

THE LAST WORDS

IN A WORLD WITHOUT WRITERS,
HIS DISCOVERY REWROTE EVERYTHING.



Produced by Abby, Cayla, Paige and Jack

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To the writers—
past, present, and forgotten.

May we never trade our voices
for convenience.

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White lights buzz on. I open my eyes. A deep blue room surrounds me as I sit up and rub my eyes free from the haze of sleep. Blue walls, blue floor and blue ceiling tiles. Even a blue door, which looms directly in front of me. There are two parallel strips of white light above me, showering the room in a visual static. This has been my room for 200 days now and I'm still not used to it. I think the blue is supposed to promote better sleep by creating a calming atmosphere, or at least that's what 1010 tells me. Though the overwhelming blue hue of the room has always reminded me of the depths of the sea and ignited a deep fear in me, a fear from a different time. Memories sometimes come flashing into my mind, emerging from my clouded consciousness. The white seafoam of crashing waves, bubbles rising to the surface through the blue, sand kicked up under my feet as I run towards a light. I can never quite make out who's with me or if I'm really the one running or drowning. Sometimes I even feel like I can taste the salty water. Which is especially odd because salt has become a negligible part of my diet. The 'spreads', or the trays of foods slipped through the middle slat in my blue door, are usually just an assortment of grey-ish vegetables, a cube of meat and some bread (which is where my salt comes from, in small doses). These spreads are slid through the slats three times a day, consisting of essentially the same foods with small variations to separate breakfast, lunch and dinner.

But today I was much groggier than usual, I heard 1010's robotic droning voice through the small, round speaker in the middle of the door, replacing the peephole.

"J10, be ready in fifteen minutes for your removal from the facility for burial collections."

"Burial collections? What do you mean, Al (my affectionate nickname for 1010)?"

"Be ready in fifteen minutes, J10"

"What do you mean, Al?!" I was banging on the door now. "I thought my whole family was dead!"

Al was gone, and I had no time for questions. I had to change from my sleep uniform into my daily uniform. Was I about to go to a funeral? 6

A funeral for a family member that has been alive this whole time without my knowledge? And, in that case, why would the Mainframe summon me?

I slipped into my daily uniform, the one I had that was stained black by coal, because I figured if I was going to be attending a funeral then I might as well be wearing black. I brushed my teeth in front of the metal bowl in the corner of my small blue room that doubled as both a sink and toilet. I spit my flavorless toothpaste into the bowl and watched it slowly swirl down the drain. A brief thought flashed through me about where that spit goes, where we, as humans, go when we die? Back into the brown earth that I've never known outside of the painted windows of the greenhouse room, which I worked in for 100 days during my intermediary education. Scooping what I quickly learned to be dirt from one till to another under incredibly bright yellow light. Ever since, my sight has been inescapably eclipsed by a black circle in the left corner of my eye. I think it's from looking into the stale, circular light for too long, though I feel like the dark mass has been growing.

I heard AI over the small speaker again. Fifteen minutes had obviously passed. I turned from the sink, wearing my black-charred uniform and walked to the door as it opened for me. AI, was a stride away from me, hovering in place, waiting to guide me through the white corridors of the Mainframe facility. I had only been living in the facility for 200 days, I was transported there after I graduated from meditation when I was exactly 6570 days old, as told by the Mainframe. I know a lot of kids kept track of their age using tallymarks in their issued notebooks, continuing on from 2000 days when their parents were separated from them so they could go to school. My parents apparently died soon after I was born so I never knew my age until the Mainframe informed me that I was being transported. Since then, I've been tallying up my days in my new work-issued notebook. But today was a new day, I was going to reconnect with myself.

AI hovered around corner after corner as I struggled to keep pace. You would think that I would at least know a couple of the hallways in the facility considering I had been there for 200 days now but it's almost like the white hallways changed everyday, like either the layout of the facility was shifting each night or my mind was. Eventually, AI got to a white padlocked door and a white arm opened out of the side of his circular, machinated body and inserted into the middle of the door and turned back and forth in an almost rhythmic pattern. The door then released and rolled upwards until it disappeared into the ceiling. This happened about five more times, I would race around corner after corner as AI smoothly hovered through. Then he would stop at a door that looked exactly like the previous and his arm would emerge and trace a similar pattern.

After the fifth door opened, I realized that we were trapped in a hallway with no corner or locked door to speak of. There was just another white wall in front of us. Then I felt the floor under my feet rumble and move, and AI attached himself to the wall of the now-moving room. We were surely being driven to burial collection, now. All without seeing anything other than white walls and locked doors. I was being driven to collect the things of some family member who I thought was dead long before today. I tried to relax as I braced myself for the drive.

After driving for approximately twenty minutes, we arrived at the burial collection. AI spoke up from the wall:

"J10, this is your stop. The old living unit of your now-deceased Aunt K8. You have exactly 80 minutes to collect everything you may want to keep in your facility domicile before her unit is lifted to the trash receptacle and everything inside is incinerated."

"Ok, AI, thanks for the lift."

"I'll be back to retrieve you, J10, in exactly 80 minutes." The back door lifted to the ceiling and a ramp emerged from the floor to reveal my unknown Aunt's living unit, white and cubical like every other living unit I had seen when I was young and unconfined by the Mainframe.

I walked down the ramp and hesitantly pulled the door handle until the pressure released. It was open, probably because the Mainframe death-inspector machines had already been through. As I wandered through the living room and kitchen, everything seemed to be in order and relatively barren. I wonder how old my Aunt L8 was when she died. I wonder if she knew about me before she died. I wonder if she knew herself.

I continued wandering through her unit, down the white hallways, barren of any decoration or paintings of the outside world. I got to the bedroom at the end of the hall and slowly pulled the door. There was a low, whining creak as the door gave way to her white bedroom. This room was as equally-barren as every other room save for her rather elegantly-large bed. Tall, wooden bedposts framed a mess of decorative red sheets. The sheets were draped haphazardly over the frame, seemingly from being previously gone through. I wonder how she managed to have such an elegant and comfy bed within the Mainframe's waves of standardized white. I was enamored by this room, so I went snooping around. Under the bed, behind the door, pacing back and forth along the white tile. Then I noticed something. Amongst the white, issued books of my dear Aunt L8's bookshelf, there was one that stuck out. It was a title I didn't recognize. There were only five Mainframe-issued books we were allowed to read after all, yet my Aunt L8 had six books on her shelf. Nestled between her copies of *How to Be A Good Human* and *Work & Time*, 8th Edition was a little red book titled simply: *Memories of a Life*. I went to pull the book down and it hitched and hung at an angle. I heard a piston pull and the mattress started to ascend until it came to a slow rest at about a 35-degree angle, revealing a chest of hidden books and journals under that glorious bed. I was amazed by the colors splashing the covers and the fonts scrawled across the front.

I picked up a book titled *Writing: A Technology* from the now-revealed hidden, horizontal library under the bed and started to read:



Writing: A Technology

At the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, across from the diagram explaining the process and benefits of oil fracking, there is an exhibit with only two items. One item is an ancient votive statue used in the earliest forms of anthropomorphic religions, with roots stemming from the Persian plateau. The other item, by contrast, is less visually interesting; sitting on a black display block. A cracking, molded slab of clay, no larger than the palm of a hand.

Daily, hundreds of people approach the glass that houses this small lump of soil material—brown and frail and dried with time. These visitors peer beyond the glass and analyze the seemingly arbitrary bumps, divots and slices embedded in the clay's surface, as if the piece has been pressed into aggregate; leftovers from being pressed against an uneven ground. How unassuming, they think. Why does the hunk of bumpy mud sit isolated in the display, offered a place of importance among artifacts made of gold and pearl?

Many scholars believe that the clay tablet, unnamed, is one of the earliest forms of writing: cuneiform. The tablet records the amount of beer and grain being given to someone, for something; most historians agree that the tablet is an early version of a receipt. On the receipt are several different markings—five wedge-shaped indentations are placed next to a pictograph of an upright jar with a pointed base, indicating five units of beer. Seven wedge-shaped indentations are next to a pictograph of a bowl tipped towards a schematic human head, meaning seven units of grain.

Fascinating, the guests of the Iraq Museum decide, after having read the paragraph description accompanying the tablet. How cool is that? So cool!—and perhaps, a little disappointing. Ashamed at their own private reactions to what is meant to be intellectually stimulating, they skitter away to oil fracking, thoughts occupied. What were the earliest humans doing—recording the sale of beer? Where are the deep contemplations on human life and civilization? Where are waxes on the universal truths that transcend time? Our ancestors are supposed to be wise; old things are meant to inform.

The earliest forms of writing can be traced back to around 3400 BCE. For those who don't feel like doing math, that's five thousand, four hundred years ago. Incomprehensible numbers, and yet, if one holds the belief that humans appeared in Africa 300,000 years ago, writing is relatively late to the game. If all of human history was a single, twenty-four hour day, writing was invented at the twenty-third hour.

Around 2100 BCE, humans got writing artifacts a little more satisfying to our existential sensibilities: The Epic of Gilgamesh in Mesopotamia, and The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor in Egypt. These stories help humans explain themselves and are vital to identity and civilization building. Egypt would later strike again with The Book of the Dead, and ancient Iraq would produce the Code of Urukagina.

The “complaint tablet to Ea-nāšir,” a clay tablet written in Akkadian cuneiform, is the first recorded customer complaint. Hammurabi created his famed Code a few years later, contemporaries with the elders in the Shang Dynasty inscribing prayers onto oracle bones. Once humans start writing, they’re addicts. Inevitable, of course, writing was always meant to be—right?

Hundreds of years later, the paranoid Essenes are huddled away in their coastal Dead Sea caves, fixedly scribbling on scrolls. Simultaneously, Socrates, one of the foundational thinkers of Western thought, has had enough of this writing thing. Plato, his most notorious student, records Socrates’ famous critique in his dialogue *Phaedrus*: [Writing] is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.

Socrates believed that writing was too finite, too fastened. The famous debater imagined that once an idea was written down, the idea held too much authority—how could the belief be challenged, and later changed, if needed? People who write will become forgetful, he argued, relying on external sources to conduct basic recall and thinking. Writing will allow people to become “hearers of many things” and critical learners of none. Socrates believed that writing was dangerous to authenticity, to genuine knowledge. The person detailing the sale of five units of beer and seven units of grain is missing out on a chance to flex their cerebellum. Socrates believed that Plato—by writing down his teacher’s lectures—boxes in the dynamic and flexible nature of belief.

New technologies have always been intimidating; old sentiments will ultimately be exchanged for efficiency. The advent of the lightning-fast railroad killed the contemplative, reflective, beautiful trot across the countryside. Why linger and meditate over a textile when a factory can produce five times what a weaver can? No one wants to write letters, penning every word laboriously, thoughtfully; they want to call. There’s no reason to feel the water rock under your feet when you can fly much quicker in the clouds. Nicholas Carr, an American journalist, author, and political thinker, believes that “Socrates was

right.” His 2010 book *The Shallows* posits that the Internet now does what Socrates feared writing would do back in 400 BCE. Whether or not growth and innovation is always advantageous is a tricky, long-contended topic, and perhaps a tad uninteresting in the age of perpetual metamorphosis.

The pivotal point comes when humans get to wonder what is worth forgetting, rather than what is worth learning. What do we throw away, in order to make more room?

Socrates was arguing in a time when writing was exclusively for the elite; 95% of the population was otherwise illiterate. Perhaps writing has made humans too certain in their own belief—but writing enacts agency, identity, and ideology that transforms and connects on a much larger scale. Maybe such connection and mobility is worth letting the cerebellum, our memory, rest every once in a while.

Every time one thinks, growth happens—but to have enough room for such growth, one must discard old ways of thought. Writing, as a technology, offloads the mental load of remembering every detail, allowing for increased exploration, sharing, and cross referencing; indeed, humans are “hearers of many things.” As a species, we are constantly seeking stimulus, and thirsting for more knowledge. The visitors to the Iraq Museum in Baghdad wander away from the clay tablet, perhaps completely indifferent, perhaps disappointed at the lack of groundbreaking antiquated wisdom—and yet, they are active witnesses to the process of discarding, and, in turn, to growing. A blunted reed wedged indecipherably into a block of soil is one of the most significant inventions of human history: writing, the technology of thought.



The Carvings We Leave Behind

Growing up in North Carolina meant learning the story of the Lost Colony of Roanoke, England's first attempt at a permanent settlement in the New World. Roanoke Colony's fame naturally arose from its disappearance. The colony had been in desperate need of supplies, but when provisions arrived after three years, the settlers were nowhere to be found. The only message left was carved into a tree: CROATOAN.

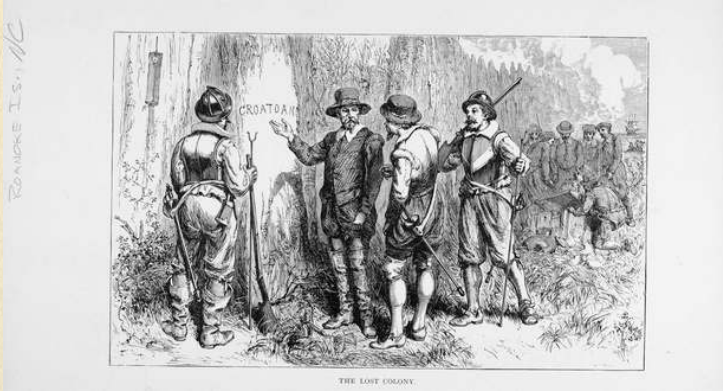


Figure 1: The Lost Colony, English Explorers read Croatoan on Tree 1876

This was the first time that I considered tree carving to be anything other than a teen's act of boredom or a way to deface and mark up a tree. Tree carving could leave a message. It could be a form of writing.

The act of carving on trees goes by many names: arborglyphs, dendroglyphs, silvaglipts, or simply tree carving. Humans have been carving symbols, messages, drawings, and names in trees for thousands of years. As the tree grows, the writing will change and stretch with it. The tools range from knives to fingernails, with the tree's bark providing a canvas that can last for decades if the writer is lucky. But if the writer is unlucky, so is the tree. Tree bark provides a layer of protection similar to human skin, shielding the tree from fungi, diseases, and pests. Carving writing into a tree often damages this outer layer of defense, compromising the tree's health. At times, the human desire to leave a mark can be detrimental to the tree's life.

In the poem "Letter to the Person Who Carved His Initials into the Oldest Living Longleaf Pine in North America", Matthew Olzmann showcases the disrespect of this human desire to leave a mark directly on nature's skin. When I first encountered this poem in my creative nonfiction class, I expected it to begin with an accusation. Instead, it felt like a conversation. The narrator asks

"what it's like to live without / curiosity, without awe." (Olzmann, 2022, lines 1-2). This pine tree, also in North Carolina, is believed to be around 470 years old. It was decades old when the English first attempted to create a settlement at Roanoke. But where the engraving of CROATOAN was left as a message by the colonists, the initials carved in a historic natural feature represents something closer to hubris. "To take it all in and then, / to reach for your knife." (lines 16-17). As Olzmann wrote, too often humans look at the wonders of the natural world and desire to make their cruel, selfish mark.

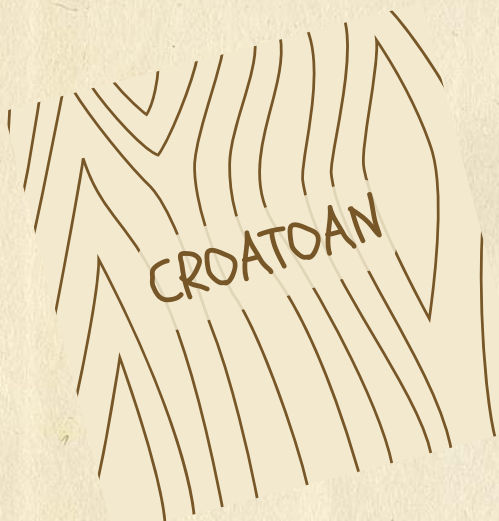
But how long does it take for a mark to turn from pedestrian to historic? The Basque Carvings in the American west are heralded as historic landmarks. The U.S. Forest Service website describes these carvings and symbols as historic, showcasing how sheepherders from the Basque region in Spain carved on aspen trees, providing a glimpse into human history and the Old West. Since these trees only live for around 100 years, these carvings and their messages are disappearing. At the end of the article, a bold message warns that "It is illegal to carve on aspen trees on the national forests and grasslands!" (U.S. Forest Service). While the Basque shepherds carved without causing damage to the aspen, the fear is that new writers would not be so careful. The fear is that humans would carve and carve until the original beauty is lost.

In areas where tree carving is not prohibited and people have already begun carving, the marks are pervasive. I recall seeing bamboo lining zoo walkways and a bamboo forest at an orchard, carved over and over by knives, nails, and sticks. They went as high as people could reach, with names, initials, dates, drawings, and words from humans wanting to leave their mark on a more permanent piece of nature. Of course, the more vulgar writing is saved for latrinalia, i.e. words scrawled on bathroom walls. Instead, carving on trees has long been devoted to initial pairs. Young love has frequently turned to engraving on trees for permanence, with inscriptions like 'A + C' or 'K loves B'. A famous example in media has to be from Disney's Robin Hood (1973), where "R. H. + M. M." is surrounded by a heart on a tree in Nottingham, England. While some of these romances are fleeting, their marks are not, growing and warping with the trees they scar. This romantic gesture has been practiced for thousands of years, with tree carving being referenced by Greek and Roman writers, the oldest description of writing on tree bark dating back to 2,300 years ago. Today, we have countless other canvases to profess our love on, and yet many people still rely on trees.

It has been over 400 years since the Roanoke Colony disappeared, and there is still no conclusive answer for their vanishing. The most popular theory is that after starvation and drought, the remaining colonists joined a local Native

American tribe, the Croatan. According to the National Park Service's page on the Lost Colony, John White, the colonist's leader who left for supplies and was delayed by conflict with the Spanish, "found "CRO" carved into a tree and "CROATOAN" carved into a palisade" (U.S. National Park Service, 2025, 1590 Voyage). Although the colonists had agreed to write their destination should they move before White's return, relations with the Croatan were questionable. But while White's books had been destroyed and his armor rusted, the colony's messages remained carved for people to find. Today, you can see a recreation of CROATOAN on a tree in the North Carolina Museum of History (under construction as of 2026), showcasing what the colonist's message might have looked like. The fate of the Lost Colony remains unsolved.

From the Lascaux Cave to modern-day latrinalia, humans have long desired to leave a mark. One continuous method of human engraving is arborglyphs, or tree carving. Whether it was left by a lover or a message carved by colonists, writing through trees is a widespread practice that is both revered and despised. Whether you mourn the marks left on living trees or delight in the humanistic desire to leave a legacy, tree carving endures in myth and in practice even as writing technologies advance from physical to digital.





Longevity and Tradeoffs in Writing Technology

I've always found it fascinating how long different writing techniques and technologies can last. Both in usage, but also physically, it's always been fascinating to think about how long the writing word can endure.

It has changed over the thousands of years that humans have been writing, but has always been a concern for writers. In the earliest days of human literacy, writing was something exclusive. It was the realm of skilled craftspeople, working on the orders of kings and pharaohs. Early writing was expensive, time-consuming, and difficult. Cuneiform tablets had to be pressed from clay, inscribed with the language and words they were to carry, and then fired in kilns to set their shape.

The ancient Egyptians had to carve their hieroglyphs into literal stone— a process that was even more difficult, both due to the complexities of learning the language itself, and the physical materials themselves.

The Egyptians also had their hieratic script, a much less well known writing system developed from the hieroglyphs. While the hieroglyphs were primarily used for religious purposes, carved into tombs and monuments, the hieratic script was used for more bureaucratic purposes. It was the language of scribes more than pharaohs, but much less has survived. The system traded durability for ease of use, swapping chisels and stone for papyrus and ink. But, consequently, much less of the script has survived to the modern day.

That trade off has never faded. In medieval Europe, paper only really became available in the late 1400s (depending on the country), and without a local substitute such as papyrus, scholars and writers had to find a different solution. Parchment, the prime writing technology at the time, was made of specially treated animal skin. It had to go through days of preparation in order to produce a single animal's hide for use. Books could require dozens of pelts, fundamentally limiting the number of works that could be produced and recorded. There was a hard limit on the amount of parchment that could be used. Parchment could last a long time— many well kept examples from the medieval period still exist after all, but it forced choices. Many works were lost, the scholars and monks tasked with upkeeping and updating them were unable to copy the originals before they were destroyed.

Paper did change things. Made of fibers, primarily from trees, it was substantially easier to produce. With the nearly consecutive development of the

printing press, paper allowed thousands more books to be produced, for significantly cheaper and much easier. Books were no longer such intensive pieces of art—monuments to thousands of hours of labor— they could now afford to be used beyond the most sacred and important works. Proper literacy took decades longer, but with paper and the printing press, the written word could actually make its way into the mainstream.

The technology behind printing has progressed further, but hasn't changed a lot in the fundamental ways. We're still printing works on paper, except now we're doing it at a scale that would blow the minds of the early adopters of the printing press. With the rise of archival, acid-free paper, it's even easier for written work to last.

The biggest change in the world of writing, however, is the advent of digitization. Now, books can be scanned and preserved digitally. It gives them a theoretically infinite life, although one much more practically limited. In fact, digital preservation may even be substantially less long-lasting than physical archival copies. While physical objects are subject to physical threats, they can also be preserved with care and effort. A digital copy isn't liable to the same type of threat, but has a whole new set of issues. Data corruption is a prime example, errors and glitches adding up to render a file inoperable. There is also no guarantee of comparability. Digitalization introduces the issue of whether upgrades will make past works unusable, or if the software gradually becomes increasingly obsolete, with no path to recovery. Digital copies allow a work to be saved, theoretically, nearly infinitely, while allowing anyone who wants to make their own easy access. It's a revolution, but revolutions always have consequences.

It's fascinating how the physical limits of the technology used to write has changed what has been written and remembered, and how the lifespan of these mediums changed over time. Writing has not always been as accessible as it is today.

Place Shapes Thought

In Guatemala, the past is not something you visit. It is something you live alongside. Ruins appear where you least expect them, woven into homes, streets, and everyday spaces as if they have always belonged there. They are treated with a kind of quiet reverence, not as artifacts to be removed or displayed, but as pieces of history that must remain in place. To ensure this, there is a law that requires new structures to be built around the ruins, protecting them from harm. It is prohibited to remove or alter the stones, preserving them as a constant reminder of the people who came before us. I remember going to an event at my mom's friend's house when I was younger, and she had glass floors with ruins underneath. It was surreal to see the past being actively incorporated into the present.

That same presence extends beyond individual spaces and into the broader landscape of Guatemala. It is a country defined by culture, color, and history, where echoes of what came before appear everywhere. Walking through town, you pass buildings that are hundreds of years old, woven seamlessly into everyday life. Much of this history traces back to the Maya, whose presence still shapes the country today. But even with all of that richness, there is something different about my favorite ruin site. It strips away the noise and the color. What remains is quiet, muted stone and the weight of history.

The ruins I love most sit right next to a busy road, surrounded by constant movement and noise. Cars pass, people go about their day, and chicken buses—old school buses spray-painted and converted into public transportation—fly by with ayudantes leaning out the doors, shouting their destinations in hopes of filling the bus like a clown car. Most buses around my house head to Ciudad Vieja (Old City), so all day we hear: “¡Ciu Vieja! ¡Ciu Vieja!” shouted so loudly and so often that you start to wonder how their voices even hold up. The noise feels constant. But the moment you step into the ruins, it's all gone. You can no longer hear any of it. The air feels clean, like what I can only describe as watching my mother hang sheets out to dry in the summer. The sunlight feels warmer on your skin, like the kind of warmth that settles slowly, the way sunlight lingers on old stone long after the morning has passed. Everything is so still that you begin to notice small details like birds flitting in and out of openings in the stone, or the texture of the walls that have been shaped by time. It slows you down without having to ask you to.



I usually go with my friends, most of whom are Guatemalan. I say this because you must pay to get in; five quetzales for locals and twenty-five for tourists. Even though I grew up there from a young age, I do not look like most of the people around me, so I keep my head down and only speak Spanish. There is something strange about feeling like you belong and stand out at the same time. Once we are inside the ruins, though, that feeling fades. We are all just people in the same space, existing in the same quiet. My friends and I are normally loud and constantly talking, but every time we go, we end up sitting in silence for a while. Not because we have to, but because the space invites it. It does not matter if you know the full history of the ruins. Being there makes you think about the past anyway. I find myself wondering what life was like when the buildings were complete. I think about those who walked through the spaces, and how different everything must have been. Sometimes, I think about how many other young girls must have sat where I am sitting, taking in the same view at a completely different time.

This is where I began to realize that a place itself can shape thought. Writing is often associated with tools like laptops, notebooks, or phones, but those tools are only a part of the process. The environment we are in plays a role as well. In the ruins, my thoughts slow down and become more reflective and observant. I notice things I would normally overlook, and I spend more time with my ideas instead of quickly moving past them. Because writing stems from thought, this shift in thinking inevitably changes the way I write.

In contrast, when I write on my phone or laptop, my thoughts feel faster and more scattered. Notifications, distractions, and the pace of everyday life make it difficult to stay with a single idea for long. Writing becomes a task to complete rather than an experience. The ruins do the opposite for me. They remove distractions and create space for deeper thinking. In that sense, they function as a form of writing technology, not as a tool you hold, but as a space that shapes the process itself.

It was not until writing this chapter that I learned the name of the ruins I had kept returning to since I was a little girl: Ruinas de la Recolección, the “Ruins of Recollection.”

A perfectly fitting name for a perfect place. Recollection is the act of remembering, of gathering thoughts, and of piecing together fragments of the past. If writing is the act of capturing thought, then recollection is where that thought begins. Without asking anything of you, the space slows your thinking and turns your attention inward, allowing ideas to surface in a way that feels natural.

In a place built out of memory and preservation, writing becomes less about producing something new and more about noticing what is already there, waiting to be understood. The ruins do not give you words, but they change how those words come into existence. They are not just a place I go to write, they are a place that teaches me how.



I never knew there was so much I didn't know. I didn't know that we used to record down all of our thoughts for other people to read. Now, we only have our work-issued notebooks and those cannot be distributed between 'workers' as the Mainframe calls us. Exchanging thoughts is far from customary, if workers have any thoughts to begin with. I've realized that the older workers seem to be unable to do anything but stare straight ahead. I can't stop thinking about how the last section of the fourth book kept by Aunt L8 ended: "In a place built out of memory and preservation, writing becomes less about producing something new and more about noticing what is already there, waiting to be understood." I just can't imagine being in a place where history inspires thought. I feel like my whole life I've been surrounded by the moment, by what task the Mainframe wants me to do next. I've never put much thought into the past. I want to start noticing "what is already there, waiting to be understood", I want to understand why I've never seen any human writing before today. I want to understand why the Mainframe has destroyed our history. I want to continue reading. I pick up another journal and continue reading...

Tom Hessin Revolution Collection Rustic Fountain Pen

\$62.00 (plus shipping and tax)

The Revolution Collection Rustic fountain pen takes the writer back to simpler times with its lightweight wood barrel and metal detailings. Its precise construction pays homage to Tom Hessin's past and the legacy of Birmingham craftsmanship.

This pen includes gift packaging, an ink cartridge, and a converter. Custom engravings are available in a print and cursive script. Purchases of this pen include a two-year warranty.

Includes:

- Gift box packaging
- Real walnut wood barrel with metal decorative detailings
- Clip engraved with legacy five-diamond design
- Pen card, ink cartridge, and converter
- PVD-coated JoWo nib

About the nib:

The nib, designed by JoWo, manufactured by Opus 88, is durable, stylish, and luxurious. Made of stainless steel, it is sturdy and corrosion-resistant. The stunning gunmetal black was produced with PVD coating (Physical Vapor Deposition), guaranteeing the hardest coating available on the market. The floral decal is sure to surprise and delight. The nib is available in the sizes extra fine, fine, and medium.

About Tom Hessin:

Tom Hessin is a name that spans generations and serves as a testament to the care of the family that's kept it alive. In 1870, Andrew Charles arrived in Birmingham, the heart of pen-making at the time, and founded T. Hessin & Co. It was named after his grandmother's maiden name, but not a year later, a son was born to Charles and he was named Thomas Hessin Charles. Thomas, raised in craftsmanship, later inherited the company and modernized it through the changing world. Under the pressures of wartime, their founding principles stayed true, and they continued to contribute, knowing the importance of pens as tools of communication and expression. The spirit of Tom Hessin continued as the company passed from son to daughter and then son again, before finally ending in the hands of Charlie Stockbridge.

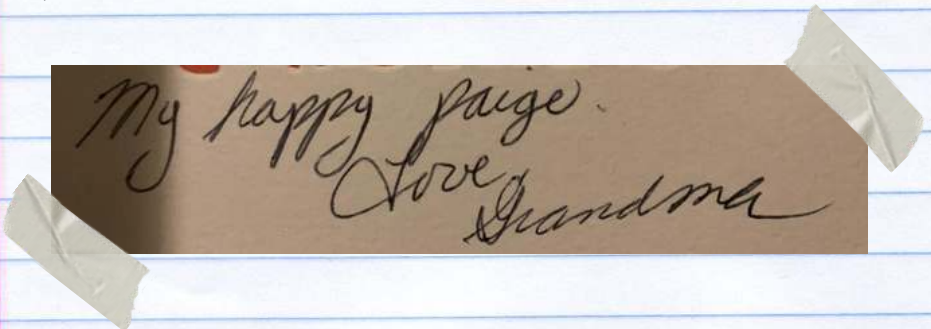
The company has continued to modernize and adapt while exhibiting the craftsmanship that Andrew Charles created in the company's founding. The legacy spanning 150 years and five generations is honored by the five diamond motif appearing on pen caps today.

The Lost Art

I get a sudden, incessant urge to organize my bedroom once every handful of months. I keep a fairly organized space and pride myself on my capacity to efficiently, and perhaps too impulsively, part with objects that serve me no direct purpose. I'm sure, if I thought long enough about when and where I received an item, I could easily attach arbitrary significance to it and indulge in the passing pleasure of reminiscing on pleasant days gone by as I gaze upon it before inevitably returning it to its more permanent state of uselessness. However, in the vast majority of instances, I choose to instead enjoy the more long-term satisfaction I derive from having and maintaining an organized space by tossing it out. This doesn't extend to all items or objects, though, which I'm reminded of each time I act on my urge to organize. As I never once, while sitting on my bedroom floor surrounded by piles of trash, bags of donations, and yet to be sorted contents of my wardrobe, consider parting with any of the handwritten cards I've received and collected from friends and loved ones throughout the years that sit in a towering stack on the top shelf of my closet.

In one past episode of room reorganization, I momentarily paused my tidying to sift through the contents of my card collection and momentarily indulged in reading over the sweet messages written in them. While doing this, though, I came across a card penned by my late grandmother. At the time, the wound of her passing was much fresher, and upon staring at the short note, "Merry Christmas, my happy girl," I felt a bittersweet knot of emotion form in the back of my throat. The message itself lacked any significant depth of meaning due to its being so short; her handwriting, however, struck me heavily, as I realized upon analysis of it just how much it symbolically represented her as an individual.

Her twirly lettering was as delicate, feminine, and timelessly elegant as she was, and the sight of it brought forth recollections of hydrangeas blooming in her garden, the soft blue fabric of her nightgown, the sweet chime of her charmed bracelets, and the crescendo of her voice alongside a piano. Through this, I was enlightened to the fact that the appearance of a person's handwriting can serve as an extension of who they are. Like a secret code or message, analysis of an individual's penmanship can provide insight into what they're like. My father, for example, has a small, stiff, and neatly compacted style of lettering, which could be seen as reflective of his practical, efficient, and organized nature. My mother, on the other hand, writes with much larger letters that swirl haphazardly across the surfaces they're scribbled onto with inexplicable capitalizations. And this perhaps signals that her personality is bold, unique, and unpredictable.



From this, I began to realize that there are benefits to handwritten notes and letters that can't be derived from the use of other mediums of communication. And my cherishing of cards was perhaps proof that I had, for a long time, inadvertently valued these affordances without ever having consciously recognized them. Failure to recognize and appreciate the virtues of writing and receiving handwritten notes, however, is a large part of what has led to the art being lost amid recent advancements in technology that accommodate rapid and effortless communication.

One special quality of handwritten notes is their tactility. The grooves left in paper by pens form mountains and valleys of meaning for their readers.

There's also, as I mentioned earlier, much that can be discovered from the characteristic curve of a person's penmanship. For within each arch, swirl, and slant of a letter is something to be gathered about the person who wrote it.

Handwriting is also as inconsistent, unpredictable, and imperfect as the people, relationships, and emotions dictating its contents and composition. Words are bound to be misplaced, misspelled, and crossed out, which in turn makes

handwritten messages feel more authentically human. In giving a letter, an individual is granting someone else access to their inner thoughts and feelings

towards them. By tacking a stamp onto the corner of an envelope one is

saying, "These are my thoughts, they're yours to keep, do with them what you will, shove them in shoe boxes, toss them in wastebaskets, hide them between the pages of your books, let them collect dust in hidden corners, or put them in a place where they might always be visible and allow them to act as a physical

reminder of me." The feelings one writes about will inevitably pass, the paper they're etched into might wrinkle, and the ink they're written in may eventually fade; however, the sentiment is still eternal so long as it exists physically.

The process of writing and sending a letter adds greater depth to a person's message, too, as it requires both intentionality and patience. To send a letter, one must first deliberate over what they wish to say, determine how they wish to say it, and where and how to send it. Then ultimately, endure the grueling waiting period between sending it off and receiving a response.

Abandoning the ease of instant communication causes us to feel a heightened sense of vulnerability; so when sending a letter, one is not only sharing a message but also notifying its recipient that they cared enough to face discomfort for the sake of sending the sentiment.



All things in life are fleeting, experiences end, feelings are impermanent, and relationships are subject to change. In a lifetime, one experiences so much, and amid all there is to do, see, and worry about, much is bound to get lost in translation. So, upon reminiscing on experiences, it's no wonder that we often end up revising or rewriting our own personal histories so that they follow more favorable narratives. In time, we inevitably grow out of touch with feelings we once felt and thus tell ourselves inaccurate stories that might eventually wind up vanishing from our recollections altogether. So, in instances where one feels a certain way for another and shares that sentiment through a handwritten letter, they're in turn making their feelings permanent, as ink can't be revised or erased. By sending a letter, we not only submit to sharing our feelings with someone else but to doing so in a manner that's eternal and undeniable. In this way, handwritten letters function similarly to photographs by creating snapshots of who their composers were when they wrote them. Composing an honest letter to someone also requires you to at least partially embrace the mess that it is to feel, for emotions are in and of themselves dynamic and volatile, bleeding into one another and branding your heart like ink printed on a page. The medium itself doesn't readily accommodate quick revisions either, as you're given no access to backspaces or autocorrect. So, by sending a letter, you're allowing a messy part of you to exist elsewhere in the hands of someone else who can keep and refer back to it for as long as they wish.

I wonder if handwritten letters now mean more than they once did, as they're no longer the standard for long-distance communication. Perhaps we've grown so accustomed to the emotionless nature of digitized, always accessible, and instantaneous correspondence that we've forgotten how much it can mean to send a message to someone else.

By rediscovering the art of letter writing, can we, in turn, add more depth to our connections, learn to embrace the mess of feeling, discover how to productively ruminate on these thoughts, and grow more emotionally stable and intelligent by taking the time to consider and articulate our thoughts independently without backspaces, autocorrect, or AI-generated suggestions? Perhaps I'm giving letters too much credit or disregarding how the experience of writing or receiving a handwritten note may be of great value to some and of less to others. Regardless, it's a kind gesture that we've undoubtedly lost touch with over time. So, consider, if you have the time, sitting down to write someone a letter.



The Temporary Masterpiece



Every sunny afternoon in the neighborhood is a good one when you have the almost endless color wheel on your chalk sticks. Inviting others to join in on your driveway after making it past your elaborate obstacle courses and hopscotch. Letting them pick which color they want to write their name in, one of the few things you know how to spell at the elementary age. Before long, the tan pavement becomes an almost serial killer-like work of art. With a mix of scribbled lines and weird little doodles splattered all over the pavement. But there is something notable about putting your name down for all to see. Making it known to others that you aren't just another person, you're Luke, Bree, or Joe. Someone who has marked the world, if only for a moment before the colored dust gets washed away. Chalk is similar to life in that way, your mark on whatever you touch only lasts so long before blurring with the others who've come before.



As a kid, you're not comprehending this thought. All you care about is how pretty your handwriting is and if the color purple suits your name. Plus, getting either parent to see your masterpiece. Yet the simple movement can inspire the brightest kids to go off and be the

most creative people you'll ever meet. Though not everyone. Some doodle with their chalk sticks while others watch, not bothering to pick up the messy writing tool alone. Picking up the chalk when you're by your lonesome is when it makes the biggest impact, because there is no one around to ask when you get stuck on what to draw next, or to help you when your dog begins to look like a horse. You make mistakes that, in the moment, only you can fix. It's a critical point in childhood. How can I get unstuck without help? Many will fail and give up, but the ones who stick it out are the people you will want by your side when things fall apart. It's unfair to say that these kinds of people never give up. Because they do...all the time. They're just the ones to "get back on the horse" and try again.

In this day and age, something similar happens later in life. These creative kids go through each stage of schooling, pushing themselves to make it into the college that will give them the best opportunities for a job and "stable future". But along the way, most will burn out and start taking shortcuts. Using generative AI to complete simple homework assignments or going into midterms blind because they got too drunk the night before. These are your future doctors, lawyers, and politicians who used to be bright kids now crippled by their addiction to taking the easy way out. This shift in mindset can be seen in young kids as well, with many parents giving tablets and phones out to their children too early. Where they rot their brains on YouTube and online games like Roblox. Losing the feeling of getting their hands dirty, whether it's from falling off their bike or writing their name with chalk.

This is not to say that technology should go away completely because it does have its pros. But it's all very new and already heavily ingrained in our society. Staring down at a screen all day makes it hard to feel connected with one's peers and surrounding landscape. No wonder many mental health specialists say to do something physical with your hands to ground yourself, like a craft or workout. Connecting is what

humans are made to do. We're social creatures for a reason. Because otherwise, the world is vast, and gets lonely really quickly. Why else do little kids say "hello" to strangers while walking down the street? They are the foundation of what we as a species are meant to be, social without fear. Social without judgement.

Many of you might remember running around your street, knocking on front doors, trying to find anyone to play with. Whether you've known them for years or just met them that day on the bus. All you wanted was companionship on your adventures. While you try to touch the sky with your toes on the swing, or defend against pirates invading your playset. Where's the fun in having to be alone with one's thoughts?. So go out and doodle with your chalk sticks. Life is messy. At least with this writing tool, though, you get to choose how messy you want to get.



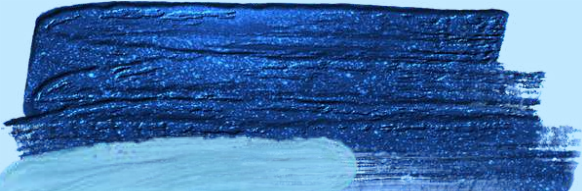
Humans write for several reasons, one of which is to be remembered. If only for a moment. Take chalk on the pavement of your childhood driveway or sidewalk for instance. Although the art is temporary, the creativity and motor skills that come from the summer activity are immense. Opening up the endless possibilities that AI and iPads are

immense. Opening up the endless possibilities that AI and iPads are taking away from our kids and ourselves. The chance to be imaginative without a digital parasite dragging you down. It's a hard thing to come by these days, even if you forgo tech. It's so ingrained in our society that it almost becomes a part of everyone's personality. Some even become shells of who they could be, if only they put down the phone and ChatGPT to look people in the eye to see their true intentions and gain knowledge about the world around them.

This disconnection makes it hard to be real with anyone, as you're not sure if they're being 100% real themselves. Given how disconnected we've become, we might want to try to connect with the ground and the place we inhabit. I know there is a saying, among other brain rot, that says "I need to go touch some grass". But there is truth to the statement. Why would we care about cleaning the house when we can watch puppy videos for two hours instead. It's still gonna look and feel awful but, hey, you giggled for two hours straight.

Technology can be helpful, but don't allow it to take over your whole life. Not when there are literal mountains and rainforests that could be explored. Enjoy the little things and make each worthwhile because we won't be on this earth forever. So go sit in your driveway one night after dinner and get your hands messy while brainstorming your next writing project. Because, like the chalk and the Christian saying, "remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."





Just a Touch

Introduction



The sun was almost halfway down by the time Dylan could bring herself to open the car door. The gold and violet hues shimmered off each cresting wave that gently caressed the shore. In the distance, she could hear the pleads of ever energetic children begging to stay in the now cool waters just a bit longer. Otherwise the beach was quiet and empty, as if it knew she needed to be alone.

Reaching over to the seat beside her, she lifted the ornate, pearly heart from its place. Faintly she could see the outline of it against the, slightly sun-bleached fabric seat. Carefully, she carried it in her arms while marching slowly through the shifting sand. Looking back to the car every now and again wishing for a way to run back inside and drive off. But she didn't. She couldn't. Eventually her eyes dropped to the odd footprints her pitch black heels left in the sand. The holes left behind by her heels looked as if someone had shoved their finger deep into the earth. It reminded her of Skye.



Blue Paint

“Why are you cryin’?”

Dylan jumped at the sudden appearance behind her. She sheepishly peered through her puffy red eyes at the beautiful girl turned wild from the paint. A different shade of paint swathed each finger, her overalls were a mess of splatters that would never fade, and baby blue paint gelled in her blonde hair, expertly matching her seafoam eyes almost shut from her wide grin. Dylan couldn't speak for a few moments as the living painting watched her patiently, before finally swallowing enough tears.

“I don't want to get my fingers dirty.” Dylan looked at the girl's attempted dye job and quickly added, **“or my hair.”**

“Aw, but that's the best part! You get to paint yourself while you paint the paper.”

“But it's so gross and sticky,” Dylan instinctively wiped the run from her nose at the word 'sticky.'

“Nuh-uh, it's just like face paint. Don't you like that?”

Dylan paused for a moment or two in disbelief at this sensational revelation and simply muttered, **“Yeah.”** Hearing that, the wild girl lit up, her cheshire grin stretching even further.



"I can paint your face, and then you'll already be covered," she gasped, "then you can paint my face!"

What do you want me to paint? I wanna be pretty like my mama!"

"A...a cheetah," Dylan couldn't help but be taken into the pace of this hurricane of a girl.

"Lemme go grab some orange and black!" The girl rushed off to a nearby easel in a hurry. As Dylan's eyes followed the girl she caught a glimpse of what the blue-haired girl had painted. It was good. And not good for a five year-old, it was simply beautiful. A bed of flowers exploded to life on the white sheet, each finger line overlapped into a melody of petals, the insides textured with fingerprints. At the bottom was a hand print the same blue as her hair signed below, somehow immaculately from a finger tip, was the name 'Skye.' Later on, Dylan would learn that Skye couldn't paint at all with a brush. When she was older and finally had the words to describe it, Skye said she couldn't feel the paper or the image through those tools. She preferred the intimacy of her fingers gliding across the page. She even insisted on signing their marriage certificate with her finger and an inkwell she brought so it would have her best possible signature.

But for now, she impatiently, yet deftly, drew the caricature of a cheetah upon Dylan's face. In turn, Dylan would take a bit of deep red paint on her thumb and press it against Skye's lips to match the shade of lipstick her mom had always worn. Dylan continued to add improvised makeup to Skye until she looked a little too much like a clown, but she seemed happy nonetheless. Although, it didn't help her uncanny smile.

"Can you paint now?" Skye's words carried that innocent and earnest tone children grow out of too quickly, otherwise Dylan might not have answered.

"I don't know what to paint."

"Well..." Skye started to speak but instinct quickly took over as she dipped her pointer finger in more paint and took Dylan's canvas for her own. On it she quickly, but elegantly, scrawled, 'What's your favourite color?' in her signature blue. **"Now you write the answer."**

Dylan studied the various paints before her. A timid finger finally found its chosen hue and, in a legibility befitting a child her age, wrote, 'pink' and, below it, 'yours?' Then they went on, writing questions and answers until the canvas was covered in a rainbow of letters and Dylan had forgotten ever hating the sensation of paint on her fingers.

This was their language. When they were tired of playing or had nothing better to do as kids, they would write in the dirt. Mud soiling and dyeing their fingers in the earth until it crept to the base of their nails. By the end, Skye's porcelain skin looked no different from Dylan's red clay. They even did this when they went to the beach.

The Beach

They had only been to Dredger's Cove one time when they were no longer children, but certainly still young and foolish. Sun-tanned and exhausted from the ocean, they wrote along the shore. Where the waves could cool them and clear their canvas with each ebb and flow.

"No seriously I wanna celebrate" Skye etched her swirling script into the sand.

"It's just college everyone goes"

"I'm not"

"Yeah, but you do..."

The water interrupted Dylan's finger. **"You don't need to,"** she finished aloud.

"I can't" Skye's water pruned finger drilled deeper into the sand in mild frustration.

"You should come with"

"Where?"

"College"

"Live where? Your dorm?"

"Sure"

"Be serious Dede," this time Skye spoke aloud, flicking grains of sand from behind her pink tipped nails. **"You know I can't afford to leave my dad's."**

"You could sell your paintings, wasn't that the plan anyway?" Dylan spoke aloud now as well.

"Well yeah, but I'm not good enough yet."

"You've been good enough since middle school. Your stuff's amazing!" Skye paused for a breath before returning her fingers to the shore.

"You think everything I do is amazing" Skye's finger was determined as it thrust the sand aside.

"They are."

Dylan dexterously returned Skye's determination in kind. But after that both of their hands slowed and moved with a gentle melancholy.

"Why do you even want me to go that bad?"

"We've never been apart"

"You'll be fine without me for a while"

"No I won't"

"You sound like you're my clingy boyfriend or something," Skye joked as she stood up, finished with their writing as the darkness of night encroached closer. Further down the shore Dylan's father was lighting a bonfire and shouting back and forth with Skye.

"Maybe I want to be"

Dylan took advantage of Skye's distraction. She wrote slowly and deeply in her own frustration, a spiteful glacier carving a path in the earth. A part of her almost wished Skye would turn around, but a part grew more and more impatient for the shore's cleansing wave. Her muscles tensed as she went to carve five new deeper scars into the sand, but something in her froze as she saw Skye start to turn towards her. Although it was dark, the newly lit bonfire illuminated the words more than the setting sun had, making Skye certain of what she read. Immediately she dropped to her knees, it was only when she was face to face with the sand that she hesitated. In an uncharacteristically sloppy script her words gently glided onto the surface of the shore.

"Please do!"

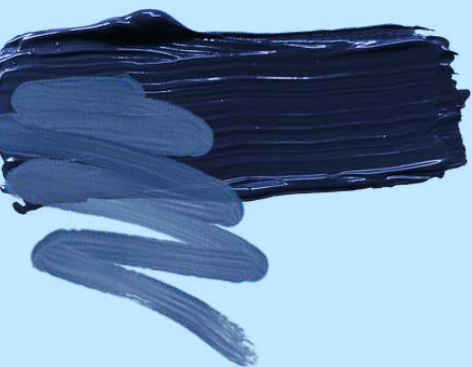
Closing

Dylan was sure this wasn't the part of the beach where they had written all those words, words she still couldn't believe she wrote or read, but it didn't matter. She placed the elegant heart on the ground where it left another imprint. The black curtains of her pants legs folded in as she knelt to the ground. She shifted her focus from the grains of sand to the wrinkles that now lined her fingers, not from water but time. Sand filled them in and sanded them smooth again as she began to write. Each stroke was patient and delicate, but firm; an extension of the gray-haired woman she had become. Looking down at the finished script she let out a deep sigh and reached for the heart. Removing the top, a bit of gray fell out. Carefully she let the rest fall into the deep channels she had carved until her ashen canals were filled. She struggled against her knees to get back up, but she managed. Looking down she saw her final message.

"Goodbye my love, thank you for staying as long as you could."

"Skye Elisabeth Williams-Eckelhart"

Then the tide pulled in, flooding the letters and scattering the ashes along the surface. When it pulled away the words and ash were gone.



Written in Sparkles

There's a preconceived notion that glitter gel pens are childish and only appropriate in certain contexts. I yearn to challenge this. Writing tools convey different messages to us and our audiences: typing is fast and efficient, a pencil is never-permanent, a fancy black pen is formal, while a glitter gel pen is widely viewed as cute, silly, and dramatic. When you reach a certain age having fun becomes a rarity, even in the smallest of ways. For example, you begin writing your notes and messages through passive typing and sophisticated black ink. I'm a firm believer that bringing back a sense of whimsy in accomplishable little ways can exponentially increase your connectedness with positivity and fun. Writing in glitter gel pen allows me, a confused, uncertain young-adult woman who knows what she wants but not how to get there, to connect with my most free self, my inner child. She knew exactly what she wanted, and although she didn't know how she would get there, she didn't care... she didn't have to. She danced wildly in her room to Hannah Montana's music, played dress-up with her little sister, and drew and wrote everything in bright sparkly letters. When I write this way, it's like letting a piece of that little girl who knows no limits out again. Beyond visual aesthetics, though, the use of glitter gel pens as a writing technology shapes how and why we express the things we write.

Glitter gel pens reflect the highs and lows of girlhood. From scribbling crushes' names in sparkly pink hearts, to crossing those same hearts out in bright red "x's" when your heart was inevitably broken. From drawing nonsensical pictures in your notebook, to filling in the nonexistent audience of your journal on how your friend let you down again. Using glitter gel pens puts me back in those moments so closely, almost dangerously so, as nostalgia is only a mind trick in a way. It can soften

even the hardest instances so much so that in hindsight, you forget just how hard they were. Alongside this, because writing in glitter gel pen is connected to childhood nostalgia, doing so also allows you to soften the very ideas you're writing about. Even when the content is serious, glitter gel pens have a way of making things feel lighter, just as nostalgia does.

At the Nashville Songwriter Awards in 2022, Taylor Swift, arguably the world's biggest pop star and voice of girls everywhere, defined her more carefree, upbeat pop songs as written in "glitter gel pen" (Nicholson, 2022). Like me, she too understands the positivity and lightness that comes with writing in glitter gel pen. It's a form of pure joy and release that reminds you how far you've come since you first began writing with it. And this metaphor is easily understood to those who've lived this experience themselves.

Physical journaling has again become wildly popular for girls my age. It offers a warm sense of comfort in a cold, comparative digital age. It allows you to create something just for you, not for your followers. The return to physical journaling marks a craving for nostalgia and for a time when our thoughts were important enough to last longer than an Instagram story post. Glitter gel pen and journaling, for me, go hand in hand. Using a glitter gel pen to write in my journal is a return to my youth, when things were fun just because. Digital writing can feel performative and detached. When I do an assignment for class, I typically type it all out, rushing to meet a deadline or move on to my next task. I submit it, forget about it, and never read it again. When I post an Instagram story, I anxiously check if followers and friends have viewed or liked it. Twenty-four hours later, it's already on its way to becoming a distant, foggy memory. Texts between friends, family, and lovers pile up, and no matter

how much they mean in the moment, they're lost in a sea of messages over time, difficult to return to. Journaling, though, allows me to intentionally get in touch with my feelings. By picking up the same book and flipping through each page each time I do it, I am forced to reflect on how much I've grown from the previous entries. Glitter gel pens are an extension of this. When I journal in glitter gel pen, I am allowed to feel however deeply I want to, unafraid of responses or views. In the current day, digital writing is a careful and curated performance; my journal is a reckless book of pure, unabashed feeling.

Now, I write, not waiting for the glittery ink to dry, because I no longer care if my hands are covered in blue sparkles for the rest of the day. I would like to say I'm making my 9-year-old self proud with this, but in all honesty, it's something that would never have even crossed her mind as a concern. As a young-adult woman, I am continuously balancing how to coexist with my younger self without forgetting her, while still focusing on moving forward into my adulthood using all of the experience and knowledge I've gained. I'll continue writing my deepest, most depressing thoughts in my journal. But my words can still be serious even when written in glitter gel ink. My journal is full of my highest hopes and crushed dreams written in sparkles, because although life's hard, it doesn't always have to be serious.

The Pilot G2: The People's Pen



If I was trapped on a deserted island, and I could only take three stationery items, it'd be three Pilot G2 0.7mm pens.

I'd worry about the paper later.

This pen has been with me since the beginning. From childhood days scribbling small drawings in a notebook to drafting my college admissions essay, the Pilot G2 is the pen I'm always reaching for. I'm always sure to have one lingering around. I keep two stashed in my car, at least five in my backpack, and a cup full on my desk (there are 15 in that cup, I counted.)

If anything's noteworthy, I'm using the G2 to write it down.

Crafted with Care

Pilot, the largest pen manufacturer in Japan, debuted the G2 in 1997. The pen gained notoriety for its retractability—a feature that set it apart from the gel pens of the era. This retractability has saved me from marking up my papers or pockets with involuntary swipes—unlike your traditional capped pens. Though being one of the cheaper (if not the cheapest) pens on the market, the G2 continues to outperform its pricier competitors regarding construction and performance. The ergonomic grip isn't bulky, allowing for comfort and minimizing the chances of an aching hand after an all-nighter of note taking. The ball of the pen is made of tungsten carbide, ensuring wear-resistance, no matter the pressure.

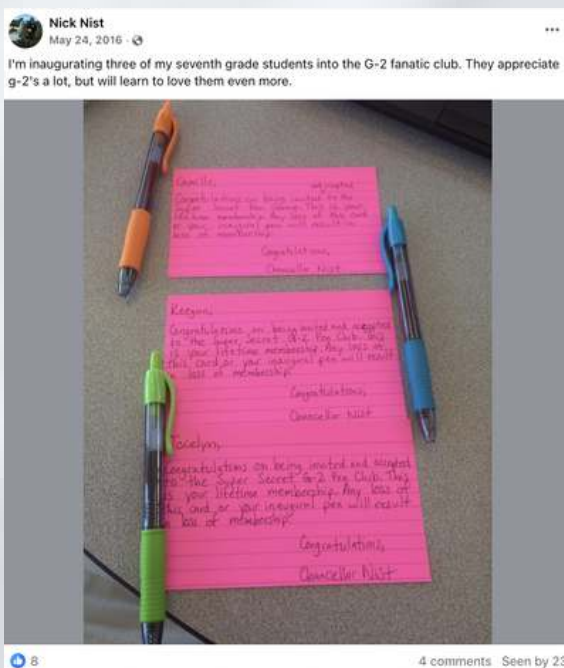
What I, and many of the G2's fans, celebrate is the ink. Though critics bash the pen's relatively slow drying time, it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make for the rich pigment that jumps off the page. My personal favorite is the classic 0.7mm in black, but the pen also comes in a whopping 31 different colors—if color-coding is your thing.

In addition to being a well-built pen all around, you can feel better when buying a new pack. Pilot is committed to being environmentally friendly. Across its various types of pens, Pilot uses recycled materials. The body of the G2 is made from 70% recycled plastic, and can be refilled with replacement ink cartridges that pop easily into the barrel of the pen.

The construction and performance of the pen can explain, in part, the wide network of superfans the pen has garnered. However, I believe the explanation for its loyal following goes beyond recycled plastic and long-lasting ink.

The Community

Loyal disciples of the pen can be seen across the internet. Writers at major outlets muse and sing the praises of their beloved G2. Even wars on Twitter are fought to assert the G2's place as the best pen of all time. Though I'd gladly partake in the battle, if need be, I prefer a more peaceful approach to celebrating my favorite pen. It was this pacifist pursuit that led me to an old Facebook group, "Pilot G-2 fan club!" As I idly scrolled through the community's posts—the most recent from 2025 to its first, in 2009—I reflected on just how much of my life I'd navigated with a G2 by my side. Among these fellow G2-lovers, I saw a bit of who I was, who I am and possibly, where I'm headed.



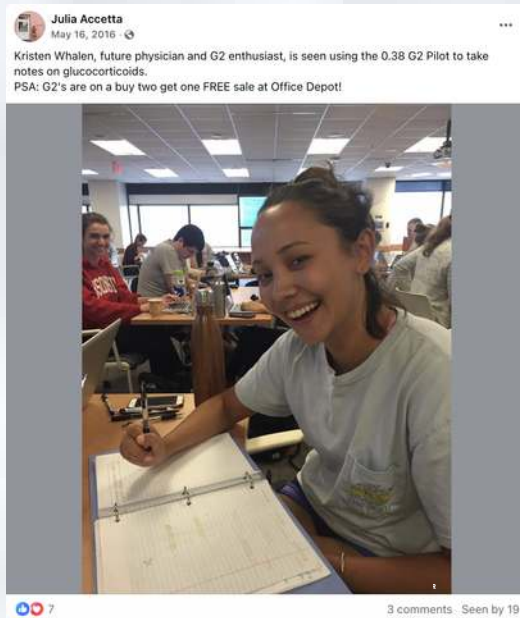
My love for the G2 is amplified by my love to share it with others; it's a treat to be able to loan someone my favorite pen. Back in grade school, I, like the post above, sang the praises of the G2 far and wide—successfully turning my friends into converts.

This post also reminded me of a lost art. Before schoolwork went digital, the necessity of a loaned pen held the possibility of meeting a new friend. It was an accessible way to speak to someone you otherwise wouldn't have, and an easy opportunity to share a bit of kindness with another person. Sharing a pen could lead to sharing a connection, however briefly.



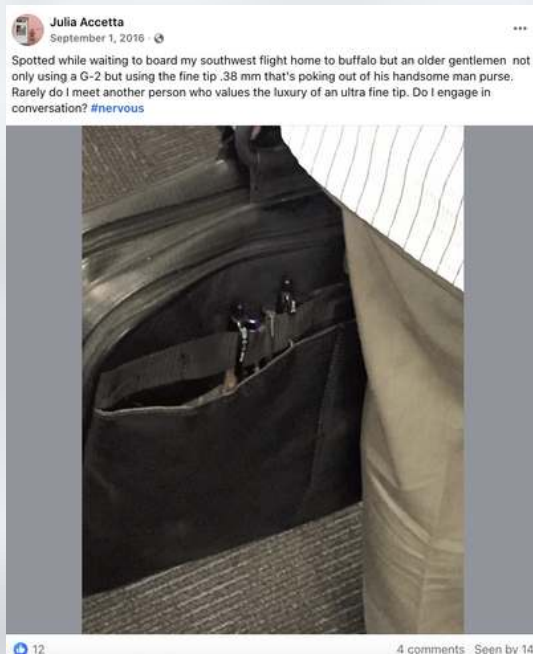
Unwilling to fully break the bond between Pilot and I, I turned to their FriXion erasable pens for a time. A few unforgiving math teachers had grown tired of my scratched-out answers and apologetic marginal notes, so I needed something with a little less finality.

Though the FriXion pen did divert me temporarily from G2 use, it accommodated me when I was more wary of mistake-making. I've long since abandoned the FriXion, as it paled in comparison to the G2, but it provided me valuable lessons, nonetheless. I came to understand and welcome my scratched-out answers and notes as part of the process. I found that a sense of finality doesn't have to be a deterrent. A learner is a "mistake-maker."



The G2 has carried me through my career of college notetaking. I've filled countless college-ruled notebooks with lecture notes on every subject. It's been there through lectures, exams, essays, and planning out my semesters.

I, like Kristen Whalen in this post, hope that my diligently recorded notes from my courses will pay off in my future career. I hope that some future wisdom can be gleaned from presently recorded insights.



Ultimately, this Facebook group serves as a reminder that the most niche and seemingly inconsequential details of our lives—like our choice of pen—weaves us together. It's not just a writing tool. It can be the difference between a new friend or stranger; an opportunity capitalized upon or squandered.

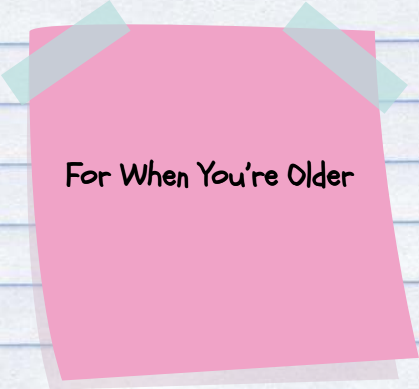
The Only Pen I'll Ever Use

In my life, the G2 has contributed to the creation of countless to-do lists, bucket lists, birthday cards, thank you notes, doodles, essays, annotations, planned trips, half-baked ideas on napkins, signing for my first car, and drafting applications to college, jobs, and other opportunities. It's seen shoddy portraits of friends, comic strips, sticky notes tacked to doorframes, written condolences, the pockets of my apron at work, and weighing decisions via pros and cons lists.

This brilliant tool helps me look back, note the present, and plan for my life ahead. It's imbued with personal hopes and wishes, and the hopes and wishes of others.

There is no pen I'd rather use.

I was fascinated by the accounts in these manuscripts. All of the journals about different people's favorite writing instruments. The weapons of the mind that have been lost to time. I can't imagine writing with a pen, let alone having a favorite pen. My Aunt kept all of these books and journals as a glimpse into the lost human act of writing, a time when thoughts flowed effortlessly from mind to hand to page. It must have been magical. I wonder what else my Aunt has kept under her bed, I pick up another stack of journals and start to read again...



For When You're Older

I look for the Post-It behind the picture.

Sometimes my mom or my dad would leave these Post-Its around our house. Little notes like 'I love you' or 'How's the weather?' You know, stupid stuff like that. I always got annoyed with it. My friends would always mention it when they came over, leading me to immediately shut it down, sticking the little notes into crevices before they could see them. For some reason, I feared they would think it was embarrassing that my parents acted cute with each other.

My parents did this, in part, because of their conflicting work schedules. My dad had the early morning shift at the local bakery, where he would wake up at 2 a.m., returning home to sleep by 10 a.m. My mom, on the other hand, worked a typical 9-to-5 civic job for the city. I think this was their best option for staying in touch, especially in an age where we didn't have cell phones.

Our family photos have this particular trait as well. If you peel off the cardboard backs to the framed pictures on our walls or living room tables, you'll find a Post-It note that says a quote made by somebody that day (like the Fourth of July photo with a quote from dad on the back: 'No party quite like a nationwide freedom party'). I remember at one point, my parents got rather fed up with me constantly taking down the Post-Its, given that this was their thing, so they told me I wasn't allowed to mess with them.

"You can someday, though." I remember my dad telling me when he sat me down on a weekend afternoon. "How about I grab you some at the store when we go there next? That way, once you're old enough you'll have some on hand."

I was annoyed with him at that point, so I did what any self-respecting first grader would do and called him a butt. He laughs about it to this day, but I think that was just because it was one of his last happy memories before Mom passed.

During my second-grade year, the cyan-colored post-it notes that had practically become her trademark were all but gone. My dad stopped leaving them around the house too, since mom was spending most of her time in the hospital anyways. By that point I had almost outgrown my rebellious streak, so I started to become a trusted member of the Post-It society, as my dad called it. It was really simple stuff, like him leaving me instructions on how to reheat dinner or asking me if I could take out the trash, but my favorite were the scavenger hunts.

I think he used them both as a way to distract himself and to keep me occupied. There was only so much fun that could be had on your own before turning on the TV became the most appealing option, but to his credit he really did try. He would stick little messages from Mom behind photo frames, things that said, 'I hope your day went well, sweetness. Dad was telling me about your project for science, and it sounds like it's going really well. I'm so proud of you' all in shaky letters. I think she was worried about me seeing her frail and skeletal, so I was never invited to go into her hospital room.

But one day, all of that changed. I was busy trying to figure out how to spell the word 'because' on a red Post-It note that was an appeal to why we should

buy ice cream at the store, when my dad suddenly rushed into the room, telling me with a wide-eyed look that we needed to get to the hospital right away. We didn't make it in time.

I don't think I fully processed what was happening. As an elementary school kid, the concept of death was rather foreign to me, but all I knew was that I was seeing dad a lot more, and mom much less. My dad stopped writing as many Post-Its for me, since the advent of cell phones meant that we could communicate more easily from afar. I think he stopped because he just didn't want to think about her all that much, though. It was too painful.

Time passed, and some wounds healed. My dad gifted me a small box of items for my tenth birthday, all of them being pictures of my mom and our family. He told me through watery eyes, "I think you're old enough to have these now. These are pictures of mom from a while ago, and she- she wanted you to have them."

I looked at the photos. As far as I could tell, these were just regular photos, not too dissimilar from those that remained up in our living room. I looked at him, confused, but as I did he brought out a frame wrapped in cloth. "This was her favorite picture of us," he said through a shaky breath. "And remember to look for the post-it behind the picture."

As I carefully held the image, I saw the familiar smiles of my parents, beaming into the camera as they held a little baby me in their arms. At first when I flipped it over, I was confused why there was a small stack of cyan Post-Its, the color my mom always loved to use. Only once I read the topmost note did the tears finally start to fall.

Written in shaky handwriting, it simply read, 'For when you're older.'

Number Two

The No. 2 pencil is a staple of grade school.

He's proud of the fact. Of course, his brethren are constantly used by professionals: bakers, engineers, scientists, you name it. But he has always had a soft spot for children.

He can still remember the way the Woman pulled his box off the shelf for the Little Girl. They took no notice of him. To them, he was just another item to check off. But he beamed from the box anyway. At last, he would be of use. It was his job to help this Little Girl, and in return, she would love him. They would be together forever.

He was still beaming as the Woman dumped him—and some of his siblings—into a clear plastic box, which was then snapped closed and shoved into a bag on the Little Girl's back. He bounced around in that bag, in complete darkness, listening to the sounds of the outside world—hissing and rumbling and screeching, like that truck that dropped him off at the store he was bought from: high-pitched voices inside that rumbling; the rustling of clothes against fabric; footsteps and more voices, deeper voices like the Woman's.

Then a ripping sound, and the light of day. He blinked up at the Little Girl from his place in the box, and watched the way her face tilted as she set him on the table. Her hand reached toward the lock, the box opened up...

She picked him up. Smiled at his perfect point. Rubbed her finger against his soft, neat eraser.

Yes.

He watched as she lowered him to that pure, white paper, already imagining the words that would flow out of him.

As she made the first stroke, he sighed in contentment.

Over the years, the Little Girl lost all her pencils but him. Him she kept, and oh, the things they write together! He started by filling in blank spaces on worksheets with big letters, squares with pictures, and eventually solitary questions in small black text. At some point, he moved to thinner paper with blue lines and wrote a lot about endlessly boring topics. Sometimes she had to trade him for a pen, but he could tell that she'd rather have him—whenever he was in the box, the Little Girl wrote furiously, always shaking her hand out, as stress dug lines into her face. Sometimes, the paper itself became blue or green, and all he did was fill in bubbles for hours.

Eventually, the Little Girl turned into a Young Woman. Her writing came faster and more frequently, and sometimes didn't take the form of words at all, but he didn't care. All that mattered was that she was still using him, dulling his point and then sharpening it again, until he had shrunk in his old age. His eraser was gone, and she was forced to use a big, blocky one instead. By the way she sighed as she hunted for it, he knew that she, too, missed the young days.

The first time the Young Woman pulled out the mechanical pencil, he thought she was just trying it out. A one-time use out of curiosity. With a sting of jealousy, he noticed the wide grin bloom across her face as she set that pencil to paper. He consoled himself by saying that she was just curious. The mechanical pencil was new. Soon her curiosity would be satisfied, and she would return to her trusty, well-loved No. 2 pencil. They'd gone through too much for it to be otherwise.

When she did return to him, it wasn't as much as before. At first, she spent half of her time with the mechanical pencil. Then, three-quarters of it. Until eventually, he stopped being used at all.

His lead heart sank.

Now he lies forgotten—peppered with teeth marks, stubby, graphite-streaked—at the bottom of the Young Woman's pencil pouch. In the stillness and the dark, all he can do is wonder what happened.

Has he gotten too old? Too short? Is his point too dull? Has she gotten tired of his lack of eraser, or of having to sharpen him?

Really, what does the mechanical pencil have that he doesn't?

Even if that pencil does everything else better than me, he grumbles, he doesn't have my heart. I'm sure he doesn't care about the Young Woman as much as I do! Isn't that the important thing?

And then comes the day when the pouch zips open. Through the other objects in the pouch, he sees the Young Woman staring down at him, her brow furrowed. His heart leaps at the sight of her face. She's older, but within her eyes he can still see that Little Girl he used to know.

Utensils clatter as she empties the pouch onto the table. Her hand sweeps through them all, as she spreads the contents out along the wooden surface. He is breathless as she begins to put the objects into piles. The mechanical pencil immediately joins the left-hand pile, along with other new pens, some glue, and scissors.

He waits on that table, wondering about the piles—but then every thought leaves him as he feels her fingers close around him. She lifts him from the

from the table—lifts him!—and finally he is close to her again. A thrill ripples down to his long-dead eraser as her eyes dart over him, as she rolls him in her fingers.

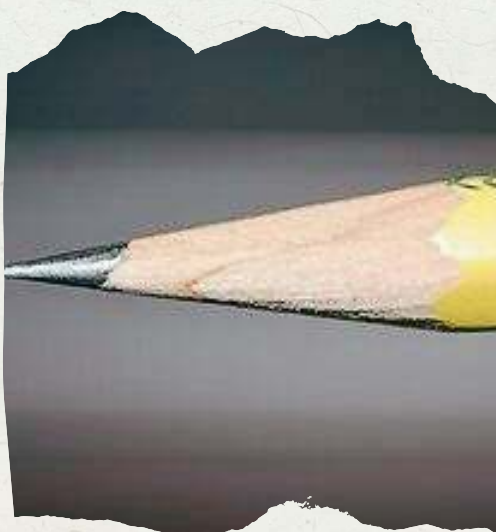
He flashes back to the old days, the days when he was her everything. She held him like that in those days. Maybe this means he'll be everything to her again.

Her lips twitch, and he expects her to smile. But instead, those lips purse into a thin line. Her eyes harden.

She places him in the right-hand pile. Her hand descends again to sweep the pile up, but she doesn't dump it into the pencil pouch. Instead, she turns.

His lead point breaks off as she throws him into the trash can, but it's his heart that truly shatters. Because he knows, then, that the Little Girl is gone.

She has let him go, and there is no going back to her.



Journal Documentary: 2017-2026

JOURNAL ONE: 2017- 2018

Origin: Gifted to me by Emerson—who else? She was the only friend I had who loved writing just as much as I did. We spent fourth grade inventing poetry, short stories, and even inspirational quotes (which were just as cheesy as you'd imagine).

Style: This journal featured a cover with two hot air balloons, one blue and one pink, floating over gold hearts on brown cardboard. The cardboard would later become torn and ragged, barely hanging on to the gold wire spiral. That's how much I wrote in it, using the pens Emerson also gifted me. PaperMate InkJoy gel pens, to be exact. They came in a pack of three—one purple, one pink, and one green. With each poem, I alternated colors. For some reason, I centered the poems on the lined paper instead of starting from the left margin. Sometimes, I would try to write in cursive. So, yes. It looked pretty messed up.

Substance: Almost unbearable to talk about or even think of. I get whiplash when/if I dare to look back on it. There will be a poem about spring, followed by a poem from the point of view of a random book character, followed by a poem about some boy I had a crush on. Never let a fifth grader write poetry. However, I do admit I could stand to regain some of her unabashed confidence.

JOURNAL TWO: 2018 - 2020

Origin: Unknown. It could have been a gift, or something I picked out myself. Either way, I don't think I paid for it with my own money. Sixth graders don't have money.

Style: Thus began my love story with stationery from Peter Pauper Press. Their journals are the perfect size. The pages are lined and rounded. The endpapers are brightly colored. This particular cover was cream, with beige and blue flowers growing from the bottom. I still used the purple, pink, and green pens, although I finally wrote starting at the left margin like a normal person.

Substance: Imagine middle school, and what it was like for you. Now imagine somebody trying to make metaphors out of that experience. And there you have Journal Two. It is comforting, however, to see my personality become ever so slightly less mortifying by the end. Maybe I should be kinder. It was middle school, after all.

JOURNAL THREE: 2020 - 2021

Origin: I know I picked this one out. I think it was purchased with some birthday money, or a check from Christmas. I went to Barnes & Noble, and scoured the tall, dark, pre-renovation shelves until this journal caught my eye.

Style: The eggshell-white cover stood out to me, and the coral-and-chartuse birds flying across it. Peter Pauper Press again, because we are in a committed relationship. The same pens, too, although towards the conclusion of this journal, I had to buy new ones.

Substance: This one comes the closest to achieving a comprehensive narrative (not that I'm trying to create a comprehensive narrative of my own random life experiences). It began immediately with a death, then a pandemic, and spanned until I returned to school in person. I started to use poetry more as a diary than a way to make art. No more poems about nature, really—just my thoughts on a year of high school spent alone in my room.

JOURNAL FOUR: 2021 - 2023

Origin: Purchased online over the summer, off of the Peter Pauper Press website, which I was elated to discover. I wanted to move away from the light, creamy colors with this one. I was entering high school in person and could do with something more mature. Which, yes, is an admittedly cringeworthy way of thinking, but I specifically remember the thought crossing my mind.

Style: That's how I ended up with a navy journal, covered in purple flowers and stars like a garden at midnight. I don't know if the silver celestial decals can be called mature, but it was a change, and I was ready for a

change. I ran out of ink again, although this time, I didn't have to buy more. A friend had gifted me a rainbow set of PaperMate InkJoy gel pens, which included purple, green, and pink.

Substance: A normal, conscious, self-aware person wrote this one, which is refreshing to see (picture that as a blurb on a book jacket). Sure, it's obvious that I was freaked out about a lot of things—homework, friendships, looming college applications. But I was also seventeen and having a good time, so it was more than just misery.

JOURNAL FIVE: 2023 - PRESENT

Origin: Purchased off of the website again, because why go to Barnes & Noble when they renovated the store to look like a minimalist millennial hellscape?

Style: Muted cornflower blue with gold butterflies and white flowers. Perhaps my favorite design yet. My pens are almost out of ink, but I don't think they sell the colors as a set anymore. The worst is the green pen. It clearly still has ink left, but I can never make it give me more than a few sentences before it peters out onto the page in dry, green-tinted scratches.

Substance: I've had this journal for the longest amount of time, because I don't write as frequently anymore. Somehow, it feels like so much effort to make my thoughts into something worth writing down. But this means that

each entry is more calculated, more developed, more interesting. This journal has seen me through high school graduation, the dawn and demise of relationships, and two years of college. The chunk of remaining blank pages is getting thinner. I'm almost done.

CONCLUSION

Let me read your mind —

But Anna! Who cares? Who cares about the colors of each journal cover and your favorite brand of pens? Who cares that you used to write poems about spring and now you just kinda write about your life? That's what everyone does! That's what a journal is!

Fair points. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I think it's at least a little interesting to have documentation of how your mind has changed, through shifting shades of purple, pink, and green. I've always been the kind of person who writes everything down. So why not write about this? Why not write down the evolution? Because I've learned something from what has changed and what has stayed the same. Whether my poems started at the center of the page or the margin, whether my handwriting was legible or not, whether I was writing about homecoming dresses or death, I have always told myself the truth.

Tom Hessein
Feature

The sun beats down on tired eyes.

On brown-burnt broken glass.

On cigarette ash, kicking below his feet. It was his last.

Rotten. This is no place for a prophet, much less a poet.

But he's not one to talk.

His pencil: lost. And him too.

He wanders and curses.

Each store lies as he passes.

Fake purses. Fake watches. Fake dresses.

There were once decent people. Where have they gone?

Fake shoes. Fake belts. Fake wallets.

His clothes aren't any different.

Sickening. His hands clench.

Fake prices. Fake guarantees. Fake quality.

He peers into a window and recognizes a brand.

A child must've sewed those pants.

Do they have a family?

Will they ever?

An irritating light beams.

His retinas are burned. And he's furious.

He blindly runs, tripping over sidewalk cracks.

It's a broken car mirror. Dangling. Catching the sun.

And catching the image of a store.

A stationary store.

The man's shoulders fall, still staring at the reflection.

There rests the sight of craftsmanship. Of decency.

A fountain pen. Walnut wood barrel.

A gunmetal cap and steel nib.

Five stars engraved and a floral decal.

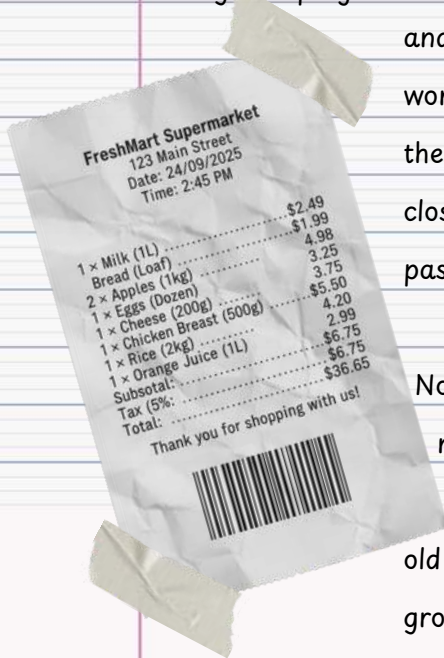
Old Pages Like Callused Skin



My notebook is small. It slips into my back pocket and gets lost completely in my tote. In its spine, I keep a robin's-egg-blue mechanical pencil with the pocket clip broken off that I borrowed from my boyfriend on our first date. It's been two years, and somehow, there's still lead in there.

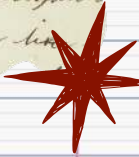
I revel in the longevity of my teeny tiny notebook. Of its lined pages, sometimes filled in neatly and other times scrawled on from days when I felt like throwing caution to the wind. There are games of hangman played in little corners next to soon-to-be published works and bus ride thoughts. There are scribbles of words and doodles that bleed onto the pages at their sides from months of being stuffed in the close quarters of pockets and bags and being passed from hand to hand.

No page is left blank in my notebook, so I just cram words in illegible spaces between year-old self-portraits and grocery lists.





Its cover is cardboard brown with deep green screen prints of beavers and ducklings on a lake that stretches from the front cover to the back—and I am not ready to part with the ecosystem. The holes that the spine threads through have eroded to slip the cover and pages without catching, and the weathered edges are smooth from hitting against my digital camera, dog-eared lit-mag, and smushed granola bars.



When my hands need to be busy, I find a spot and write what I see in my little notebook. An old man eating yogurt and drinking a cappuccino in the same shoes as my dad. Two college girls, laughing. A woman with her feet up on the chair in front of her, wearing flats. I read memories of a cafe, my dentist's waiting room, and the DMV. Of strangers who had cool pants and ringlet curls. Of nosey thoughts about surrounding conversations.



I follow patterns of penciled ants crawling between cursive and print, watching as they circle the dotted pathways of the ladybugs and dragonflies in the margins. I read my attempt at long division, unsolved and sporadic. I read grocery lists meant to fit certain diets, unfollowed and sad. I read communications with my brother, unanswered and wrinkled in tears. Little beetles hug the words.



Hum

Emotions turned tangible in every turn of page, each swirl of an ant colony a tattoo on my extension of being. I feel them crawling on my ankles, on my toes, a warm welcome to share and be heard.



I hold it in my hands, swirling it in them, feeling the grains of recycled paper in its cover and the smooth spirals of binding flipping across my palms. I run my finger over my eyebrow, feeling the hair follicles in their unruly growth and the slick enamel of my crooked front teeth. They all feel the same. I scrunch letters in the white space between one story and the other, telling my notebook it looks just like me.



I flipped furiously through the pages, now, hungry for more information. I can't believe people used to carry their journals around with them. Our current work-issued journals are to be used only in our domiciles. Especially because we can only write in our journals using a brain-to-text instrument that connects to our temples and a white visor that slips over our eyes. Then a light-blue laser maps words onto our journal for a limit of 15 minutes per day, before the visor disengages. I wish I could carry around a journal with me while I work so I could record any thoughts that race across my mind, the thoughts that flash seem to be the most important...



GRAFFITI ●

A wall, built of brick and mortar, creates a city of blank slates. A city of symmetrical brick organized in offset lines calls for greater disorder. Disorder that reflects the messy human condition on the walls that house that disorder.

Shake up the can. Listen to the metal ball rattle around the cylindrical sides, beating against their confines. Listen to the spray of the paint from the nozzle onto the untouched red brick. Trace across the lines of your mind, blurring those of the mortar bordering the brick. Impose disorder through the unevenly sprayed paths of the can. Step back and admire your color. Breathe in the fumes of your expression. Small sprayed paths will create a greater image with time and noise. You can already see it on the wall, like a modern-day cave painting. You can leave your mark. Invade eyes with your hunt, your struggle. The metal ball rattles, and the spray echoes off the walls, soon to be marked.

They're looking for him. His graffitied signature has saturated into the colors of the city, and they can't stand seeing themselves in his dirty mirror. They can't stand seeing themselves in the wild colors of each passing train car. They can't stand seeing themselves in every dark alley and every abandoned tunnel. They can't stand, and his sprayed paint does. His sprayed paint walks and stares through the dark and overlooked spaces of the conscious city. They sense his eyes and his colorful marks, clawed into the foundations, and they grow increasingly uneasy. A sprayed panther of his making prowls in the city's crevices, and they will lock him up for freeing it, if they know who he is.

If they knew who he was, for he is now everywhere and nowhere. He is now the passing paint of the daily commute. The flash of color in an otherwise exceedingly dull path. The one that catches the eye. He has finally been seen. He has weaseled his way into the neural pathways of the cities and tainted memories with the reality of suffering. They can't ignore him now. They hear the rattle of his paint can amidst the noisy honks of traffic and the late-night barks of chained dogs. They see his sprayed lines in the dark. He has tempted the public into the darkest alleys of the city and shown them a painted passage. A passage that is inherently dangerous to

them. They who trapped him and you. They who keep him trapped by blocking out the sky with concrete pillars. They who inspire worship in their advertisements. They who live outside of the confined city. He's forever creeping inside.

"Squash me," he pleads to the flashing blue and red light parade just outside his small apartment window. He's sitting in the dark as the blue and red lights flash on his face. They aren't here for him, but there's a large part of him that wishes they were. There's a part of him that wants to be handcuffed and thrown in jail, behind real metal bars, just so the world can become a little clearer. "Find me and spray me with your best poison, already. Just like a spider, swat me away. Crush me with your powerful black boot. I've already made my web. I've already spun my story."

I remember tagging a train just last week. A long train of vast metal cars sitting in the yard of tracks that I frequented often with a black hood draped over my cheekbones and dark sunglasses that I found abandoned off of Main Street. The train sat, extending its metal lengths into the dark horizon, waiting for a greater purpose than industry, waiting to become a canvas. I wanted to turn every train in this dull city into a great art exhibition, riding along metal tracks into the sightlines of everyone but the art critics. After propelling up the 8-foot-tall chain link fence with just my determination, I checked for cameras for the hundredth time. I never knew when they would replace them after I broke them with a rock last time. I climbed up on the tracks, simultaneously rattling my metal can, preparing to paint my masterpiece. Spray painting, sadly, is often an art form that falls victim to a strict time constraint. This strict time constraint leaves room only for diligent sprays, with layering sprays often acting as both a background color and a contour. The limited time and space leaves the graffiti artist simultaneously present and incredibly absent. Each graffiti artist in this city (and there aren't many of us) has to rely on a specific style and, usually, a select few colors. We definitely aren't rich enough to buy more than 3-4 cans of paint at a time (if we had money, I assume we could resort to a different artistic medium) and even if we could, it's hard to jump a fence and create quickly with 7 cans of spray paint rattling around in your backpack.

I liked graffiti, though, and I couldn't see myself doing anything else in my free time back in those days. I loved the anonymity, the

darkness, the time constraint, the contrast between my color and the metal car, the contrast between my art and a business man's eye, the way my art weaved between grey skyscrapers and concrete, the way the colors flashed with the train's speed, the way the people absorbed my sprayed marks but didn't really see them like advertisements on side-of-the-highway billboards. I was both fleeting and incredibly present, a presence that is far from curated or intended. I was the rattling rage of the people of the city. The people who go to work every day just to return home to their run-down apartment buildings to try to catch some sleep in the smog. The people that use the honks of traffic as white noise. The people who feel uneasy walking through their own street's alleys. I wanted to create that uneasiness for the people who are too insulated to feel it. The people in the high-rise apartments looking over the business district. The people of the clouds. I wanted to tell them, "Welcome to the rain, the wet, the dry, the loud, the silent, the contours of the people embedded in the gravel, the people slinking through the crevices." I know they felt my yellow-slitted eyes in the dark of the alleys because they'd seen my sprayed claw marks, scratched into the metal of movement.

Someone laid on the horn, and I jolted from my artistic trance. I sprayed my graffitied signature and stepped back to admire my work in the dim light before pulling my hood tight and leaping back into the grey. Handcuffs soon followed, but I, at least, got to sink my fangs in



VERKALIF



Galatea

*On a rainy night, the city's glow is diffused by the mist,
Pygmalion's steps echo on slick pavement,
His mind an intense whirl of dreams and desires,
Towards Aphrodite's club, where gods and mortals intertwine.*

*Galatea, his creation of ink and thin-pressed paper,
Haunts his thoughts with warm yearning,
He seeks Aphrodite's favor,
To breathe life into his scripted love.*

***In the rain's rhythm, there exists a symphony of longing,
As he approaches the threshold of divine intervention,
Hope and desperation mingle in the downpour,
Pygmalion's silent plea echoes in the night.***

Approaching the door of Aphrodite's club, Pygmalion knocked three times, the door swinging open before he had time to pull away. As the door clipped his knuckles, Pygmalion drew his hand back, curling it into his chest as his other hand cradled it close. His eyes trailed up to meet that of Hephaestus, the corner of his lips twitching as he attempted to ease himself, rubbing his wrist one last time before letting his hands drop to his waist. "I-I'm here to see Aphrodite?" Pygmalion stuttered, his eyes flickering between the man's gaze.

The man's left eye had a golden sheen over it, a shimmering scar crossing over the socket and digging into the hairline of his buzzcut. He stood stagnant for a moment, judgements trailing his eyes down and then up again, as an uncomfortable silence passed by. "Hey 'Dite, he's here," Hephaestus called out, not turning to the empty bar behind him, stepping to the side to let the wimpish man in, tugging his hood down as he entered.

***In the empty bar, devoid of revelry's usual hum,
Red and purple neon lights bathe the space in a sultry glow,
Aphrodite, draped in a tight-fitted white dress.
She sits at a table, smoke swirling from her cigarette,
A solitary goddess amidst the serenity of the night.***

“Pygmalion, it’s so lovely to see you,” The woman charms, a smile spread over her glossy, wine-stained lips. Stretching her arm out, she patted the empty spot on the table. **“Sit,”** she ordered, though the pleasantry in her voice made it seem more like a request of a friend.

“Yeah, yeah. Um – it is.” The man returned, slithering down into the chair and fidgeting with his hands as he looked around slightly. **“S-so... about Galatea...”** Pygmalion started only for his thoughts to be interrupted by the haunting laugh of the enchantress before him.

“Oh, tish tosh. You’re so quick to do business. You don’t even want to ask how I’m doing? I’m doing you such a big favor, after all.” Aphrodite almost threatened, her gaze hardening as she stared at him with her emerald hues. Pygmalion swallowed hard, clearing his throat.

“I – um... I’m sorry.” he apologized, readjusting himself. **“How are you, Aphrodite?”** he asked, fidgeting as a wave of nervousness washed over him.

“Just fine, darling.” She replied curtly, snuffing out her cigarette in the ashtray at her side, a thin plume of smoke swirling in the air. **“So, about that favor,”** she started again, reaching into her rhinestone-bedazzled clutch and retrieving it.

Galatea’s breath.

*The small glowing vial, filled with light and potential of life.
Embossed with intricate patterns, pulses with silent power,
Its surface is a glimmer of iridescent purple,
A beacon of potential, positioned to bring life to Galatea.*

*Within its compact frame lies a universe of technology,
A fusion of ancient alchemy and cutting-edge innovation,
Whispers of creation echo within its humming core,
As it hovers above Galatea, a promise of awakening.*

“Here it is,” Aphrodite introduces, spinning the pulsing cylinder around in her hand.

Amazed by the small yet earth-shattering piece of technology before him, Pygmalion pressed his lips together, taking in the sight for all that it was worth. A wonder. **“So... how do I use it?”** he asked, unable to draw his eyes away from the small vial in the woman’s hand.

“Well, you put it in a quill and write with it, I figured that was obvious,” she replied dryly. **“This is important, as well, Pygmalion,”** she started, her emerald eyes settling into something of a more serious nature. **“This ink, when you put it in the quill, be sure you mean every word you write. Don’t spare any detail when describing your love,”** Aphrodite warns. **“Do you understand?”** Aphrodite asks, her voice grim.

“Yes.”

“Good,” Aphrodite returns, setting the glowing vial on the table, watching as Pygmalion gently lifts it. “Be careful with her, Pygmalion.” She mentions one last time.

Pygmalion's hands tremble as they grasp the glowing cylinder,
A surge of anticipation courses through his veins,
As if life itself pulses within his very grasp,
The weight of creation is heavy yet exhilarating.

The cylinder hums with a gentle warmth,
A heartbeat of energy that resonates with his own,
Each touch a connection to the life he yearns to bestow,
Galatea's form awaiting the touch of his transformative hand.

The Light and the Dark

Lieutenant Kendra McGivens clenched her stylus under the table to hide her nerves.

"I'm sorry," she said. **"I don't know that word, dez-h-ti. Could you please define it?"**



She'd repeated the phrase so many times over the last few months she should be beyond making any mistakes with it, but apparently not.

The alien-sitting across the table from her rippled his hair tendrils softly, in a gesture she now knew preceded a gentle correction. **"I," he said slowly, using a form of 'I' that she belatedly realized didn't match up to the form of 'you' she'd used to refer to him, "would be happy to define it."**

Shoot. She'd messed that up, too. Seriously, screw this language.

She bowed slightly in her chair to hide her embarrassment and raised her shaking hands to the tablet sitting on the table in front of her, stylus poised to write.

"Please, instruct me." The traditional phrase to indicate acceptance of criticism, at least, was simple. She'd long ago memorized the pronouns she'd been told applied to her.

He raised three fingers—and boy had it freaked Command out that these aliens had almost entirely the same appearance as humans—then gracefully lowered the first.

"I am vuk-ta," he said. Kendra furrowed her brow.

"Forgiveness, but how is vuk-ta different from vuk-ti?" *Vuk* meant 'male,' and both *ta* and *ti* were particles that indicated masculine grammatical gender.

And pronouns. She couldn't forget that they were also both pronouns to indicate masculine gender in general.

"Different from vuk-tim," he gently corrected her grammar. Then he cocked his head to the side, and his tendrils coiled then released in a shrug. **"Vuken-ti are of the light, while vuken-ta are of the dark."**

Ugh, this again. No one in the translation crew had yet been able to get a straight answer about all this light and dark business.

It appeared today wasn't the day, either, as he lowered his second finger.

"Dezh-ti is ti, not kih."

Oh. Okay, note to self, the forms of 'it' were just as complicated as the forms of 'I' and 'you.'

The final finger lowered, still outstretched, to point at her stylus. **"Dezhen-ti are very similar to that,"** he said.

"My 'stylus'?" she said, pronouncing it in English.

"Yes. Though we would call yours 'stylus'en-ta." He placed a plural inflection from his own grammar on the word and changed its gender slightly.

Kendra considered the stylus in her hand, barely seeing it through her thoughts. **“Ti is of the light. Ta is of the dark,”** she murmured. But both were masculine?

He smiled. **“Yes.”**

“Why?”

He cocked his head, and only one side of his tendrils coiled up, staying there in an expression of confusion.

She clarified. **“Why is mine a dezh-ta and yours a dezh-ti?”** She used the correct ‘you,’ this time, at least. Rarely did she make the same mistake twice.

He waved at her tablet. **“You write darkness into the light,”** he said. **“We write light into the darkness.”**

This again. **“I don’t understand.”** And she didn’t expect to be taught, either. Not when it came to light and darkness.

But he surprised her.

“Here,” he said, and waved at the center of the table. She pushed her tablet and stylus closer to him, happy to see where this went.

He picked up the stylus and drew it across a blank spot on the screen. A streak of black pixels followed, trailing across the blank white.

“Now watch.”

He reached into his formal robes and pulled out a black square, which he unfolded twice and set beside her tablet. From another pocket he retrieved a stylus of his own, and drew a similar line across the dark page. A streak of white followed the nib.

Kendra looked back and forth between her tablet and the alien’s, and quietly despaired. This language would kill her. It already had close to two hundred distinct pronouns, one for every possible variant of person, case, sex, gender, and plurality, and now she had to deal with pens that changed grammatical gender based on what color ink they drew?!

It seemed he picked up on her distress, however, because he hummed a short comfort-melody as his tendrils swayed toward her like an air hug.

“Do not worry too much,” he said. **“Dezh-ti and dezh-ta are formal.**

Most will not care if you simply say dezh.”

Really? **“Does that apply to all nouns?”** she asked. It would certainly make her life a lot simpler.

He shrugged his tendrils again. **“Most. But you are an interpreter, yes? You will be formal much of the time.”**

Drat. Well, if she was going to be stuck with it, she might as well have fun.

She reached out and switched the tablet’s settings to night mode, then drew another line across the screen, parallel to the one the alien had left. This time, it left a trail of white on the black background.

The alien's eyes widened, and his tendrils poofed up like they'd been hit with static.

"Dezh-ti?" she asked, smirking a little.

He nodded numbly.

She switched it back to normal and laid down a third line. **"Dezh-ta?"**

"How?" he whispered.

Wait, they really didn't have this in any of their tech? They were so much more advanced than humans in a lot of ways, it kind of blew her mind that they didn't have something as simple as a night mode toggle.

Feeling a little bad about her jest now, she shrugged. **"This is light mode,"** she said, then flicked it once more. **"And this is night mode."**

The alien stared at her tablet for a long time, his tendrils waving around wildly. She just waited him out.

"I think," he said at last, **"that it might be time to speak of the light and the dark."**

Ken'dra blinked. **"Wait, what? Why?"** Why her, why now? Her division had been trying for ages to get them to open up about this, and every single diplomat they'd spoken to had been rather close-mouthed about it. What had changed?

He raised his eyes to meet her own. **"We did not think you"**—he used the general plural form of the pronoun, indicating all humans—**"understood about the light and the dark. But you do. So now we will tell you."**

God, her boss was going to have kittens when she told him a UI setting unlocked the mystery they'd been after for years. She dreaded making the report already.



Brain-to-Text

I used to write slowly, like each word had to be carefully caught and held before it disappeared from my mind

I would sit with a pen or stare at a screen, waiting and hoping for the right sentence to arrive

Sometimes the words came together clearly, but most times they didn't, and I was left trying to piece them back together

My thoughts always seemed to move faster than my hands, and I often felt my ideas slipping away before I could fully take hold of them

I would forget what I meant halfway through a sentence or change it because it no longer sounded the way I intended

Writing felt like chasing after something that was almost in reach but never fully in my grasp

Everything changed, though, when I started using brain-to-text, a small device that rests against my head as it works quietly and almost invisibly

It did not write or think for me, it simply listened

Not to my voice but to something deeper, in the space where words form before they become sounds or actions

Now, I can sit completely still, and the words come as quickly as I think them without any delay or interruption

There is no pen to pick up, no keyboard to type on, and no physical movement required to get the words out

Just thought turning directly into language at the exact moment it forms in my mind

A sentence appears fully written the moment I think it, followed immediately by another, and then another, without pause

Nothing feels lost anymore because every idea, every fragment, and every half-formed thought finds its way onto the page

It feels powerful in a way I have never experienced before, as if I have finally closed the gap between who I am and what I can say

I am no longer spending time and energy translating my thoughts into words, but simply existing and letting those thoughts be perceived as they are

But even with that power, something about it feels different in a way I can't ignore

I no longer stop to think about what I am saying or sit with a sentence and question it

I do not rewrite or rethink my words because they arrive already formed

The device does not hesitate, and because of that, neither do I

I've started to wonder if this way of writing is actually better or if something important is being lost along the way

I think about how writing without effort might also mean writing without the same level of care or intention

I remember how it used to feel to struggle through a paragraph and finally get it right after multiple attempts

I remember the satisfaction of finding the exact word that perfectly matched what I was trying to say

Now, every word feels certain, even in moments when I am not completely sure of what I mean

There is no longer a space between thinking and writing, and I've begun to wonder if that space mattered more than I realized

Maybe that space was where meaning lived, in the pause, in the doubt, and in the moment when I had to decide what I truly wanted to say

Now everything happens immediately, and my thoughts appear before I can question them, change them, or even fully understand them

And that leads me to wonder if these words can even be considered mine, if I never shaped, chose, or fully understood them

If they simply arrived through a device that recognizes when I am thinking, what does that say about the writing itself?

I keep writing because I can, because it is easy, and because there is nothing stopping me from continuing

The page fills faster than ever before, becoming a complete record of everything happening inside my mind

It is unfiltered, unpaused, and uninterrupted in a way that feels both freeing and overwhelming

But even with all of that, I've started to miss the slowness that used to be a part of writing

I miss the quiet moments when I had to sit with myself and take the time to figure out what I actually meant

I miss the mistakes, the unfinished sentences, and the messy pages that showed evidence of my thinking process

Now the page is always full and complete, but I am not sure if it feels the same as it once did

When I read back what I have written, it sounds like an unfamiliar version of me,

It's a version that never hesitates, never doubts, and never changes direction once a thought begins

The brain-to-text device continues to listen without judgment, without questioning, and without ever requiring me to slow down

And maybe that is where the problem begins, because writing used to ask something of me in return

It used to make me slow down, choose my words carefully, revise, and truly understand what I wanted to say

Now it only asks me to think, and even that feels different when every thought becomes permanent the moment it exists

I begin to wonder if I should turn it off, even if it is only for a moment

Just to feel the No silence again between idea and expression, and to memorize how the distance felt

To experience again what it's like to reach for words instead of having them instantly arrive without effort

Maybe writing was never about capturing thought as quickly as possible, but about taking the time to shape one's words into something meaningful

Maybe it was about becoming someone who could say exactly what they meant through effort and intention

And maybe in this new way of writing, where everything is immediate and effortless

I am still learning what it truly means to mean something at all



I dropped the journal. You're telling me that the government was teaching aliens how to speak human languages? How did my Aunt have this government file? Surely this report would be incredibly top-secret or destroyed by the Mainframe. I could barely comprehend what truths of the world were just revealed to me. Was the Mainframe the product of alien overlords that had mastered human language and culture? If so, what made them completely destroy writing and human expression in favor of rigid facility work? Were they trying to control us? Wait... was my Aunt L8 Lt. Kendra McGivens? Is that why she had this file? Is it her own? Did she smuggle it away from the Mainframe? Did she want me to find them?

Questions buzzed around me.

I could barely breathe.

I scraped through the bottom of the chest, looking for anything that could give me more information. I needed answers now. I scraped my hand along each edge of the small wooden chest, searching for another hidden manuscript. I found nothing but cobwebs. I needed more information.

I scoured through every drawer and cabinet in my Aunt K's bedroom immediately, frantically searching for something that could give me a clue to why she kept these books and notebooks, or who she was. I found absolutely nothing until I caught a glimpse of reflection from the corner of the mirror of her vanity, which sat disheveled along the wall by the foot of her bed. I pulled the mirror off the wall and a small, digital phone fell out from between the mirror and the wall. I picked it up. After some thought, I recognized the phone as one frequently used about 20 years ago, just before the Mainframe confiscated all independent technology, notebooks, books and any free scratch paper. They assured that virtual reality and brain-mapping were the next generation of communication and archaic technology was immediately obsolete. Then, I didn't realize all that we were losing. I was very young at the time. I feel almost younger and more clueless now. I tapped the phone screen and it lit up, looking for a password.

I scanned the room for any numbers and found nothing. I tried the only combination I could think of: my call number and my Aunt's call number. I typed in one, then zero, then zero, then eight...and the phone unlocked and blinked to life. There was only one app on her phone with two files...

The Rise of Artificial Intelligence

Forms of writing have continuously evolved throughout history. Writing has advanced in various ways from cave engravings, to quill and parchment, to pencils and paper, and now, to typing on a phone or a computer. Even today, writing takes many forms and shapes, and is continuing to evolve and grow thanks to the emergence of new and exciting technologies. Recent technological developments include voice dictation, texting, and emailing.

One of the most recently emerged technologies used to help advance and guide writing is Artificial Intelligence. Artificial Intelligence is different from previous writing tools because beyond merely aiding writing, it can write for you, too. Not only can Artificial Intelligence write entire essays it can also be used to create or generate images and videos. So, it is ultimately an extremely powerful and multifaceted tool that's used frequently. Current debates about Artificial Intelligence center on **ERROR**. Many people in the general public and in the Artificial Intelligence industry are lobbying government officials to introduce **ERROR** its rapid rise. It is a tool that has completely changed many aspects of our society, and is undeniably one of the biggest technological achievements/advancement in human history.

When it comes to Artificial Intelligence and writing, the possibilities are truly limitless. Unlike previous technologies invented to help with writing, Artificial intelligence doesn't just help aid writing for an individual, it can do the entire job for them. For example, I could ask an Artificial Intelligence program like ChatGPT or ClaudeAI to "generate me a well-crafted 5 page essay detailing the history of Great Britain," and the program would generate 5 pages for me in less than 10 seconds, with **ERROR** no detectable faults. That hypothetical happenstance really puts into perspective just how powerful Artificial

Intelligence is when it comes to its ability to craft writing material.

Generating entire essays or prompts is not the only thing Artificial Intelligence can do. As previously mentioned, it is a multifaceted tool that can be used for many purposes in both society and in writing. Hypothetically, I could use it to generate an email or formal message to a work supervisor or school professor. Furthermore, in addition to generating entire essays, Artificial Intelligence can also edit and check pieces of writing for things such as cohesion issues, punctuation errors, spelling errors, and grammatical mistakes. It can do this as well with little to no room for error. Normally, you would have to hire someone to edit a piece of writing for you—an editor)—, but you can hire Artificial Intelligence to do this for you for free.

ERROR. Artificial Intelligence can do extraordinary things such as write entire texts or essays, edit documents, and rewrite sentences. These are things usually done by professionals, such as authors, writers, and or editors. **ERROR**. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see how this scenario will play out.

The impact of Artificial Intelligence has been felt in writing in many ways. When it comes to education, this impact has been seen as **ERROR** due to speculation that students are now using Artificial Intelligence **ERROR** on their assignments. Examples of ~~X~~ ethical uses of Artificial Intelligence observed in classrooms include the implementation of it by students to answer test questions, generate entire papers, analyze texts, and complete homework assignments.

Professors and members of the academic community are trying to navigate how to **ERROR** use Artificial Intelligence in the school setting.

Professors have employed the use of Artificial Intelligence checkers such as ChatGPTzero to **ERROR** . In addition, professors/teachers sometimes check the word choice of a sentence or essay, and if it deviates from the student's traditional form of writing **ERROR** . Nonetheless, doing this is harder said than done, and many students are still **X** using Artificial Intelligence. **ERROR**

As previously mentioned, Artificial Intelligence is a new form of technology that has drastically changed the whole of society. In terms of writing, in particular, its impacts have been seen in many subsets of the field, whether that bein academic settings or the job industry,. The use of Artificial Intelligence in writing will only grow as it continues to become more intelligent and advanced.

Moving forward it'll be important to observe how Artificial Intelligence evolves **ERROR** . Nonetheless, the invention of Artificial Intelligence represents one of the greatest technological advances in writing throughout the course of history, and its situation is ongoing.

The Modern Writer

Left to Our Own Devices

I have a friend who can only write on her laptop or on a piece of loose-leaf paper to transcribe later and, every so often, she tells me that her writing isn't good (a claim that is common among writers, but wholly unsubstantiated on her part). I have another friend who nearly exclusively types on their phone, has only ever used paper for one outline as long as I've known them, and has to finish a work within a certain window of time or the inspiration will run out, and it'll never get done. I prefer to write on my laptop, though I will resort to using my phone if it's more convenient, and I despise outlining (or writing any larger creative work, for that matter) on paper. The scribbles of ink and eraser marks and poorly-shaped letters are grating to me now that I've had beautiful, neat, digitized outlines that I can add to or subtract from at will.

Though, it's worth mentioning that I still keep an inordinately large collection of pens in every color and thickness.

The modern writer is spoiled for choice in terms of medium. Paper is, as always, a classic. Both antique and new typewriters are still available. Digital technology offers a slew of word processors and beckoning text boxes, from Microsoft Word to the humble Notes app. There are countless places to keep your writing, no matter the subject matter, and almost all the writers I know have their work split between multiple. Many of us try to be neat, but good digital housekeeping is a constant uphill battle, as anyone with multiple email inboxes will tell you.

But, on some level, this isn't new. Art has always been a messy process. Some of the greatest creative geniuses of

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our time have written, painted, or otherwise created works that felt like pulling teeth at the time or almost weren't finished at all. The advent of such a wide spread of options hasn't changed our nature as artists—it's merely changed the channels through which we create and share our creations. In a lot of ways, from the printing press to the internet and self-publishing, new technologies have often democratized writing. We'll come back to that later, but first I want to point out the elephant in the room that is modern writing: the recently crowned star of writing technology's hopes and dreams. **X**

ARTificial

ERROR a panacea for all the world's ills. **ERROR**



ERROR It seemed like every person and every field was rushing to adopt AI in every way they could all around me,

ERROR The fact is, simply not using AI makes you somewhat of a rare bird in today's technological landscape. So, if that's true, why **X** resist? **ERROR** the choice to feel and connect and experience, is ours to make.

The Modern Writer

Fanfiction to Published Novel?

Now, back to the conversation of democratization in terms of the internet and self-publishing. If you're paying any kind of attention to the publishing industry, the shelves of Barnes & Noble, or book-related social media, you've probably noticed a trio of trends, all of which often go hand in hand: the rise of self-publishing, the rise of fanfiction name-changed and carefully edited to be published without violating IP laws, and the recent stardom of the subgenre known as romantic fantasy (or, as coined by social media, romantasy).

The decline of stigma around self-published books and the general upset of tradition in the publishing industry, as technology and culture shift around it, have marked the advent of a new publishing market; a publishing market that values its own survival enough to shift its priorities to resonate with those of the modern audiences that can keep it alive. That shift in marketing strategy centers around appealing to a social media-informed public—and, often, one that browses for books based on existing tropes and familiar content (tropes and content which find their roots in fanfiction, where they were grouped and named).

However, this shift toward pre-existing details and character archetypes as well as the publishing of edited works of fanfiction, which presuppose an audience connection to the characters around whom these works are based has also caused a sort of collapse of context—something I've referred to recently as BYOF, or "bring your own feelings." In prioritizing marketable traits in writing, I've found that a great many recently-published books fall flat in terms of character work and development (and even

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romantic plot—many of these pairings read in the end like low-budget romcoms, sometimes even becoming so tropey as to be uncomfortable to read). The emotional stakes of the books themselves are propped up on a base of existing reader buy-in, and can collapse entirely when that buy-in isn't present.

Self-publishing isn't the end of the world, and neither is the imperative of the publishing industry to change to meet the cultural and technological changes around it. Though it's often debated whether or not these things "degrade" the value of publishing. There are many valid concerns about the content of newly-published books (such as the issue of BYOF and over-reliance on tropes) and the level of weight marketing carries in the decisions involved in what books reach the shelves, but there are also many concerns that are, frankly, not raised in good faith. Even with its recent gains in social capital and in publishing, fanfiction as an art form is still heavily stigmatized.

Like most things, it's a matter of opinion. But whether you love or hate it, in today's environment, fanfiction and online fandom have become a training ground for future writers, and romantasy is here to stay.

I was perplexed by these two files. They seemed to be propaganda pieces for the Mainframe and the implementation of all of their new technologies into human society, but at the same time, so much was missing—unable to load. It's almost like the Mainframe had already combed through these files and was refusing to show me information that would plant any doubt about the use of the Mainframe's technologies in our lives. I know my Aunt K wouldn't save these files in their current state, especially as the only four files on her hidden phone. Her phone had definitely been tapped into and tampered with by the Mainframe. I wonder if that's the reason why she died. It's at least one of the likely reasons why the Mainframe was so quick to send death-inspector machines to ransack her living unit. I was still struck by some of the ideas in what was left of my Aunt K's digital files though. "The fact is, (error) simply not using AI makes you somewhat of a rare bird in today's technological landscape. So, if that's true, why (error) resist (error)?" The Mainframe was obviously pushing the implementation of A.I. as an infrastructure, pushing people to quickly adopt their new technologies with no room for questioning. I felt called to be a rare bird, like my Aunt K. I couldn't stop thinking about the last quote in the section titled ARTificial: "the choice to feel and connect and experience is ours to make."

I was still hungry for more information, but I could hear a facility vehicle pulling into the driveway. It was AI, my eighty minutes was surely up and I would soon be collected and sent back to the facility to carry out the remaining daily tasks I would be assigned, factoring in my absence. I couldn't let them take me back to the facility until I knew the truth about the Mainframe, my Aunt K, AI, everything. I raced out of Aunt K's living unit and to the Mainframe's computer lab, the only place where we were allowed to have access to information for a set time of twenty minutes. The computer lab was only a five minute walk from the facility so I knew I didn't have much time before AI would contact the Mainframe enforcement sector that I was missing from my Aunt K's and that I would need to report back to the facility immediately.

I ran as fast as I possibly could, passing many Mainframe vehicles on my way, hoping that none of them would recognize me. I scanned into the library and I knew my internal timer was immediately ticking away, tracking my time within the premises of the computer lab to the millisecond, installed in every human worker's chest during birth to keep the routine running smoothly. I wanted to rip it out of my chest, in pure exasperation for what the Mainframe had kept from us, humans, and done to my Aunt K. But I knew that would be foolish right now, before I knew what was really going on. I tapped into a computer and mentally-searched for anything relating to the early implementation of AI and Mainframe technologies.



Interactive Storytelling in Virtual Reality

Have you ever wanted to experience a book in a new, more interactive way? Dive into a story of your choice. Seeing your favorite characters, and the setting of the story in your own eyes. The details of the world within the story come to life, and you can read a book in a whole new way. Virtual reality storytelling is an exciting form of storytelling that immerses you into a story of your own personal choice, and adds new elements to your reading experience. This blends writing, gaming and visual storytelling. This technology is still adapting over time and soon many others will be able to all experience a story in a different light. Virtual reality, also known as “VR”, was designed in 1968 by the computer scientist, Ivan Sutherland. Ivan created the first mounted head display, named The Sword of Damocles, – a 3D graphics VR system. As time went on, others adapted and improved the works of VR. The name itself, Virtual Reality, was coined by Jaron Lanier, who was the founder of the visual program lab, VLB, that developed a range of research over Virtual reality. Virtual reality currently has over 171 million users worldwide. People love being able to put the headset on and escape to a world of their dreams. It wasn't until the late 2010s when virtual reality started to become mainstream. Around 2016, the first wave of consumers for this new tech arose.



Virtual reality's initial use was originally for gaming. Though creators have found ways to adapt interactive storytelling into the Virtual reality world. In VR storytelling you don't just have to flip the page to find out what happens next. You can see and experience the plot of the story for yourself. Unlike original books or movies, VR storytelling dives you into an unforgettable experience, to where you can interact and change the narrative of what happens next. For these interactive stories, writers now have to think about the setting and take it into new directions. Being able to see 360 degrees around yourself challenges writers to add additional details to their stories. For example, writers may now think about hidden clues that wouldn't be able to be added to traditional written stories without spoiling.

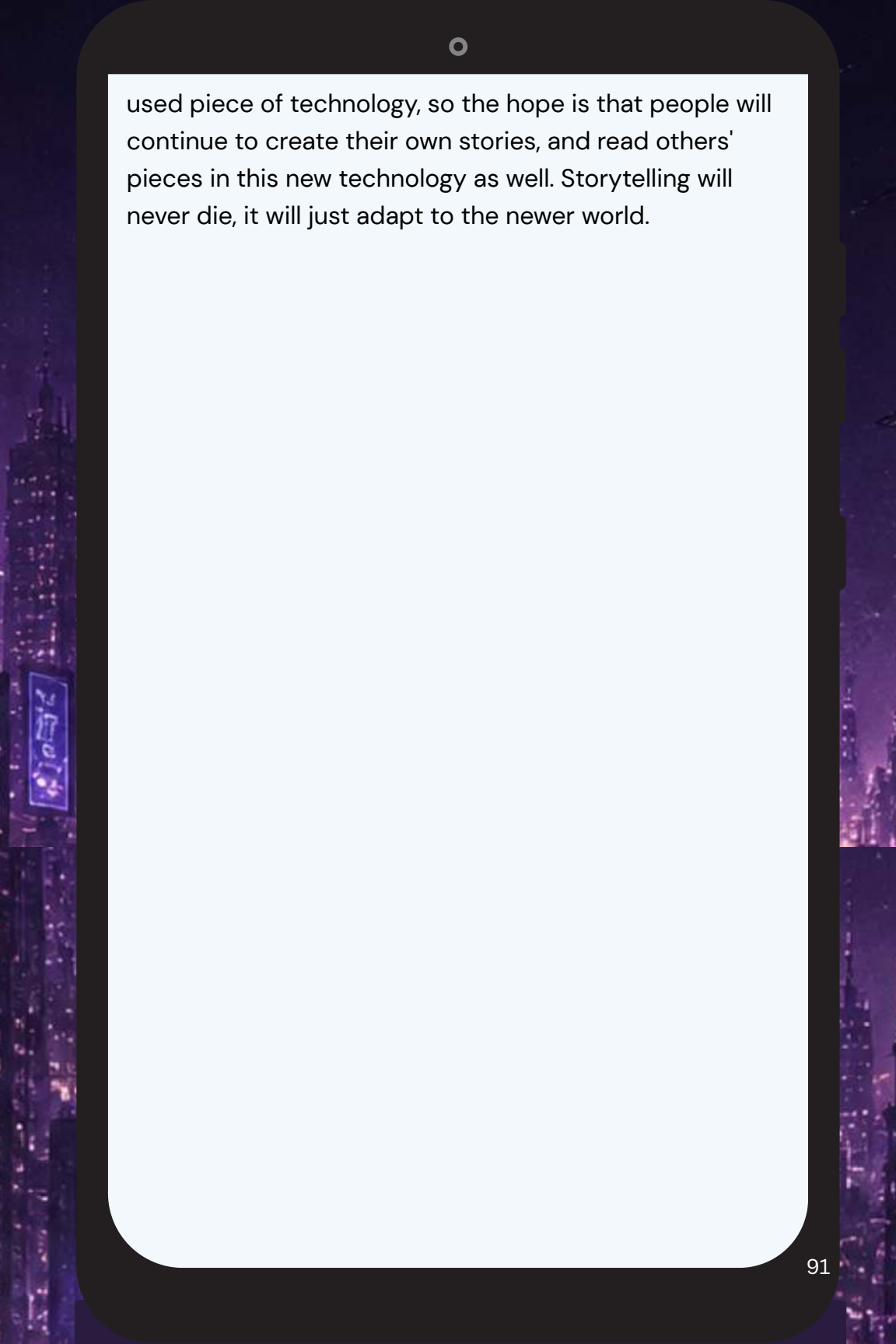
What does this mean for the common person? This could mean that with the advance of technology, you will no longer need to pick up a phone, tablet or book to read or

experience your favorite story. You throw on your VR headset, and now you're flying with Harry Potter, or a participant in the Hunger Games with Katniss herself. With the adaptation of technology, many people believe this way of storytelling will not only be more effective than traditional reading, but more entertaining as well. With the rise of artificial intelligence, the possibilities for Virtual reality storytelling remain endless.

Some current VR stories are Red Matter 2, which is a sci-fi puzzle adventure interactive story, where you travel through this dystopian world and reveal hidden environmental clues around you. Another mentionable story is The Walking Dead: Saints and Sinners, based off the show, "The Walking Dead." Saint and Sinners, is an interactive horror story that throws you into an apocalypse with zombies that makes the reader deal with actual story effecting choices. Both of these stories include choices that affect the storyline, and it's up to the reader to choose their own type of ending. People who enjoy gaming with VR enjoy these interactive stories as well. An additional popular interactive story is Moss, an adventure puzzle where the reader travels through this world learning about the main character and deciding his fate. All of these interactive stories are available on Meta Quest Oculus for download. There are hundreds of different stories the consumer can choose from. Ranging from horror, adventure, romance to murder mystery. These interactive stories aren't limited to one genre.

Beyond just reading alone, Virtual reality opens doors for new people to create their own stories and experience it for themselves in first person. This paves way for new creations as the human imagination is never ending. New possibilities are awaiting the future of storytelling. Aspiring writers may now have the drive and opportunity to create their own world and story in their virtual realities. People may also be able to collaborate on these interactive stories, which would make the writing experience not only easier but more fun for the writer and editor as well. This opens up new jobs such as a writer, editor, illustrator, game tester, or engineer. It wouldn't just contain an editor and writer alone. You can learn using this new creative tech as well. History can be taught through these interactive stories, letting readers experience earlier decades and experiences from 10 to 100 years ago. It will also teach the reader compassion. Letting you step into the shoes of someone else in a way that a history book cannot. Virtual reality storytelling lets the reader experience these scenarios safely.

The power of storytelling in Virtual reality is immersive and thrilling to those who want to step away from traditional movies and books. People want to be inside their favorite stories and experience it for themselves. This new abruption of technology changes the way people can learn or leisure themselves. New stories are bound to be written for the new users of VR storytelling. It paves way for new experience, new jobs, new ways to learn, and new ways to go about your day to day lives. As of Forbes, in the future many predict VR to be a daily

The background of the entire page is a dark, purple-toned photograph of a city skyline at night, with numerous lights from buildings and streets visible. Overlaid on this is a large, dark, rounded rectangular frame that resembles a tablet or a piece of paper. At the top center of this frame is a small white circle, possibly representing a camera lens or a punch hole. Inside the frame, the text is displayed in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

used piece of technology, so the hope is that people will continue to create their own stories, and read others' pieces in this new technology as well. Storytelling will never die, it will just adapt to the newer world.

The Simulation of It All

Before

The sun shines down on Adam's face. After months of the cold and dreary winter, the bright, albeit brisk, day is a welcome change. His walk on the uneven sidewalks is no different than any other day, but the air and the wind smells different. It's as if Oxford, Ohio has finally shaken off the grip that winter had on it. The fresh day has given Adam a new perspective on his priorities; he's been slacking with school and needs to get his priorities straight. With the end of the semester quickly approaching, he's been going out with friends a lot without making sure his work for his classes is done first. But, that's all going to change because of this day. Adam has a test coming up in his Business and Management class, so he's going to meet a friend at the library to get a jumpstart on studying. He doesn't feel like it'll be too difficult, but it's not like he got an A on the last test in this class, so he needs to step up his game.

As Adam rounds the corner to the library, he gets a ping on his phone that his friend, David, got a study room for them. He secretly hopes that David has better notes than Adam does, since he didn't care to pay attention in class the past two weeks, if he had the time to even show up. He's got to figure out how to manage to get a better grade on this test. Adam enters the library and beelines for the stairs. He heads down to the basement and circles the sections until he spots Adam in the study room. He knocks on the door and David lets him in.

During

Adam sits down beside his friend and starts to get out his things.

"There are so many new terms to memorize. This test is going to suck," David complains to Adam, who doesn't know what these terms are. His bright, shining morning is a long way away in this basement he's found himself in on a Sunday morning.

"How the hell are you going to memorize them all?" Adam baits, hoping to just do whatever David does. He doesn't know the terms, let alone a way to study them.

"Well, I was hoping to just listen to them over and over. I don't really have the time to read them again and again."

"What do you mean listen to them? How?" Adam presses, confused as to who would read his terms out loud for him.

"I was going to use this text to speech software. Here – look at this." David turns his laptop screen so it's facing Adam. "So I type in my notes, or, like, copy and paste them. Then I just hit play and..."

A robotic sounding voice fills the small study room. His notes came to life all around them, reading off definition after definition. David hits the pause button on his computer.

"What's that site called?" asked Adam.

"It's Speechify. They have all different types of voices you can select, too," David answers.

"How did you even find that?"

"It was advertised on another AI site I use. They've both been super helpful when it comes to studying. It's not cheating if it's not writing it for you."

Adam hadn't known that the text-to-speech generator was AI. He'd never used AI before, not because of a specific reason, just because he hadn't really known what it was. He'd seen memes online of people using AI to do all their work for them, **ERROR** But this, using AI as a tool, didn't seem inherently bad. It seems like it would help him study, instead of using it to get off easy. David was a great student, if he was doing it, why shouldn't Adam?

"That's really cool, man. I'm gonna have to check that out. Do you mind sending me your notes, too? I want to make sure I got all the definitions down."

After

Adam goes home that day, feeling much more prepared for his upcoming exam. He has a paper to write tonight, too, but that site that David told him about stays on his mind the entire walk home. As Adam reheats his leftovers for dinner, he inputs his notes into Speechify, listening to his own words (and David's notes that he sent over) call back to him.

As soon as he was done eating, Adam tried to lock in on his paper. But, he just couldn't think of where to start. He thought he might use one of the sites that David mentioned, just to get a jump start on it. Only an outline, he thought. It couldn't hurt. Adam brought up ChatGPT, the only site he could remember by name and typed in the prompt for his paper. Before asking a question, he just hit enter. He didn't mean to, but ChatGPT was already responding. And just like that, there was an entire paper on his screen. It looked like five full paragraphs with a strong thesis. He started reading it, and it wasn't bad. It wasn't the best

paper ever, but it hit every part of the rubric. It was already getting late, and Adam was tired from studying all day. So, instead of staying up one or two more hours to get his own paper done, he just submitted what was already in front of him.

ERROR Adam went to bed. **ERROR**

I was only able to skim two articles before the enforcement unit machines burst through the computer lab's sliding doors and dragged me away from the computer.

That night, I wished to write down my thoughts before they inevitably became just vague flashes in my Mainframe-manipulated mind. I wanted to write something down with my hands, with a pen, that would inform my fellow workers about what I thought I had found. I wanted to spread the word. But I couldn't find the letters. How much had humans lost at the hands of the Mainframe? How much thought and creativity had we forgotten? Just thinking about it made me sick. I laid down to rest in my stale white bed, surrounded by blue, and woke up under buzzing white lights, **again.**

A Glimpse at the Future

Introduction

In the past decade alone, advances in technology related to writing have been numerous. In the five thousand years since humans began writing, technological advances were few, and not entirely awe-inspiring. We began with singular symbols and icons, carved with our fingers or smaller implements into soft materials. We began to use alphabets next, creating small systems of letters to formalize the process of putting words to physical form. Primitive paper, pens, and books came next, and soon exploded into mass-produced newspapers and letters. The digital era topped everything off, turning writing from an intense physical ordeal (who would want to write thousands of pages by hand?) into something almost as easy as talking.

The timeline of these advancements is a unique thing to look at. Hundreds of years existed between each minor advancement, up until a few centuries ago. After the introduction of more modern writing implements and machines, it seemed that writing was reaching the pinnacle of its development; the physical act of writing is now likely less than one percent of all writing that occurs. A writer can have their work seen by potentially hundreds or thousands without any effort on their part. For all the work and stress that writing is, modern writing is easy compared to the eras before it.

For timeline purposes, I would say that the “modern” act of writing reached its peak about a decade ago. People would type away on laptops in secluded environments, in bustling coffee shops or quiet classrooms. Writing was easy enough that almost anybody could do it.

Now, with the introduction of AI, any barriers that may have prevented people from creating works ~~X~~ are all but gone. A single sentence thrown into a generator can create a relatively

complex piece of writing that would normally have taken days or weeks to plan. There are books on the market ~~ERROR~~ that were almost entirely written by an artificial intelligence. ~~N/A~~ take pride in the fact that the ideas and worlds they had in their minds can be put into physical form immediately.

It takes a generative AI seconds to write pages of content. Compounded over an entire book series, I would estimate that for a contemporary generative AI to create it couldn't be more than a few minutes.

At first, I wanted to speak about how writing is only ever getting faster. What started as a few words that took hours to dry in the sun slowly moved towards digital writing over a hundred generations. Letters created instantly with the press of a button, pasted onto a bright white screen from anywhere in the world. Writing has already reached the peak of its speed. Humans cannot physically write faster than we can now (barring some insane biological implements in the future). Most of writing is thinking about what to write next. The limit of speed isn't on the technology, but on the mind of the writer.

This is, obviously, where AI begins to break the limits of human creation. Generative AI doesn't ponder. ~~ERROR~~ It just creates. It writes what it is told to write.

Which leads to this experiment of thought; how much farther can "writing" ~~N/A~~ proceed from here? What technologies might exist in the future, and which ones will stem from what we already have now?

I was curious to see what I could come up with.

Vocal Writing

Voice-writing exists already. We speak, it transcribes. People do this for texting, but it's a bit too unwieldy for actual pieces

of literature. What could change?

If it was ever to come into existence, I imagine creative generation through AI would be pushed into the process. A writer speaks into their phone pushed against their mouth. They lay out the general idea for a character they had. The city they live in, the problem they face. Word for word, with as much accuracy as it can manage, it is transcribed and pushed into some digital machine of incalculable size.

It spits out the product; a full story, created only from speaking some random thoughts and words into a microphone. What would usually be saved for back-room idea generation is now all that is necessary to create a major piece of writing.

This is a tiny step forward. I would assume this already exists, but has yet to be fine-tuned enough to be a replacement for writing prompts.

“Hand-Holding” Writing

It's not uncommon to teach through a filling in of the blanks. It's prevalent in schools as a way of forcing students to memorize a word's relation to its definition, rather than just associating an idea with it. How could writing be pushed forward through this?

To no surprise, AI would be involved. A series of increasingly complicated questions would all but craft the narrative for the author.

At the start, they would be simple; what genre are you trying to write? Are there any major themes or emotions you're trying to strike?

They would rise in complexity. What's the main character's relation to the plot? What problem would they be attempting

to solve? If these are too complex for the author to answer, the AI could go smaller, or even all but write the work for them; this character is plagued by a problem that stems from their upbringing: what person in their childhood might have caused it? Directed, pointed, and almost impossible to fumble an answer for, because most of it is already presupposed.

At this point, the AI would be asking questions to the author and writing in the background. Each answer the author gives would further entrench the information into the fictional world. It would be the most intertwined, complicated story to exist. A writer can only add so much into their work before the information becomes overwhelming. Not so for an artificial intelligence.

Thought Writing

The sci-fi nerd in me is simultaneously obsessed with and terrified of the potential for a writing system like this.

An author thinks of an image of a character or location. Somehow, through neural technology, a description is given immediately of what they are imagining. It is evocative and deeply descriptive.

Next, they imagine an emotion that they wish to convey with the image. Again, a description is given. It's accurate to the emotion the author imagined, complete with reasonings and deep, plot-relevant points with almost no fine-tuning from the author.

After several iterations of this, it all melds together; the descriptions and feelings the author sought to invoke through their world is put into writing at a level of detail never before seen. The words strike a chord with the readers because it was created through the identification and enumeration of emotions that are usually impossible to put into writing.

It would be comparably slower to the previous options, but much more suited for complex worlds.

Conclusion

There are obviously hundreds of different technologies and machines that could be used in the future. These are a few that I found either most likely or most interesting. My main points are twofold. Firstly, I want to specify that writing is ~~✗~~ getting quicker. ~~ERROR~~ The physical act of writing reached the limits of its speed with the introduction of the computer. ~~✗~~ Second, technology related to writing is nowhere near its end. When humans began writing on paper, none could imagine the printing press. When humans began typing, none could imagine a program that would do it all for you. And now, ~~✗~~ generative AI ~~ERROR~~ creates complex worlds with only a few sentences.

What's on your mind today?

+ The end of writing



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