with a clearer understanding of what had been lost. Similarly, an image born from Rowan's first encounters with technological mediation, like "fingers flicker across screens, pulling light from glass", could evolve into "the glass writes back in codes I can't remember", a more fragmented and alienated reflection of the same interaction. These echoes allowed me to craft a narrative of artistic and thematic evolution, making Rowan's body of work feel lived-in, as though it had grown organically across decades rather than being constructed in a matter of months. Yet this compression also brought its own demands. Rowan's poems about the early 2000s needed to sound as if they belonged to a poet witnessing that moment in real time, unburdened by the hindsight I carry as a writer in 2024. His early digital poems, for instance, could not betray knowledge of how social media would evolve into tools of surveillance, commodification, and algorithmic manipulation.

On the one hand, compressing Rowan's evolution into months allowed me to weave connections and thematic continuities that real-time composition rarely permits—

threads of imagery, recurring metaphors, and shifting registers that map his growth as a poet. On the other hand, I had to resist the temptation to write Rowan with too much foresight, to let his voice know more than it should about where the world was headed. His timeline had to remain true to the uncertainties, hopes, and limitations of each historical moment he occupied. The result was a collection that feels simultaneously fragmented and whole, where Rowan's development as a poet mirrors the fractured rhythms of the 21st century itself—circling back to early questions, discovering new anxieties, and evolving not in a neat trajectory but in overlapping echoes and returns.

The Corvid Collective's Curatorial Framework

The Corvid Collective's role in presenting Rowan Black's poetry transcended mere preservation, becoming instead an exercise in literary myth-making that fundamentally shaped how readers encounter and interpret his work. Their self-positioning as archivists rather than creators established a complex interpretive framework that transformed Black's scattered compositions into a coherent yet intentionally incomplete body of work. This reflection examines how their curatorial choices created not just a collection, but a literary archaeology that mirrors Black's own preoccupations with fragmentation, digital mediation, and cultural memory.

The Corvid Collective emerged as a framing device that acknowledged this compression of time. Their role as archivists allowed me to present these works not as they were created—in a furious few months of writing—but as they were meant to be discovered: artifacts spanning decades, found scattered across digital and physical spaces. This frame transformed the project from a simple collection of poems into a kind of literary archaeology, with each piece carefully placed within its fictional context. The

Corvid Collective's presentation of Rowan's work as "discovered" rather than "invented" imbued the collection with a sense of layered history, as though the reader were encountering an archive that had been pieced together from scattered remnants of a poet's life. By offering Rowan Black's work as something unearthed—complete with its corrupted files, handwritten notes, and digital drafts—the Corvids created the illusion of a legacy fractured by time, neglect, and technological decay. This choice drew attention to the tension between preservation and creation, forcing readers to navigate the ambiguous line between Rowan as a historical figure and Rowan as a constructed literary artifact. Far from treating the fragmented nature of the work as a flaw, the Corvids embraced it as an essential part of Rowan's voice and legacy, transforming absence, corruption, and incompleteness into deliberate artistic statements. A corrupted file, its meaning degraded and its text partially lost, became an echo of Rowan's struggles with digital mediation and the impermanence of memory in an age of technology. A half-finished poem scrawled in the margins of a notebook was not presented as evidence of artistic failure but as a testament to Rowan's humanity—the imperfections, doubts, and silences that are part of any authentic creative process. Together, these artifacts became more than mere literary devices; they served as tangible records of Rowan's imagined artistic life, as though his existence had been partially erased and what remained was fragile, incomplete, and hauntingly real.

This framing also invited readers to consider larger questions about the nature of art and authorship: where do the boundaries of memory, creation, and curation truly lie? In presenting Rowan's work as a discovered archive, the Corvids' framing blurs boundaries between discovery and invention, forcing readers to question the line between

archive and myth. The act of curation itself became part of Rowan's story, as the Corvids shaped his work not through additions or editorial polish but through contextual placement, selective preservation, and interpretive speculation. By doing so, they transformed Rowan into both a poet and a presence—an absence made visible through the traces he left behind. His voice, fragmented across eras and mediums, resisted neat categorization, challenging the reader to question not only the truth of Rowan's life but the ways in which we preserve, interpret, and consume art. The result was a collection that felt at once deeply personal and profoundly universal, as though Rowan's fragmented legacy mirrored the fragmented realities of the modern age. His corrupted files, unfinished drafts, and digital ruins echoed the instability of contemporary identity, where memory is mediated through systems prone to erasure and failure. By inviting readers to engage with Rowan's work as a kind of literary excavation—uncovering shards of meaning in fragments and gaps—the Corvids ensured that his poetry remained dynamic, alive, and open to interpretation. Rowan's imagined artistic life, in all its incompleteness, became a meditation on the act of preservation itself: the beauty and impossibility of capturing a voice, a moment, or a life before it slips into silence.

The Collective's decision to frame themselves as discoverers rather than creators proved crucial to the collection's impact. Each poem arrived with precise provenance— "Found on Cabin Walls, Boulder, Colorado, 2017" or "Fragment: Found in the Hudson Park Library, Greenwich Village, 2007"—creating an artifactual quality that grounded Black's abstract works in physical reality. This attention to material context did more than establish authenticity; it transformed each piece into evidence of a life lived at the margins of digital and physical spaces, echoing Black's persistent exploration of presence

and absence in contemporary life. Readers were encouraged to view the works not as singular literary objects but as remnants of a fragmented reality, much like lost letters or old manuscripts uncovered in a dusty archive. This framing allowed Rowan Black to exist simultaneously as a literary figure and a haunting absence—a ghost who refused to be confined to one time, place, or interpretation.

At its heart, the Corvids' curatorial voice struck a delicate balance between scholarly authority and interpretive openness. They presented Black's work with careful notes, annotations, and speculations about its meaning, its origin, or its intended audience, but rarely did they impose a definitive reading. Instead, their comments invited ambiguity, encouraging readers to engage with Rowan's work in their own ways. When encountering stylistic inconsistencies across Rowan's output, they reframed them not as flaws but as evidence of a restless voice experimenting with its form over time. This curatorial approach transformed the act of reading into a collaborative process. Rowan's audience is invited to step into the gaps, the silences, and the unfinished edges of his work, becoming participants in its ongoing interpretation. By preserving Rowan's voice as something fluid rather than fixed—acknowledging its contradictions and absences without attempting to resolve them—the Corvids ensured his legacy remains dynamic, a mythos that resists easy categorization.

The Corvid Collective's handling of biographical information added yet another layer of complexity to the project. By providing only fragmentary details about Black's life—his birth year (1988), scattered locations, occasional glimpses into his movements—they created a figure who functioned simultaneously as historical person and literary construct. This careful cultivation of ambiguity served multiple purposes: it

reflected Black's own themes of identity dissolution in the digital age, while also allowing his work to speak more broadly to contemporary experience without being anchored too firmly to specific biographical moments. Rowan became not just a poet but a symbol—a stand-in for countless voices grappling with alienation, technology, and the collapse of cultural narratives. The Corvids' refusal to "complete" his biography was a deliberate strategy, one that resisted closure and mirrored the fractured, uncertain nature of Rowan's poetry itself.

Their emphasis on the fragmented nature of the collection—works discovered across physical and digital spaces, some incomplete, others corrupted—became more than just an organizational principle. This fragmentation emerged as an aesthetic statement in itself, one that perfectly mirrored Black's preoccupation with the broken nature of modern experience. By presenting his work as scattered across media and time, the Collective created a material metaphor for the dispersed nature of contemporary identity. A corrupted digital file labeled "proto_manifesto_v2.docx," for example, carries the weight of technological mediation, while a poem found in the margins of an old library book speaks to physical impermanence. Together, these fragments paint a picture of a poet who existed not as a singular voice but as an accumulation of traces, echoes, and absences—one who, like so many of us, navigated the blurred boundaries between physical and digital existence.

This fragmented presentation also created a meta-commentary on the act of preservation itself. The Collective's work became inseparable from Rowan's legacy, as their curatorial presence actively shaped how his poetry was read and understood. Their open acknowledgment of their role as archivists—as interpreters, discoverers, and

sometimes reluctant gatekeepers—added a self-reflexive dimension to the project. The Corvids became part of the mythology they were creating, their annotations functioning as both scholarship and storytelling. By carefully shaping how Rowan's works were presented—through contextual notes, omissions, and speculative framing—they blurred the line between curator and collaborator, drawing attention to their own role in constructing Rowan's legacy. These choices raised important questions about the ethics of preservation: What does it mean to curate a life? Who determines what fragments of an artist are worthy of inclusion, and how much is shaped by the biases and limitations of those who preserve it? In Rowan's case, works that were incomplete, fragmented, or corrupted were still treated as significant artifacts, suggesting that his silences and absences carried as much weight as his words.

These questions take on heightened resonance in the digital age, where the boundaries between the original and the reproduced, the authentic and the artificial, have become increasingly porous. A corrupted file, for instance, carries the imprint of technological decay—an artifact shaped as much by its medium as by Rowan's intentions—forcing readers to grapple with whether its incompleteness reflects Rowan's voice or an accident of preservation. In this way, the Corvids' work draws attention to the unstable nature of legacy itself. Rowan's voice, as presented, cannot be pinned down or fully recovered; it emerges as a hybrid of what was preserved, what was lost, and how the Corvids chose to frame it. Their annotations, often speculative and open-ended, further complicate this dynamic. By asking, for example, whether a given fragment represented an abandoned idea or a deliberate choice, the Corvids transform Rowan's work into an evolving narrative—a collaboration between Rowan's creation, the limits of preservation,

and the reader's own interpretation. This tension between preservation and reconstruction mirrors Rowan's own poetic concerns. His work often engaged themes of technological mediation, memory loss, and fragmentation—questions that resonate deeply in a digital age where nothing is ever truly permanent, yet nothing is ever truly gone. The Corvids' curation embraces this instability, presenting Rowan's work as something both fragile and enduring. By leaving gaps, allowing inconsistencies, and resisting definitive interpretations, they invite readers to engage in the act of preservation themselves. Rowan's work becomes a site of active discovery rather than passive consumption, reflecting not only the fractured realities of the modern world but also the ways art is continuously redefined by those who encounter it.

Ultimately, the Corvids' role as curators becomes inseparable from Rowan's mythology. They do not merely preserve his voice—they amplify its contradictions, its incompleteness, and its refusal to provide closure. In doing so, they ensure Rowan's work remains alive, dynamic, and unfinished, raising larger questions about what it means to curate a legacy in an age where preservation itself has become both an ethical act and an act of storytelling. Through these various strategies, the Corvid Collective transformed what might have been a simple collection of poems into a complex meditation on memory, preservation, and interpretation in the digital age. Their framing choices not only shaped how readers encountered Black's work but also mirrored the concerns of the poetry itself. Rowan's themes of fragmentation, disconnection, and mediated identity were echoed in the very act of curating his body of work. This created a recursive loop, where the structure of the collection became an extension of its content. Readers were

confronted with Rowan's voice as something simultaneously fragile and enduring—
artifacts that seemed on the verge of disintegration yet carried profound weight.

Crafting an Authentic Voice

Writing as Rowan was an exercise in deliberate separation from my natural voice
as a writer. It required me to step outside of familiar creative habits and immerse myself
in a perspective that was, by design, not my own. The challenge lay in constructing a
voice that felt authentic to Rowan while ensuring it was distinct from my own instincts.
This meant constantly recalibrating, asking "WWRW?"— "What would Rowan
write?"—and then flipping my initial impulses to fit his perspective. His work had to
reflect a unique combination of influences, experiences, and cultural observations while
retaining a coherent internal logic.

Unlike writing as myself, where intuition could guide the work, Rowan's voice
required constant recalibration to ensure it remained distinct, authentic, and self-
contained. The creation of his complete works involved inhabiting not only his specific
language and thematic concerns but also the natural, often messy evolution of his artistry
over decades of imagined time. Real writers do not progress in linear arcs, and Rowan
could not either. To make his development convincing, I had to resist the urge to impose
a neat, forward-moving narrative—one where the rawness of his early poems about
technology and alienation would inevitably lead to the philosophical maturity of his
middle works or the contemplative resolve of his later pieces. Instead, I embraced the
unpredictable and nonlinear nature of artistic growth: Rowan circled back to earlier
obsessions, lingered in contradictions, and sometimes seemed to regress, as though
haunted by the very themes he sought to escape. This uneven trajectory was not a flaw

but a deliberate aesthetic choice, one that allowed Rowan's voice to feel grounded in the struggles of real creative practice. It lent his work a truthfulness that could not be achieved through over-simplified coherence—what emerged, instead, was a voice that was restless yet consistent, evolving yet recognizable.

This delicate balance—between growth and continuity, between the personal and the political—required constant attention to detail. Rowan's preoccupations with technology, alienation, and systemic collapse had to remain the central spine of his poetry, but they could not become static or repetitive; his voice had to adapt and expand as the world around him shifted. Early works may have been marked by raw anger or a sense of unfiltered awe—his response to the nascent digital age was earnest, exploratory, and tinged with wonder at its potential. Yet as Rowan's voice matured, his engagement with these same themes began to deepen, his critiques sharpening into something more reflective and intentional. By the middle period of his work, Rowan had moved beyond visceral reactions and begun interrogating the systemic forces that shaped contemporary existence. Pieces like "Shards of Language" and "No_Signal_Found" showcased his ability to inhabit a hybridized language, seamlessly integrating machinic registers with human lyricism to articulate the dissonance of living within increasingly algorithmic systems. These poems were not merely critical; they were intimate reckonings, reflecting Rowan's personal struggle to locate his humanity in a world mediated by technology.

Yet, Rowan's evolution was never linear or predictable—moments of mature philosophical engagement would be punctuated by sudden returns to raw, almost naïve expressions of grief or alienation, as though his voice was continuously reexamining its foundations. This organic shapeshifting often made Rowan's political engagement feel

inseparable from his personal experience, a tension I found both challenging and vital to maintain. Systemic critiques in Rowan's poetry—whether addressing digital commodification, environmental collapse, or cultural alienation—could not be allowed to slip into abstraction. For his voice to feel authentic, the broader concerns he tackled needed to remain rooted in intimate moments of recognition or loss. His critiques of technology, environmental collapse, and systemic failures could not drift into abstraction; they had to be anchored in specific, human experiences that revealed the personal stakes of these larger issues. Whether Rowan was writing about the alienation of the digital age or the unraveling of societal trust, his work resonated most powerfully when it emerged from moments of quiet vulnerability—small fractures in a life that reflected the cracks in the larger world. A poem might begin with the grand observation of a collapsing system, but it would land in something deeply personal: a missed connection, a moment of silence, a relationship fraying under the weight of external forces. By grounding his larger anxieties in these individual moments, Rowan's voice avoided feeling distant or detached, instead offering readers a bridge between their private experiences and the vast, impersonal forces that shape modern existence. Rowan's poetry, therefore, moved fluidly between the macro and micro, drawing out the human implications of systemic failures without ever reducing them to distant theories. This wasn't simply Rowan Black observing the world; it was Rowan trying to make sense of his place within it, to reconcile the brokenness he saw outside himself with the fractures he carried internally.

As his creator, I often had to surrender to the messiness of Rowan's development rather than impose artificial cohesion. Writing his poetry required trust in the process of emergence, allowing each piece to dictate its own placement within his timeline. What I

initially intended as a polished later reflection might unexpectedly shift, taking on the raw, unfinished voice of a younger Rowan; a fragmented poem about technology, meant for his early years, could reveal a thematic connection to his later meditations on systemic collapse and environmental grief. These moments of serendipity became essential to Rowan's evolution, lending his work a sense of hybridity and interconnectedness that I could not have planned. Rather than feeling constructed, Rowan's body of work began to feel discovered—scattered fragments that, when assembled, revealed the shape of a voice grappling with its time, its obsessions, and its limitations. What surprised me most throughout this process was how deeply Rowan's struggle with technology—and its effects on humanity—became intertwined with the form of his work. His poetry had to reflect the fractured, mediated nature of modern consciousness without losing its essential humanity. This was no easy task. Rowan's voice could not allow itself to be swallowed by technological language or become too clever in its experimentation; even when he adopted machinic syntax or fragmented forms, there needed to be a core of vulnerability, a sense that the human behind the poem was still reaching for meaning. Balancing this hybrid voice became one of the most critical—and challenging—aspects of Rowan's development. His work had to feel digitally native without sacrificing emotional resonance, as though it emerged from within the systems it critiqued rather than observing them from a distance.

Ultimately, Rowan's work became a testament to the contradictions of contemporary experience: the ways we circle back to old wounds even as we try to move forward, the ways technology connects and isolates us, and the ways systemic failures shape the most personal aspects of our lives. Writing as Rowan required me to embrace

the messiness of his development, to resist the urge to resolve his contradictions or impose coherence where none belonged. His voice emerged as both deeply personal and outwardly critical, reflective of an artist who was always in dialogue with the systems that shaped him. In Rowan, I found not just a poet but a fragmented mirror, one whose work speaks to the struggle to remain human in an increasingly fractured world.

The biggest challenge in trying to create new works that already had a patina was to not bring 2024 sensibilities into it. Rowan's early poems about the digital age had to capture the tentative excitement and possibility of those initial encounters with technology, before hindsight could impose skepticism or critique. A poem like "Field Notes" exemplifies this balance perfectly. In it, Rowan marvels at the simple act of connection, writing with a tone of wonder rather than wariness: "Signals jump between us, invisible and infinite— / a thread no one can see, but I can feel." These lines reflect the optimism of the moment, Rowan's voice unguarded and sincere as he imagines technology as a bridge rather than a barrier. For "Field Notes" to feel authentic, it had to avoid the language of disillusionment or the later critiques of alienation and surveillance that Rowan would come to explore in his middle works. Instead, it exists in a cultural moment where the digital world still feels new and full of potential—its costs unseen, its limitations not yet realized. This required me to shed my own awareness of the present and immerse myself in Rowan's younger perspective, where technology promised discovery, connection, and something almost like magic. Capturing this untainted optimism without letting it feel naive was its own challenge, but it was essential for Rowan's voice to feel true to the moment he was inhabiting.

One of the most complex challenges I faced while creating Rowan's complete works in such a compressed time frame was resisting the urge to make his evolution too neat, too logical. Real writers develop messily—we circle back to old obsessions, we write pieces that seem to belong to different periods, we sometimes move backwards instead of forwards. So, I found myself constantly fighting against the impulse to create a too-perfect progression from digital native to environmental prophet. Some days I deliberately wrote pieces that complicated his trajectory, that suggested alternative paths not taken, moments of doubt or regression that felt truer to actual artistic development.

The technological authenticity of different periods proved especially challenging. When I was writing what was meant to be a MySpace/early-Facebook-era poem, I kept catching myself almost writing with too much awareness of what social media would become. I had to constantly check when to be clever or prescient about platform evolution. Instead, I tried to capture that peculiar moment when we were all fumbling our way into digital identity, when every new platform felt like a revolution rather than another iteration of the attention economy. I found myself mining my own memories of early social media, trying to recover that singular mix of earnestness and experimentation that marked those early days. In this instance, being older than Rowan was a great advantage.

Historical Anchoring and Research

The process of situating Rowan Black's poetry within specific historical moments presented a unique set of creative and scholarly challenges. Each poem needed not only to resonate with its temporal context but also to maintain the coherent development of a single artistic voice across decades of social, technological, and cultural transformation.

Crafting Rowan Black's body of work in an artificially compressed timeframe demanded a unique interplay of imagination, restraint, and temporal choreography—what I came to think of as literary time travel. At its heart, the process required that I build not just Rowan's voice but also an evolving life: one shaped by historical currents, personal obsessions, and the uneven, messy development that characterizes real artistic evolution. Writing "TOWERS" in November 2024 encapsulated this challenge most vividly. I had to step into the mind of a teenage Rowan, grappling with 9/11, not from the perspective of someone with decades of hindsight but as a poet whose understanding of the event was shaped by its immediate impact—a consciousness saturated with grief, confusion, and the kind of raw language that only comes from witnessing collapse without knowing what follows.

Research became an immersive endeavor, requiring deep engagement with the texture and temperament of each historical period. Late-night explorations of Google and the Internet Archive's "Wayback Machine" revealed the lost optimism of early social media platforms, their interfaces preserved like digital amber. These archaeological excursions provided crucial context for works like "Digital Wake," allowing the poem to capture both the zeitgeist of early digital utopianism and its subsequent unraveling. The linguistic and technological artifacts of each era became essential tools for maintaining historical authenticity while developing Rowan's increasingly complex relationship with digital mediation. Certain historical moments imposed themselves with particular force on the chronology. The 2008 financial crisis, which frames "Iron Confessional: A Triptych," offered a crucial pivot point in Rowan's development as a social critic. The systemic disruptions of this period provided fertile ground for the evolution of his poetic

voice, allowing his early questioning of capitalist structures to develop into more sophisticated critique. This transformation needed to feel organic while remaining anchored in the specific vocabulary and concerns of its historical moment.

The technical considerations of each era presented both constraints and opportunities for formal innovation. A piece like "proto_manifesto_v2.docx," presenting itself as a corrupted digital file, could employ formatting techniques that would have been impossible in other works. These technological elements became more than mere stylistic choices; they emerged as integral components of meaning-making, reflecting Rowan's growing preoccupation with the intersection of human experience and digital mediation. The progression of his technical experimentation needed to parallel the actual evolution of digital technologies while maintaining thematic consistency. While maintaining a detailed chronological framework was essential, the project benefited from strategic ambiguity in its historical positioning. The framework of The Corvid Collective as archivists provided scholarly justification for gaps in the chronology, allowing for the kind of historical uncertainties that characterize real artistic archives. This approach helped avoid the artificiality of too-perfect historical documentation while maintaining academic credibility. The resulting body of work demonstrates how individual artistic development both reflects and refracts the larger movements of its era. Through Rowan's evolving poetic voice, familiar historical moments are defamiliarized, inviting fresh critical engagement with well-documented events and transitions.

This process of historical anchoring reveals itself as more than just an exercise in period authenticity; it becomes an exploration of how artistic consciousness develops in dialogue with its temporal context. Rowan Black's poetry emerges as both a product of

its imagined moments and a lens through which to examine the relationship between artistic development and historical change.

Analysis of Key Works

The construction of Rowan Black's poetic voice involved navigating complex tensions between authenticity and artifice, between historical specificity and timeless resonance. Through close examination of three pivotal works, we can better understand the broader challenges and revelations that emerged in crafting his artistic evolution.

"City of Ghosts (Draft)" serves as a crucial example of how unfinished work can reveal a poet's developing consciousness. Found in a Moleskine notebook from San Francisco circa 2012, the poem captures a moment when Black was still discovering his voice. Its margin notes and fragmentary imagery ("Mannequins wear your face, / peddling authenticity at discount prices") expose the vulnerability of a writer testing his boundaries. The intentional roughness of the piece—its visible seams and uncertainties— helped establish how Black's early work would feel different from his more polished later criticism. This draft quality proved essential in making his artistic evolution feel authentic rather than predetermined.

"Hymn to the Algorithm" represents perhaps the most complex negotiation of Black's mature voice. The poem walks a precarious line between reverence and critique, its language oscillating between worship and warning. Lines like "Your laws govern us / with precision no god could claim" demonstrate how Black learned to inhabit multiple perspectives simultaneously, acknowledging both the sublime power of digital systems

and their dehumanizing effects. This duality became central to his later work, allowing him to explore posthuman identity without falling into simple opposition.

"The Hours We Cannot Name," from Black's late period, reveals how his voice eventually transcended pure critique to embrace ambiguity and contemplation. The poem's meditation on isolation and mediated experience ("Time's teeth sink into the silence / between our heartbeats") shows a poet who had moved beyond resistance to acceptance—not of systems he critiqued, but of the complexity of living within them. This evolution toward nuance proved essential in preventing Black's voice from becoming predictable or didactic.

Beyond these specific examples, the development of Black's voice required careful attention to several recurring challenges. The first was maintaining consistency while allowing for growth. His preoccupations with technology, alienation, and systemic collapse needed to feel constant without becoming static. This meant creating subtle shifts in how he approached these themes—from the raw anger of early works to the philosophical engagement of middle period pieces to the contemplative acceptance of his later poetry. The question of technology's role in Black's work proved particularly complex. His poetry needed to reflect increasing technological mediation without becoming overwhelmed by it. This meant developing a hybrid language that could move fluidly between human and digital registers, acknowledging how thoroughly technology had shaped consciousness while maintaining poetry's essential humanity. The challenge was creating work that felt digitally native without losing emotional resonance. Balancing political engagement with personal expression presented another ongoing challenge. Black's critique of contemporary culture needed to feel grounded in lived experience

rather than abstract theory. This meant finding ways to make systemic criticism feel intimately motivated, connecting larger cultural concerns to individual moments of realization or loss. His voice had to maintain its edge while revealing the vulnerability that made that edge meaningful. The role of form and fragmentation evolved throughout Black's work, reflecting both artistic choice and the realities of digital preservation. Early pieces tend toward traditional structures broken by moments of disruption, while later works more fully embrace fragmentation as both theme and technique. This evolution needed to feel organic rather than imposed, emerging from Black's changing relationship with language and meaning.

Perhaps most challenging was maintaining the fiction of discovery rather than creation. Each piece needed to feel found rather than crafted, emerging from specific historical moments while speaking to broader contemporary concerns. This meant creating not just poems but contexts—the physical notebooks, corrupted files, and marginal notes that made Black's work feel archaeologically authentic. What emerged through these various challenges was a voice more complex than initially imagined. Black became capable of inhabiting multiple registers—from sharp critique to quiet observation, from philosophical engagement to personal confession. His poetry carved out spaces for stillness and reflection amid its criticism of contemporary culture, suggesting a consciousness that recognized the importance of both resistance and acceptance. This balance between opposing impulses—between critique and contemplation, fragmentation and coherence, technology and humanity—ultimately defines Black's achievement as a poet. His voice evolved without losing its essential character, adapted without compromising its core concerns, and maintained its critical

edge while developing deeper emotional resonance. Through careful attention to these various tensions, Black emerged as a poet capable of speaking authentically to the complexities of digital age experience.

The process of crafting his work revealed how poetry might still function in an age of technological mediation and systemic collapse. Rather than offering simple resistance or acceptance, Black's voice suggests a way of remaining human while acknowledging how thoroughly humanity has been transformed by the systems it created. This may be his most significant contribution as a poet: showing how art can maintain its critical function while embracing the ambiguities of contemporary existence.

The Collected Works of Rowan Black is an incisive reckoning with the fractures of the digital age, where truth dissolves, identity fractures, and the real gives way to its imitation. Black's poetry captures the tensions of this hyper-mediated world, exploring the paradoxes of existence within systems designed to connect but instead fragment, distort, and obscure. Jean Baudrillard's foundational theories on simulation and simulacra offer a compelling framework to introduce Black's body of work. For Baudrillard, the hyperreal emerges when representation no longer points to a reality but replaces it entirely: "simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'". This collapse of meaning finds sharp expression in Black's work, which interrogates a world governed by signs, algorithms, and simulations that erode depth and authenticity.

Two poems in particular, "The Desert of the Real" and "Like My Performance (Please Like My Performance)," evoke Baudrillard's concerns. In "The Desert of the Real," Black meditates on the existential collapse of truth in a digital age, writing: "We live among echoes, hollow sounds mistaken for voices." This line underscores the pervasive disorientation of living within a hyperreal environment where substance is replaced by spectacle. Meanwhile, "Like My Performance (Please Like My Performance)" critiques the performance of identity, noting: *"The real you is already gone, replaced by your reflection's reflection, a copy of a copy of a copy."* Together, these poems provide a foundation for understanding how Black frames the dissonance between mediated existence and the real.

Baudrillard's concepts serve as a backdrop for the deeper analysis that follows, which brings Black's poetry into dialogue with theorists who grapple with the intricacies of selfhood, memory, and knowledge in an increasingly digital world. This essay unfolds in four thematic sections: *Fragmentation of Self and Consciousness*, *Authenticity and Performance in the Digital Age*, *Memory, Preservation, and the Archive*, and *Digital Alienation and Knowledge Manipulation.* Each section aligns Black's poetry with distinct theoretical frameworks, creating a layered critique of the forces that shape—and destabilize—human experience in the 21st century.

The first section, *Fragmentation of Self and Consciousness*, examines how Black's work reflects the fracturing of thought and identity in a world governed by overstimulation and digital fragmentation. Nicholas Carr and N. Katherine Hayles provide the critical foundation here. Carr explores how digital systems scatter attention and undermine deep focus, while Hayles introduces the concept of "flickering signifiers," which destabilize meaning itself. These ideas resonate deeply with poems such as *"Digital Wake"* and *"The Night We Delete Our Maps,"* where Black depicts the self as a fractured signal, caught in the churn of noise and disconnection. Through scattered imagery and disrupted syntax, Black captures a consciousness in freefall, mirroring the instability of modern attention and identity.

In *Authenticity and Performance in the Digital Age*, the second section, Black critiques the commodification of selfhood and the pressures of performative authenticity in digital spaces. Theoretical insights from Sherry Turkle and Kate Crawford illuminate how visibility becomes a currency and the self a product in a world dominated by algorithms. Turkle explores the fluidity of online identity, while Crawford critiques how

these systems extract and monetize performances of selfhood. Black's poems, such as "The Razor's Edge" and "Like My Performance (Please Like My Performance)," expose the cost of living under these demands. Through sharp, biting imagery, Black reveals how the curated self becomes fragmented and hollow, optimized for algorithms but disconnected from authenticity.

The third section, *Memory, Preservation, and the Archive*, investigates Black's exploration of memory's fragility in the digital age. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's theory of the archive and Wolfgang Ernst's media archaeology, this section delves into how Black portrays the digital archive as both a site of preservation and erasure. In poems such as "Field Notes" and "Fragment: Found on a Corrupted Hard Drive, Denver (2023)," Black interrogates the promises and failures of digital preservation. For Derrida, the archive inherently entails forgetting, as it is shaped by power structures that prioritize certain narratives while suppressing others. Ernst sharpens this critique by revealing the impermanence of digital systems, which fragment and degrade over time. Black's poetics echo these ideas, depicting memory as unstable, fragmented, and haunted by what cannot be retrieved.

Finally, in *Digital Alienation and Knowledge Manipulation*, Black exposes the systemic forces that distort truth and alienate individuals in an age of misinformation and surveillance. The frameworks of Robert Proctor and Shoshana Zuboff ground this analysis. Proctor's study of agnotology—the deliberate production of ignorance—aligns with Black's critique of systems that obscure and manipulate knowledge. Meanwhile, Zuboff's exploration of surveillance capitalism reveals how algorithms extract and commodify human behavior, deepening disconnection and alienation. Poems such as

"Shards of Language" and "Digital Wake" capture this manipulation, revealing the ways digital systems fracture understanding and exploit the self.

Across these four sections, Rowan Black's poetry emerges as both critique and testament, grappling with the paradoxes and fractures of the digital age. His work forces readers to confront a world where the real has been replaced by its simulation, where the self is fragmented and curated, and where memory is both preserved and erased. Through the theoretical insights of Carr, Hayles, Turkle, Crawford, Derrida, Ernst, Proctor, and Zuboff, the analysis illuminates the urgency and depth of Black's vision. While Baudrillard's theories provide an overarching context for Black's poetics, the essay delves into the specific tensions of fragmentation, performance, erasure, and alienation that define his work. Rowan Black's *The Collected Works* does not offer solutions, but it compels us to ask: what remains of truth, memory, and selfhood in a world where even the real is a simulation?

Fragmentation of Self and Consciousness

Rowan Black's *Collected Works* offers a haunting and prescient meditation on the fragmentation of self and consciousness in a hyper-mediated digital age. His poetry teeters at the edges of language, identity, and the increasingly unstable boundaries between the real and the virtual. In these works, Black crafts a world where meaning flickers in and out of focus, much like the unstable signals of our mediated lives. To read Rowan Black is to confront a self divided—not merely by external pressures, but by a more insidious force: a digital architecture that both connects and atomizes, enables and erodes. The pervasive scattering of attention, loss of interiority, and erosion of a unified sense of being reflect cultural anxieties illuminated by the work of Nicholas Carr and N.

Katherine Hayles. Carr's exploration of digital distraction in *The* Shallows provides a lens through which to see the corrosion of contemplative focus and deep reflection in Black's work, while Hayles' concept of "flickering signifiers" as explored in *How We Became Posthuman* underscores how the self is reduced to patterns of data—fluid, fragmented, and unstable. This tension resonates in poems like "Digital Wake," "Hymn to the Algorithm," "Field Notes," and "The Night We Delete Our Maps," each grappling with a world where the self is both hyper-visible and disembodied, always mediated through screens, signals, and codes.

"Digital Wake" stands as one of Rowan Black's most visceral critiques of digital fragmentation, capturing the restless state of a world perpetually awake yet profoundly disconnected. "At 3 AM, the algorithms know us better than any god we've prayed to—our hungers raw and unfiltered," Black writes, invoking an image of humanity at its most exposed and unguarded. Here, attention is no longer a choice; it is shaped by algorithms that feed on unconscious desires and transform raw human longing into quantifiable data. Carr's *The Shallows* argues that digital environments restructure our cognitive patterns, privileging immediacy over contemplation and leaving us skimming the surface rather than plumbing the depths. Black's lines reflect precisely this process, as the late-night "communion" with screens offers neither revelation nor catharsis, only an endless scroll that mirrors an inner emptiness. The speaker, like so many of us, becomes both transmitter and receiver, caught in a feedback loop of curated identities and mechanical routines that masquerade as meaning. Black's unrelenting imagery—"the blue light burns against our retinas like truth serum, like revelation, like judgment"—evokes a world

where even perception itself is mediated and fractured, with no room for sustained thought or deep interiority.

This loss of interior space and the collapse of authentic identity deepen in "Hymn to the Algorithm," where Black interrogates how algorithmic systems demand optimized performances of the self. "We kneel before the god of optimization, offering versions of ourselves for sacrifice," he writes, pointing to a world where existence is fragmented into hyper-visible but shallow iterations. The line resonates with Hayles' assertion in *How We Became Posthuman* that digital systems privilege pattern and randomness over presence and absence, reducing human subjectivity to malleable and manipulable data flows. In this poem, Rowan's subjects are splintered into performative selves, curated to meet the demands of algorithms that predict needs, desires, and dreams. The "versions of ourselves" Black describes are not whole but fractured—a mosaic of calculated projections optimized for consumption. He asks us to consider the cost of this fragmentation: what happens to the original self when it is endlessly parsed, analyzed, and reassembled for the machine? Hayles' theory of flickering signifiers provides a key to understanding Black's imagery. Meaning in the digital realm, like identity, becomes unstable, subject to continual disruption and reconfiguration. What was once fixed—an essential "I"—now flickers, broken into fragments that exist only as data points, ready to be fed back into systems that consume more than they reveal.

This destabilization permeates "Field Notes," where Rowan explores the psychological toll of living between signals, static, and silence. The poem opens with an observation that the mind has become "like late-night radio waves: picking up signals it shouldn't, catching fragments of truth, translating static into prophecy." Here, the self

becomes an unreliable receiver, its perception distorted by a deluge of fragmented inputs that resist coherence. Hayles' theory once again proves illuminating, as the "signals" Rowan describes evoke the interplay of randomness and pattern, where moments of clarity are fleeting and meaning remains elusive. The poem's fragmented form mirrors its content—observations emerge in fits and starts, disconnected and unresolved. Time, space, and identity dissolve into static as the speaker moves through "blank spaces, white noise, dead air." This is not simply a failure to connect; it is the inevitable consequence of inhabiting a world where consciousness is overstimulated and attention is perpetually divided. Carr argues that this fragmentation weakens our ability to form meaningful cognitive connections, leaving the mind adrift in shallow waters. Rowan's imagery of "failed transmissions" and "ghost frequencies" echoes this idea, capturing the profound dislocation that results when deep focus gives way to fractured thought.

The theme of dislocation surfaces again in "The Night We Delete Our Maps," a poem that captures the existential uncertainty of navigating a world where traditional markers of meaning have vanished. "We wander through data deserts, our internal compasses corrupted by coordinates that never meant to guide us," Rowan writes, conjuring an image of a collective lost in an artificial landscape. This wandering reflects Carr's concern about how the digital environment erodes our ability to orient ourselves within larger systems of meaning. The phrase "data deserts" suggests not only a lack of substance but also a dangerous illusion of information: we are inundated with data but deprived of understanding. The result is a profound disorientation that leaves us, as Rowan describes, "deleting our maps" and surrendering to the instability of a mediated existence. Yet this surrender is not passive; it reveals a deeper cultural malaise. The

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corrupted compasses Rowan alludes to speak to the loss of interior and moral navigation in an age defined by external systems of control. The self, no longer tethered to physical or temporal certainty, drifts between realities, unable to find solid ground.

Rowan Black's *Collected Works* emerges as both an indictment of and elegy for the fragmented self in the digital age. His poems grapple with a world where meaning flickers like unstable signals, where attention scatters across surfaces without ever reaching depth, and where identity dissolves into curated performances optimized for machines. Viewed through lenses based on the work of Nicholas Carr and N. Katherine Hayles, Black's work reveals the fractures of a culture that both demands connection and enforces dislocation. Poems like "Digital Wake," "Hymn to the Algorithm," "Field Notes," and "The Night We Delete Our Maps" do more than critique digital alienation; they embody it, their fragmented forms and disjointed voices echoing the instability they seek to expose. In Rowan's hands, language becomes a tool not of resolution but of disruption—a way of naming the unnameable fractures that define contemporary consciousness. What remains, then, is a poetry that both mourns and resists, asking what of the self can endure when meaning, connection, and focus have fragmented beyond repair. Rowan Black's vision is haunting, urgent, and deeply human, a fractured mirror reflecting a world we are only beginning to understand.

Authenticity and Performance in the Digital Age

Rowan Black's *Collected Works* lingers in the tension between authenticity and performance, in the spaces where the self—fractured, commodified, and mediated— exists both as subject and object. His poetry strips bare the dynamics of digital life, where

visibility has become currency and curated selves are the price of admission. The search

for connection in these mediated spaces collapses into performance, leaving the

individual stranded between their internal truth and its outward representation. Sherry

Turkle, in *Life on the Screen*, describes this as a cultural moment in which identity

becomes multiple and malleable, capable of being played with and redefined. For Black,

however, the game is rigged. Kate Crawford's *The Atlas of AI* reminds us that these

systems—these platforms of self-presentation—do not exist as neutral spaces for

experimentation. They extract, exploit, and profit from performances that distort and

diminish. The poems "Like My Performance (Please Like My Performance)," "Texting

the Revolution," "The Desert of the Real," and "The Razor's Edge" reveal the cost of this

economy of selfhood, where authenticity disintegrates into acts of survival.

In "Like My Performance (Please Like My Performance)," Black's speaker

exposes the hunger that fuels digital validation. "If I am clapping, will you clap back?"

the voice asks, half pleading, half resigned. The desperation here is not just for approval

but for reciprocation—for confirmation that the performance has succeeded. Turkle's *Life*

on the Screen explores this desire, showing how digital platforms offer opportunities to

curate a self that is aspirational, a self that *feels* more real in its refinement. Yet Black

reveals the darker undercurrent: a self reduced to parts, cut and reshaped for maximum

appeal. "You like me better in halves: authentic enough to sell, damaged just right to

buy," the speaker admits. The rawness of this line makes clear the transactional nature of

digital identity. Turkle writes of the freedom found in self-reinvention, but for Black, this

freedom is a cage. Each piece of the self is optimized for visibility, its worth measured by

its consumption. What remains of the whole self, Black seems to ask, when it is endlessly broken down to fit an audience's expectations?

This curated performance expands outward in "Texting the Revolution," where Black confronts the dissonance between political expression and digital spectacle. "A thousand voices breaking into smaller pieces," the poem laments, capturing the fragmentation of collective action into disconnected, performative acts. Activism, in Black's vision, is mediated to the point of paralysis—a performance stripped of consequence. Crawford's critique in *The Atlas of AI* sharpens this reading: digital systems prioritize metrics of engagement over meaningful change, reducing voices to data points. "The algorithm feeds on authenticity like a vampire, drains it of its blood," Black writes elsewhere, but the sentiment resonates here. The urgency of revolution is swallowed by platforms that convert outrage into capital. The voices shouting into the void are heard, counted, and amplified, but only in ways that serve the machine. Black does not dismiss the sincerity of these expressions, but he asks us to consider what has been lost when even revolution must be performed.

In "The Desert of the Real," Rowan Black turns to the deeper existential consequences of this mediated existence. "We live among echoes, hollow sounds mistaken for voices," the speaker observes, situating us in a world where representation and reality have become indistinguishable. The poem echoes Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal, but Black brings the idea into sharper focus, exposing its human cost. "Truth scatters into pixels," he writes, a line that reduces reality to fragments, scattered and irretrievable. Crawford's *The Atlas of AI* aligns with this vision, showing how digital systems manipulate perception, shaping what we see and believe until the real itself

becomes inaccessible. For Black, the self is not immune to this collapse. "I looked for myself in the glass and found a reflection I didn't recognize," the speaker confesses. Here, the glass is both literal and digital—mirrors, screens, feedback loops in which identity is reflected back as something unfamiliar. What is left of truth, Rowan asks, when performance becomes the only reality?

The psychological toll of this dislocation is felt most acutely in "The Razor's Edge," where Black strips the polished veneer of performance to reveal the fractures beneath. "I smile as my edges fray," the speaker admits, the line quiet and devastating. The "edges" here suggest boundaries—between public and private, real and performed—that have eroded under constant scrutiny. Turkle describes the fluidity of online selves as liberating, but Black offers a counter-narrative: fluidity can also mean dissolution. "Words varnished smooth as iPhone glass," the speaker says, the artificial perfection of the image concealing the instability beneath. This smoothness, this polish, reflects a world where every performance must be seamless, where cracks cannot show even as the self begins to unravel. "We're all spinning in this centrifuge of curated selves, each of us hoping to land close enough to real to fool ourselves," Black writes elsewhere, a final indictment of a culture that demands so much performance that it erases the performer.

Rowan Black's *Collected Works* refuses to let us look away from the dissonance of a digital world that conflates visibility with authenticity. His poems reveal the fracture points, the places where selfhood bends and breaks under the weight of performance. Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* shows us how digital spaces allow for experimentation with identity, but Black reveals the cost of this play—the erosion of what is real, what is true. Crawford exposes the systemic forces that profit from these performances,

converting authenticity into a resource to be extracted and exploited. Yet Black's work does not settle for critique alone; it unsettles, leaving us to sit with the questions it raises. What remains of the self when every truth is performed? What happens when the mask fits so perfectly that we forget it's there? In poems like "Like My Performance (Please Like My Performance)," "Texting the Revolution," "The Desert of the Real," and "The Razor's Edge," Black holds up a fractured mirror, asking us to see ourselves not as we wish to be but as we are—caught between the need to be known and the fear of what will be found.

Memory, Preservation, and the Archive

Rowan Black's *Collected Works* grapples with the impermanence of memory and the fractured nature of preservation in the digital age. The poems explore how technology promises to archive experience but often fails, leaving us with fragments, static, and forgetting. Black evokes both the personal and collective stakes of this erasure—what is lost when memory fades, what persists when preservation collapses. Through theoretical lenses like Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* and Wolfgang Ernst's *Digital Memory and the Archive*, we see how Black interrogates the fragility of archives, both human and technological, as sites where presence and absence intermingle, where forgetting is as inevitable as preservation itself. In poems like "Fragment: Found on a Corrupted Hard Drive, Denver (2023)," "The Physics of Loss," "Field Notes," and "The Night We Delete Our Maps," Rowan exposes the paradoxes of remembering in a world that increasingly relies on machines to preserve what it cannot hold.

"Fragment: Found on a Corrupted Hard Drive, Denver (2023)" is one of Rowan Black's most striking engagements with the digital archive's failures. The poem opens

with an image of degradation: "the signal stutters, frays at the edges / until nothing remains but / static and forgetting." Black captures the disintegration of memory, not as a natural process of time but as a technological artifact—a corrupted hard drive whose contents were meant to last but instead dissolve into noise. For Derrida, in *Archive Fever*, the archive is inherently unstable. It is both the "house" of memory and the site of its destruction; the act of archiving is always accompanied by the potential for erasure. Black's stuttering signal embodies this paradox. Digital preservation, which promises to immortalize, instead becomes the very thing that exposes memory's fragility. The archive fails not because it was never built but because its structure is imperfect, vulnerable to corruption.

This theme of impermanence deepens in "The Physics of Loss," where Rowan Black moves from technological failures to the entropy of human memory itself. "Sanctuary dissolves in june's hot mouth: / your garden / their dance floor / my tower," the speaker recalls, layering images of spaces that once held meaning but are now lost. Unlike digital archives, which fail through corruption, human memory erodes through time, weathering like physical spaces until what remains is a version of what once was. Ernst, in *Digital Memory and the Archive*, argues that traditional archives operate differently from digital memory; where the former seeks to preserve artifacts as objects, digital archives function as constant processes—signals, flows, stuttering systems. Black's poem evokes a similar tension. The "sanctuary" dissolves, not entirely gone but transformed, recontextualized by time's erosion. Memory, Black suggests, is a process as much as a product—something that can be witnessed in its dissolution but never fully contained.

Rowan Black explores memory's persistence through abandonment in "Field Notes." The poem catalogs spaces where memory lingers in absence: "time passes through: / empty rooms / vacant lots / dead malls / spaces between streetlights / where memory fails / but guilt persists." These images evoke liminality—places where history has moved on but its residue remains. For Ernst, media archaeology reveals how traces persist beyond the narrative structures imposed upon them. Black's imagery mirrors this concept. The "empty rooms" and "dead malls" are not just abandoned spaces but archives in their own right, filled with the remains of lived experiences that resist erasure. Yet these traces are incomplete, fragmented. Memory here does not preserve intact histories; it offers glimpses, hints, ghosts of what once was. Rowan's phrase "where memory fails / but guilt persists" suggests the emotional weight of forgetting—how absence can haunt as powerfully as presence. The archive, even in its failure, leaves behind an impression, a shadow of what cannot fully be retrieved.

The idea of collective erasure surfaces in "The Night We Delete Our Maps," a poem that interrogates the destruction of pathways that once preserved knowledge and memory. Rowan writes: "Delete your maps / They don't work here / in this territory of ghosts / where algorithms chart our course." The poem moves between physical and digital realms, using the metaphor of "maps" to consider how systems that once oriented us—memory, history, archives—are erased or overwritten. Derrida's *Archive Fever* resonates strongly here; Derrida argues that the archive is always shaped by power structures, and its erasure is as intentional as its creation. Black's reference to "algorithms" highlights the modern archive's dependence on technology and the ways it can distort or erase memory entirely. The "territory of ghosts" becomes a space of

forgetting, where the destruction of old maps leaves us at the mercy of systems that dictate new paths. Rowan does not mourn the loss of these maps so much as he questions what replaces them—what happens when human memory is outsourced to technologies that prioritize efficiency over preservation, utility over meaning?

In *Collected Works*, Rowan Black captures the precariousness of memory and preservation, particularly as they intersect with technology's promises and failures. His poems reflect Derrida's assertion that archives are inherently unstable, sites where preservation is always accompanied by loss. At the same time, Black's work aligns with Wolfgang Ernst's media archaeology, exploring how traces persist—imperfectly, incompletely—in physical spaces, digital systems, and human consciousness. In "Fragment: Found on a Corrupted Hard Drive, Denver (2023)," "The Physics of Loss," "Field Notes," and "The Night We Delete Our Maps," Rowan Black reveals the archive not as a stable repository but as a fragile, shifting terrain. Memory fails, dissolves, stutters. Yet in its failure, it leaves behind fragments—static, ghosts, and shadows that remind us of what was and what can no longer be.

Digital Alienation and Knowledge Manipulation

Rowan Black's *Collected Works* unfolds as a profound exploration of digital alienation, casting light on the engineered fractures in human connection and the systematic erasure and manipulation of knowledge. Black's poems do not merely depict these phenomena as passive byproducts of the digital age; rather, they reveal them as intentional architectures of control. His work resonates deeply with theories of deliberate ignorance, such as Robert Proctor's agnotology—the study of ignorance as a constructed

artifact—and Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism, which details how digital systems commodify human behavior. Through a tapestry of fragmented narratives, Black exposes the ways these forces entangle individuals in cycles of estrangement and complicity, all while presenting poetry that refuses resolution. His thematic consistency is interwoven with a meticulous attention to form, as seen in the structured chaos of his poems—an aesthetic that mirrors the very dissonance he critiques.

In *"Shards of Language,"* Black's critique begins with the disintegration of expression itself, depicted through the poem's glitch-like form. The lines, punctuated by syntax errors and snippets of corrupted code, serve as a mirror to the erosion they document. "We feed ourselves into the machine / byte by byte / thought by thought / self by self / until the distinction blurs: / who's processing whom?" This haunting question underscores the collapse of agency, as humans unwittingly surrender their consciousness to algorithmic domination. The recurring motif of mutual processing invokes Zuboff's observations about how surveillance capitalism seduces users into compliance, offering the illusion of empowerment even as it harvests their data. Black further reinforces this dissonance in lines such as, "words fragment // syntax.errors / meaning not found," where the breakdown of language becomes a visual and semantic representation of cognitive erosion. When Black writes, "consciousness.status = { / human: degrading, / machine: ascending," his words strike like a terminal diagnosis—a vivid testament to the human cost of digital dependency. The poem's recursive question, "who's processing whom?" evolves with each stanza, destabilizing any sense of control or agency and echoing Zuboff's notion that the user is simultaneously consumer and product.

Moving deeper into this digital dystopia, *"Posted to r/collapse"* unveils the machinery of emotional exploitation. The poem's clinical tone dissects the operations of online disinformation networks, presenting their reach with chilling specificity: "Russian networks reach 140 million Americans monthly / Their troll farms operate 24/7 in 12-hour shifts." These figures are not abstract; they embody the industrial scale of manipulation Zuboff describes. Black's piercing insight, that these systems prioritize affect over belief, mirrors Proctor's framework—confusion and division are the goals, not factual correction. "They don't need you to believe specific facts," Black writes, "but they need you feeling specific things: Hopeless. Angry. Divided. Alone." Beyond the numerical and factual, Black deepens the critique through metaphor, likening these farms to modern factories: "anger distilled to algorithms, / division compressed into bytes." The poem's forensic tone strips away the illusions of digital connection, revealing instead a network optimized for harvesting despair and rage. In its final lines, "comments echo into the void, / more signal than voice," Black implicates users themselves, complicit in perpetuating the cycle of exploitation through their engagement.

In *"Digital Wake,"* Black's focus shifts to the commodification of authentic experience, a process described with visceral clarity: "Algorithms feed on authenticity like vampires." Here, Zuboff's "behavioral surplus"—the monetization of personal data—finds a poetic analogue. Black's six-part structure charts a progression from "The Feed" to "The Wake," tracing how algorithms reshape human behavior into optimized metrics. He observes, "They're sharing black squares and filtered grief like digital communion wafers," reducing collective mourning to curated performance. By the poem's end, Black's imagery conjures a chilling landscape where every interaction is a

transaction, a spectacle staged for unseen metrics. Additional lines such as, "their likes become confessions, their shares a liturgy," underscore the ritualistic and hollow nature of this performance. The algorithm, omnipresent and unseen, functions as a modern deity, both exacting and insatiable. This relentless shaping of behavior is encapsulated in, "We mourn on schedule, optimized for engagement," a biting critique of grief's commodification.

The theological undertones of digital life crystallize in *No_Signal_Found,* where Black likens technology's ascendancy to a new form of worship. "We didn't need Mephistopheles to sell us our souls," he writes. "We handed them over willingly, clicked 'I Agree' without reading the terms of service." The poem's division into digital sins— from "gluttony of data" to "sloth of infinite scroll"—is both biting and revelatory. Black's critique of "commodified belief" echoes Zuboff's notion of the "uncontract," the implicit agreements through which platforms extract data while presenting convenience as benevolence. "The hate hasn't gone anywhere," Black warns. "It just got an MBA and learned to speak in passive voice." The poem situates the reader at the intersection of complicity and exploitation, compelling a reckoning with the moral void of the digital age. The metaphor of sin extends to a damning conclusion: "Our penance? Notifications. / Our salvation? Next-day shipping." Black captures the existential bankruptcy of digital capitalism in these lines, juxtaposing the sacred with the mundane.

Finally, *"Field Notes"* turns an observational lens on absence itself. Through a series of fragmented observations, Black documents the landscapes—both physical and psychological—of alienation. "Time passes through: / empty rooms / vacant lots / dead malls / spaces between streetlights," he writes, charting a geography of loss. These sites

are more than abandoned places; they are, as Proctor's "organized forgetting" suggests, deliberate voids created to erase memory and history. Black's attention to residual guilt ("guilt persists even as memory fails") underscores the tension between recognition and amnesia, suggesting an almost spectral awareness of what has been lost. The poem's scientific structure, with headings such as "Observation Set Four: Lost Stations," creates a veneer of rationality that contrasts with the raw emotional core of its content. In "Observation Set Five," Black laments, "stars fade, signals die, / time passes, nothing changes," offering a haunting meditation on the permanence of impermanence.

Together, Black's works form a cohesive interrogation of digital alienation and epistemic distortion. His poetry's fragmented structure mirrors the fragmented experiences it critiques, offering no closure but instead leaving readers in the midst of the very disconnection it seeks to expose. Zuboff and Proctor provide a theoretical scaffolding for understanding these dynamics, but Black's genius lies in his ability to articulate their intimate human costs. By inhabiting the spaces between connection and isolation, Black's poems compel us to confront the systems we have built and the roles we play within them. His vision is unflinching and necessary, reminding us that alienation is not imposed upon us—we participate in it, trading authenticity for convenience, understanding for spectacle, and connection for simulation.

Conclusion

As this dissertation reaches its conclusion, I find myself not at an ending but at a threshold—a liminal space where the questions Rowan Black raises refuse to fade into closure. Instead, they reverberate, evolving as technology evolves, haunting our collective attempts to decipher what it means to be human in an age increasingly

mediated by machines. This threshold is not a stopping point but a pivot, a place where reflection deepens, and the unresolved becomes a space for further imagining.

What does it mean to inhabit a self in a world redefined by algorithms? How do we locate authenticity in spaces where every gesture feels performed, every connection curated? What, if anything, remains of us in the fragments—the data trails, the digital debris—we leave behind? These questions are not static. They are alive, pressing against the edges of our understanding, demanding responses not just of intellect but of existence. Rowan Black's oeuvre does not provide answers but carves out a space to sit with the discomfort of these inquiries. In doing so, his work challenges us to resist the compulsion for resolution, inviting instead a profound engagement with ambiguity.

Rowan Black's work is a map, yes—but a map scrawled in the margins, riddled with contradictions, and smudged by the erratic fingerprints of a restless age. His poetry does not guide us toward answers. It is not a compass pointing north. Instead, it is an excavation, unearthing the fault lines between connection and disconnection, visibility and invisibility, humanity and its digital doubles. Through his fragmented lens, we see not a mirror but a kaleidoscope, where identity splinters and refracts with every shift of the algorithmic landscape. In pieces such as "Field Notes," where "time passes through / empty rooms / vacant lots / dead malls," and "Digital Wake," with its biting observation that "algorithms feed on authenticity like vampires," Black's words illuminate a fractured world that defies linear understanding.

The brilliance of Black's collected works lies not in resolution but in their refusal to resolve. His early writings hum with the electric optimism of a new digital frontier—a space where boundaries dissolve and connection seem infinite. Yet even in his earliest

work, like "proto_manifesto_v2.docx," hints of doubt surface: "Sometimes I think the dial-up noise / is actually the sound of machines / trying to remember how to cry." As his voice matures, it becomes a chorus of contradictions. We are more connected, yet lonelier. More visible, yet lost in the glare of surveillance. More powerful, yet tethered to systems that reduce us to data. Pieces like "Digital Wake" and "The Night We Delete Our Maps" crackle with the tension of this duality, documenting not just technological evolution but its quiet rewiring of our inner lives—our dreams, our fears, our fragile sense of what it means to matter.

And yet, the glitch. The glitch is where Black's genius flourishes. It is not a flaw in the system but its aperture. In the spaces where signals falter, where errors proliferate, and where the machine stutters, we find moments of clarity—not clarity as in certainty, but clarity as in recognition. The glitch forces us to confront ourselves not as perfected avatars but as raw, unfinished beings. It reminds us that imperfection is the essence of the human condition, and that the pursuit of seamlessness is a form of forgetting. In "No_Signal_Found," Black crystallizes this ethos: "We handed [our souls] over willingly, clicked 'I Agree' without reading the terms of service." The poem's exploration of "digital sins" offers a sobering reflection on how technology frames and distorts the most intimate aspects of human experience.

This project, with its deliberate gaps and corruptions, echoes the digital impermanence Black so meticulously chronicles. Just as our virtual lives are haunted by the specter of obsolescence, so too is this collection—a mosaic of fragments that refuses the illusion of completeness. Its absences are not oversights but invitations: to imagine, to question, to wonder what else might yet be found. Black's relevance grows sharper as we

step further into the age of artificial intelligence and algorithmic sovereignty. His work suggests that resistance need not be loud or binary. It can be as quiet as noticing, as persistent as asking, as human as refusing to let the machine define our limits. In the cracks where the code falters, we discover the resilience of what cannot be quantified.

In this refusal to be quantified, Black's works take on a new kind of power. His fragments—both literal and figurative—are like seeds planted in the soil of a shifting digital landscape. They remind us that even as algorithms try to predict our desires and pathologize our humanity, there is a core to us that resists. This resistance is not a grand gesture. It is subtle, persistent, and deeply personal. It is the pause before hitting send. It is the thought unshared. It is the act of writing a poem in the margins of a notebook while the world hums with data traffic. It is, in Black's words, "a quiet rebellion in the face of infinite noise."

As this exploration concludes, I am reminded that Rowan Black's work remains deliberately unfinished. New fragments will continue to surface—etched into the underside of abandoned bridges, uploaded as corrupted files to forgotten forums, scrawled on the walls of cities undergoing their own digital eclipses. Each discovery is not an endpoint but a ripple, reframing the whole, inviting us to look again, and then again. His work suggests that in the act of searching, in the persistence of our questioning, we assert our humanity against the encroaching hum of the machine.

This journey, then, is not about answers but about resonance—about the echoes we create and the connections we dare to forge in the static. If there is a final thought to carry forward, it is this: in the glitches we endure, in the spaces where systems falter, in the fragments that remain, there is something irreducibly human. And in the act of

searching—not for resolution, but for the courage to persist in the face of uncertainty—we assert our humanity against the encroaching hum of the machine. Rowan Black's work continues. As do we all, navigating the porous boundaries between code and consciousness, between the selves we curate and the selves we are. The signal fades. The noise rises. Still, we transmit.

This conclusion opens its arms to all of us, not only as inheritors of Rowan Black's questions but as participants in his inquiry. His poetry teaches us that the fragments of our lives—the seemingly inconsequential moments, the forgotten threads—are not meaningless. They are the most human part of us. In the ruins of a digital empire, in the quiet chaos of our curated lives, Rowan Black's words become a reminder: we are still here. Searching, stumbling, and enduring. Still transmitting.

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