



# PRINT ISSUE VOLUME FOUR

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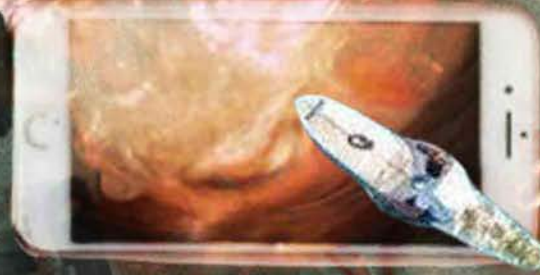
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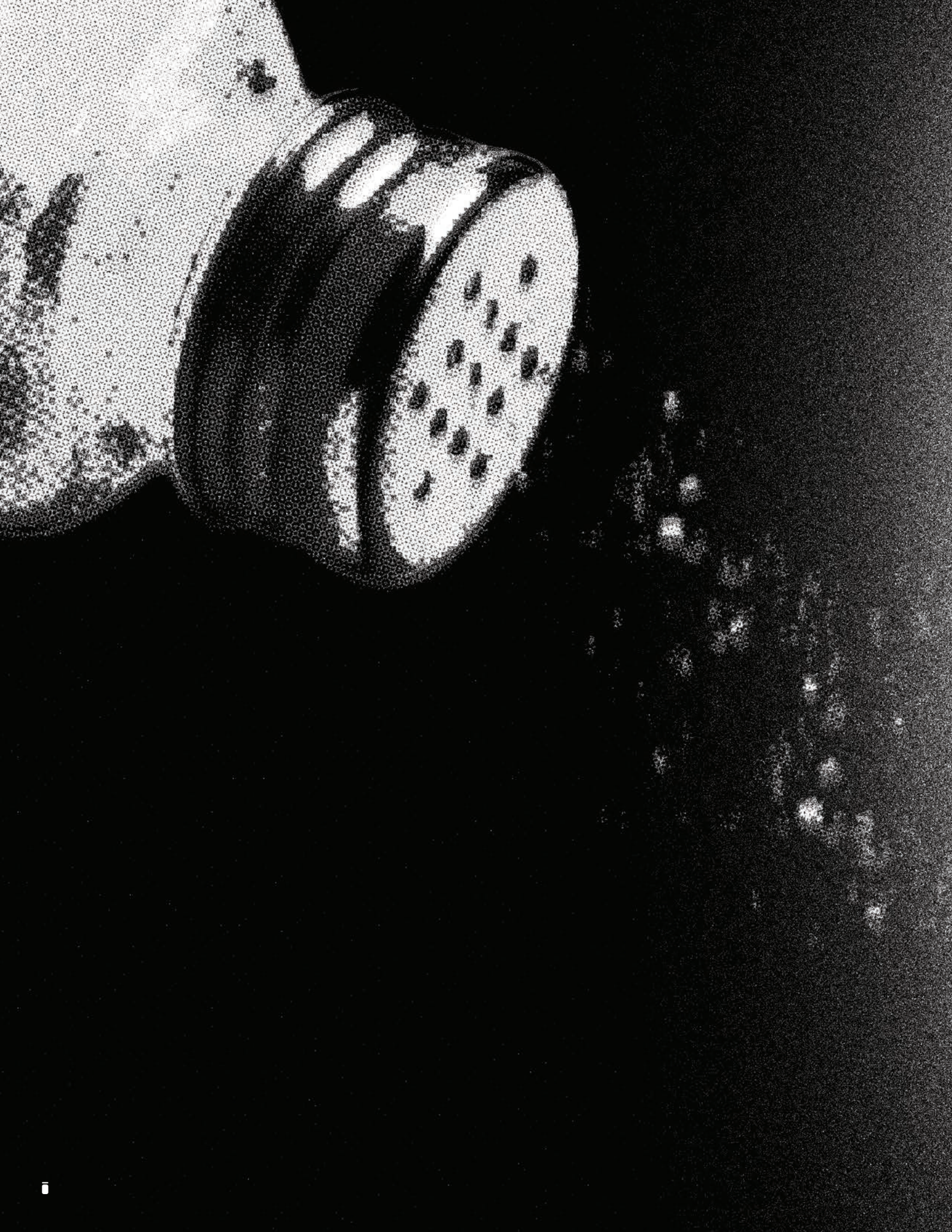






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if this is your first time reading one of these introductions, welcome. if this is your second, third or now even fourth time –

we fucking love you.

you're currently holding grain of salt mag's fourth print project – or 4.5, if you're a real one who knows about our mini zine "**let's talk about sex**" for bluestockings nyc. and to be perfectly candid, we will never get over the fact that we get to do such cool things with such cool people, no matter how many times it happens. grain of salt mag is a volunteer-led passion project. every person involved, from our internal team keeping the content train chugging along, to the creatives who submit to our silly little magazine, does this because they believe in our mag, our mission and our creatives. and to us, that is the most beautiful thing.

each print project is significant to our magazine's history: "**the best of grain of salt**" marked our first foray into print following our first year as an organization; "**frozen adolescence**" navigated adolescence and change during the stagance of covid-19 quarantine; "**sublime**" inspired us to hold onto bits of love and laughter during such a dark time in our history.

this brings us to "**glitch**": an exploration of our movement from the physical world to an ever-growing digital universe. through this curated collection of art and writing, we aim to explore the digital spaces we gravitate to, how we express emotions and behaviors online, the ways we construct our personas and how virtual community impacts our human connections. each copy of "**glitch**" is accompanied by grain of salt mag's "**index of the internet**" – a comedic and design-forward zine straight from the depths of our slack channels and brought to life by our incredibly talented creative team. we hope you love it as much as we do.

thank you, thank you, thank you. and thank you again. our appreciation for the grain of salt community cannot be captured through words alone. we would not be here, writing this, if it weren't for you, reading this.

happy reading.

with all the love in the world,  
rita, faith, isa, maria and sarah

# How Gen-Z Has Captured a Generation's Anxiety Through A New Digital Medium

By Anna Statter



You've probably seen it already: a monologue from "Malcolm in the Middle" cuts to a clipped Better Help ad, all overlaid with audio from a "Breakfast Club" interview from Donald Glover, flashing across your screen at break-neck speed. It may seem like there is no real method to the madness, but this is actually "core-core," a TikTok trend that gained popularity earlier this year, attempting to articulate Gen-Z's generational frustrations through lightning-speed digital collages.

While there isn't a centralized definition of core-core, or even an established influencer in the space, the format is clear: a dizzying patchwork of loosely connected images, video and audio clips in a rapid-fire montage intended to evoke some strong emotion or express dissatisfaction with a social phenomenon, often related to technology, social media or the internet. The clips can be taken from anywhere online: a screen-capped TikTok backed by audio spliced from a TED talk and "The Lego Movie," grainy footage from an obscure Youtube video overlaid with audio from Joe Rogan's podcast, a broadcast news clip detailing the loneliness epidemic behind a 2016 video of Trisha Paytas crying on her kitchen floor. The more random the curated collection is, the better, as long as it fits within a semi-cohesive theme, such as men's mental health or social media addiction. A good core-core edit captures the distinctly Gen-Z fear of doom-scrolling your life away.

Like any artistic movement, it is important to take a look at the greater social context to understand how and why core-core emerged on TikTok. First coined as a jab against the use of the suffix "-core," which is often used to describe niche online communities (e.g. cottage-core), core-core emerged in 2020 as a semi-ironic response to the ever-shrinking lifespan of online microtrends.

The nonsensical nature of 'core-core' has been compared to the twentieth-century Dada movement, an artistic movement borne from the dismay of Europe post-World War I. In Art News Net's article "Explained: What Is Corecore, the Dada-esque 'Artistic Movement' Now Trending on TikTok" author Min Chin cites the key curatorial and absurdist factors found between core-core and Dadaism. Similarly, various TikTok creators, such as @aamirazh, were quick to compare the two movements earlier this year. Dadaist artists, writers and performers in the early-to-mid twentieth century purposely created illogical pieces to convey the senselessness of WWI, and, similarly, 'core-core' video editors interslice equally nonsensical digital media in response to the greatest threats facing Gen-Z in the post-pandemic digital world. The Vice article, "Corecore is the Screaming-Into-Void TikTok Trend We Deserve," even calls core-core the "anti-trend" for mocking the deterioration of microtrends that TikTok continuously burns through. Even this harkens back to the famous description of the Dada movement, "Dada is anti-Dada!" in the way it subverts traditional artistic movements. The act of creating meaning in the meaningless through nontraditional mediums, which is a staple of both core-core and Dadaism, demonstrates the shared artistic features of movements created by two generations born a century apart.



But what's the point? In the mid-twentieth century, the ironic, almost ridiculous nature of Dadaism made it impervious to serious critique, similar to the illogic of providing thoughtful, dedicated analysis to a TikTok trend that revolves entirely on the premise of not making sense.

There's something distinctly unique about the confusion of core-core videos, which mock TikTok's unique ability to churn through trends at an increasingly accelerated pace until the trend cycles collapse in on themselves. By mimicking TikTok's algorithm with the rapid succession of seemingly random collections of video clips from every corner of the internet, there's a distinctly human element to a pattern that is so closely tied to TikTok's elusive algorithm. But can you derive meaning from a trend based on chaos? Can a TikTok trend even be considered an art form?

In scrolling through the most popular core-core videos featured in TikTok's Discover page, the edits acutely capture the unease of existing online, offering solidarity but without much resolve. Core-core offers a place for Gen-Z to commiserate together on issues facing their generation, but it falls short of finding a way out.

***"Maybe the only purpose of these hyper-edited, rapid-fire mosaics of digital media is to diagnose Gen-Z's anxieties in a fractured digital world, not treat the underlying issue."***

But is it the responsibility of a TikTok trend to produce a solution to a social ill, or is it simply enough to encapsulate a common sentiment? Maybe the only purpose of these hyper-edited, rapid-fire mosaics of digital media is to diagnose Gen-Z's anxieties in a fractured digital world, not treat the underlying issue. It may be unfair to expect a TikTok trend to tackle the problems it holds a mirror up against, yet it is difficult to come away with anything but more dread and dissatisfaction after scrolling through core-core edits, which is precisely the issue it attempts to address.

Maybe the answer's in "hope-core," an offshoot of core-core that follows the same format as its predecessor, but with a more uplifting spin. Hopecore delivers the same fast-paced digital montage with the opposite result: displaying inspiring feats of human endurance, achievement and compassion to combat the overall dread in the doom-scroll. It encapsulates what TikTok claims to provide: a series of rapid-fire videos, audio and images that show off the best of humanity.

Though core-core videos offer an outlet to express grievances with internet culture and the technologies behind it, this trend exacerbates the issues it aims to address. The digital media we consume impacts the way we view the world and ourselves, and though connecting through shared complaints offers solidarity in an increasingly isolated digital world, there's something distinctly dread-inducing about this trend, in a dadaistic encapsulation of what it means for Gen-Z to exist in a post-pandemic digital world.

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by Sara Wilson

As soon as I graduated college in spring of 2022, I leapt into a highly competitive, fast-paced position at a fully virtual web company. Getting the job was HUGE for me. Everyone in my graduating class was looking for this exact thing. Flexible schedule? You bet! Cool co-workers from around the world? Check! I was in a great spot, and I was overjoyed to be starting fresh in a new city with a cool new position on my LinkedIn bio.

Fast forward three months to me sitting in my "home office" (a standing desk wedged in the corner of my apartment bedroom). I am dressed in a neat, starchy blouse wearing borderline disintegrating shorts because "Who cares? Nobody will see it on calls." My makeup is hasty and flakes around my eyes due to a lazy morning routine. I'm in a lengthy workshop call to kick off my day, staring into my mirrored reflection on Zoom and looking nothing like myself.

A lot of things come to mind when one thinks about the cons of remote work. Isolation, boredom and monotony are often mentioned, but these elements tend to ebb and flow. They result in a blend of motivational highs and exhausting lows – experiences that are not exclusive to remote work but inherent in almost any job. Although I am grateful for a fulfilling and rewarding position, I sometimes experience moments of disillusionment. I wonder why I am feeling drained, not only on a professional level, but on an emotional one.

Interestingly, I discovered a short diary entry, in which I reflected on my work experience and uncovered a pain point I hadn't considered before. A portion of the entry read:

*Dear Diary,*  
I've started to suspect my work dissatisfaction stems from the constant disgust of staring into the Zoom camera. It's like looking in the mirror and dissecting my insecurities, except I am also aware of an audience of viewers who, in my lowest moments, I assume are dissecting me as well.

This epiphany led me to discover the term "Zoom Face," which refers to the self-consciousness that arises from constantly staring at oneself during video calls, often for hours on end. To my surprise, many of the articles I came across discussing Zoom Face seemed fixated on materialistic solutions. They often referenced plastic surgeons dubbing it a "trend" in the industry, leading to an uptick in minor cosmetic procedures such as wrinkle relaxers and microneedling, aimed at restoring confidence in people's work lives. While I have no objections to individuals choosing cosmetic surgery, I found myself both disappointed and perplexed by how this message seemed to dominate nearly all conversations addressing this phenomenon. If I couldn't change the fundamentals of my appearance, what was I supposed to do?

I decided to open this conversation to women and gender non-conforming people at my company, hoping to gain some insight and conquer the Zoom Face beast. Their responses were raw and empathetic, as they openly shared the personal transformations they'd undergone to align with their own perceived standards of Zoom beauty.

They recounted stories of cutting their hair to conceal their foreheads or contour their faces, altering their makeup routines (or adopting makeup for the first time), and even opting for fillers in their lips and chins. The common denominator among all of my co-workers was that their choice to make a change stemmed from staring deeply into "imperfections" on video calls.

Zoom Face is not the individual burden I once believed it to be. It is, in reality, a byproduct of our self-critical tendencies – an affliction born from the digital mirror that holds sway over us from 9 to 5 and beyond. While I can't claim to have discovered a magic solution to break free from Zoom Face, even after nearly two years of remote work, I've learned that this battle is one that can be won. It begins by reminding myself to regard my own face with gentle understanding and patience.

I've come to realize that the contortions of my expressions, captured on the screen, possess a beauty of their own, not just in appearance but in the emotions they convey. My laughter, my smiles, and my "deep in thought" expressions are all part of me and whether or not I'm actively observing them, they remain an integral part of my identity. Zoom Face, as I've come to see it, is simply a distraction, an unnecessary mirror. As one of my witty colleagues aptly put it, "It's not my business what I look like all day."

So, while we may grapple with Zoom Face from time to time, let us never forget that our true beauty lies in the authenticity of our expressions and the meaningful connections we forge, whether through pixels on a screen or in person. In embracing this perspective, we can free ourselves from the grip of Zoom Face and rediscover the joy of being our unapologetic, genuine selves.

# RGB

photos by Adyera Robinson







# SKIBIDI TOILET

by ava peabody



Remember Slenderman? For all the nightmares and underlying fear of woods-based activities that urban legend gave me, I think back on the iconic creepypasta fondly as one of the first internet experiences I ever had that translated to real-world bonding with my friends. Slenderman – with his faceless glare and his abducting tendencies – transcended the confines of the internet to become a recess topic of conversation. This was still a time when life was something that the internet existed within, rather than the other way around. Some other highlights from this time, during which I was lucky enough to be in late elementary school into early middle school, include the ASDF movies and Potter Puppet Pals and Loca the Pug. Now regarded as classics as well as relics of a bygone era, these were some of the first cultural references which required not only an internet connection, but an understanding of the spaces online in which you could find them. In addition to making sure you were keeping up with the latest fads in books and movies, now there were these funny, catchy, sometimes scary internet posts and videos that your friends knew and constantly (constantly) referenced.

Given that the internet has only become more enmeshed in daily life since the late 2000s, it comes as no surprise to me that the kids of today have their own internet content to watch, reference and one day lovingly look back on. What I was entirely unprepared for, though, was what form it would take. That form is Skibidi Toilet, an ongoing animated YouTube series surrounding a class of autonomous disembodied heads in toilets who dance as if they have been electrocuted, or perhaps possessed. The channel which posts Skibidi Toilet videos, DaFuq!?Boom!, is operated by Alexey Gerasimov, a Georgian animator who has given surprisingly cogent interviews about his animating program and has failed to comment on the clear derangement of this entire enterprise.

DaFuq!?Boom! was the single most watched YouTube channel during the month of June this year. Wikipedia seems to be unconvinced of the notability of this phenomenon, but I disagree. Each video garners a completely preposterous amount of views – more views than I thought there were children alive. Because the videos are each only around a minute long, they appear in YouTube Shorts feeds, expanding their reach. An audience of primarily children tune in religiously to watch these toilet men navigate a world which repurposes imagery from early 2000s video games like Half-Life 2 and Counter Strike: Source, all while singing a demonically synthesized approximation of scat (skibidi dop dop dop yes yes, and so on).





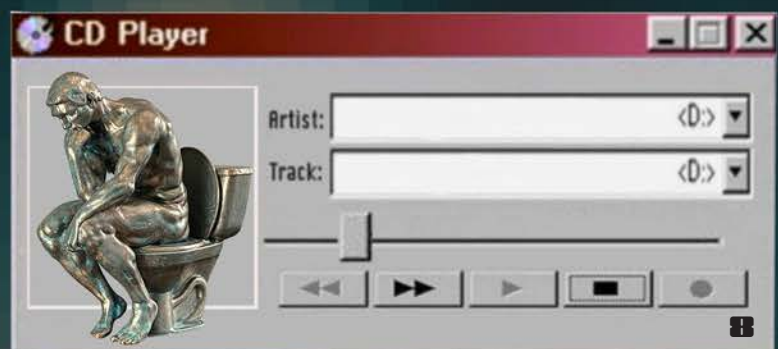
Almost more unsettling than this music are the episodes that are conducted without any music at all, recalling for me the feeling of standing over a friend's desktop computer in their basement in 2007 as they anxiously watch you watch that horrible fake car commercial with the zombie jumpscare.

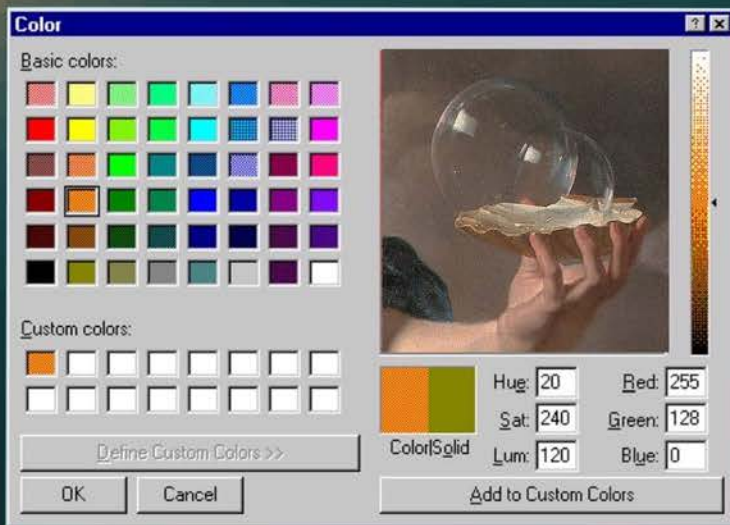
The Skibidi Toilet series – now on its 21st season – has established such extensive lore that it requires a sprawling wiki page. The series is big enough to have a mobile game based on it with over 1 million downloads. Skibidi Toilet has even become a discrete character who appears on other channels, and in other worlds crafted with visual cues of

Minecraft and those incomprehensible iPhone games you always see in ads while playing Solitaire. The videos invariably feature a bunch of the stock iMovie noises used in clickbait YouTube videos scattered throughout like breadcrumbs for a confused child. "Here," these videos seem to say, "you've heard the shock sound effect that you know and love. You're in safe territory."

Every article I've read about Skibidi Toilet takes a cautious, noncommittal approach to explaining the plot, leaning heavily on "it seems" in lieu of making any real statements about this bewildering phenomenon. I, however, am not a coward, so I will describe it to you in detail now. Skibidi Toilet is a character, often duplicated in ranks, who has instigated a war in this abstract, indeterminate location, which is grounded only by reference to the City of Columbus. The Skibidi Toilets are killed in each episode by the Alliance. The Alliance consists of the Cameramen, who look like Secret Service agents with security cameras for heads – a visual which startles me more than I'd care to admit – and who have banded together with the Speakermen and the TV Men to beat back the tide of the oppressive Skibidi Toilets. There are also female variants; I am overjoyed about the diversity of the Skibidi universe (the skibiverse, as I'm proposing we call it). These agents form the Alliance, and the goal in each episode – here we're using "episode" in the absolute loosest sense of the word, in the sense that anything technically could be an episode of a larger series – is for the Alliance to kill the Skibidi Toilets. A recent post, which received 43 million views in three days, is from a first-person shooter perspective, accompanied not by music, but by constant audio of helicopters and gunfire. The videos have become increasingly martial over time, as war ravages our beloved skibiverse. If I were a parent, I would be unnerved to hear this video playing from my child's device.

Whether or not the Skibidi Toilets are killed does not appear to have any impact on subsequent episodes, though I could be mistaken, as I have yet to fully grasp the plot. I only became aware that there was a plot to be grasped after reading breathless speculation in the comment section about the next plot points. In the comments of "skibidi toilet 63," @RagingSpartan24 reverently





remarked that "Every time you think the episode is wrapping up, they just hit you with something else. I love it." @JordanwhoPrinters announced that he had gotten into the series because of his son, and now "hate[s] how compelling this web series is. This man should be fined for making such addictive content." This, interestingly enough, is the diametric opposite of the emotional response I had to watching these videos, which was more one of concern and great confusion (though I agree Gerasimov should be fined).

In true internet fashion, Skibidi Toilet is a result of several colliding trends, stitched together rather nonsensically: the jerky, unsettling head movements of the Skibidi Toilets were inspired,



said Gerasimov, by the TikToks of Paryss Bryanne, who was dancing to a remix of the raunchy, already-trending song "Dom Dom Yes Yes," sung in Hindi and Bulgarian by artist Biser King – popularized in its own right by the TikToks of @yasincengiz38. Arguably, Skibidi Toilet is bringing the world together. The remix layers in "Give It to Me," by Timbaland, sped up in the now-traditional stylings of TikTok, which renders so far removed from the original "Give It to Me" that it sounds positively foreign. It's a catchy hook, necessary for capturing the imaginations of children everywhere. The approximation of European club music guided by a straining, mechanical voice bounces around the wasteland of the skibidiverse. "Give It to Me" is such a random pull from the club hits of the 2000s, and its use is an illustration of one of the only positive impacts I think TikTok is having: to unearth old favorites that these kids would otherwise likely not know. Other

inclusions range from "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" (anthem of the Speakermen, naturally) to the glam rock deep cut Japan. A music education is a music education no matter where you get it, but more than anything, these diegetic music selections are just mystifying – why these songs? Why not new pop music? Is Gerasimov just using his own personal favorite songs? What does skibidi even MEAN? Does it need to mean anything?

Great media can be strange, and hard to follow, and unnerving, and I think it's healthy for kids to engage with all those things. But kids need to see a clear narrative in the media they devote their time to in order to learn how to understand and tell stories. You might argue that some of the classic late 2000s content wasn't super big on plot either, but those were primarily quotable one-liners from home movies or animated sketches – these are highly-produced, yet almost unparseable worlds of intentionally distressing imagery, from uncanny valley faces lunging towards the viewer to the ceaseless noise of ear-splitting gunfire. It doesn't make sense. I already feel like my brain is scrambled from my brief foray into this world, and I had a firm grasp of narrative structure going into this.





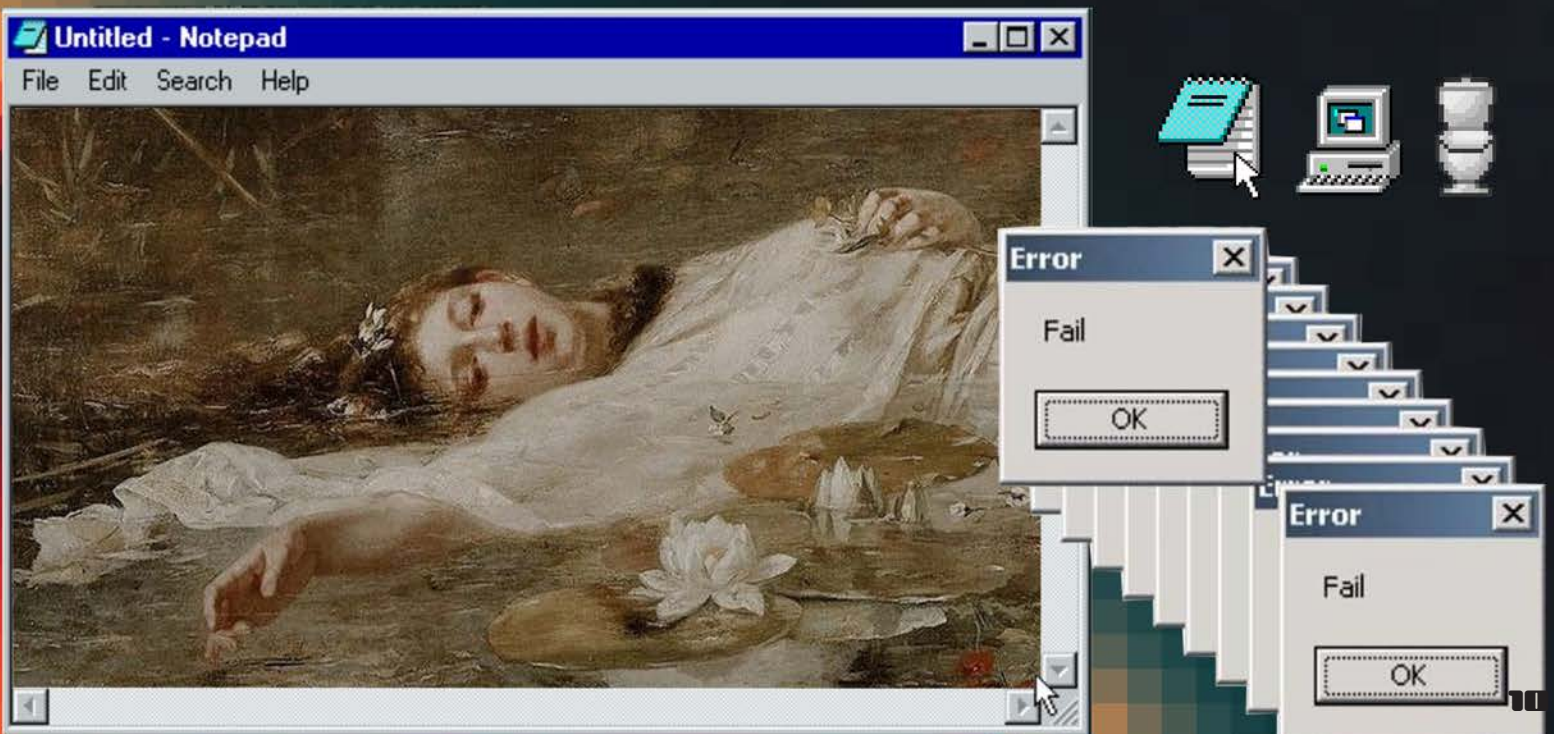
The creativity inherent in viewers being able to remix and imagine possibilities by creating their own Skibidi-based content is really cool, and I see why the complex lore is so engaging for kids. The series faintly echos that sort of "random" humor that drew us to ASDF movies all those years ago. But the random factor has grown so far as to overtake the plot or character arc of the media itself.



The post-nihilist memes of the 2020s are funny to those of us lucky enough to have been born at the only point in history to have witnessed the entire lifespan of memes as a concept, but Gen Alpha is coming in blind. There doesn't have to be some overarching lesson about kindness, but a winding, disjointed collection of short, fast and loud videos with inexplicable and frightening imagery has the potential to rot a child's brain. Skibidi Toilet deserves close scrutiny, like all children's media.

There is already a dearth of well-written, well-produced educational children's media, as Danny Gonzalez famously noted in his video about Billion Surprise Toys. I know there's Blippy (who inspires in me an existential dread so profound that I cannot look him in the eyes, even with the protection of the screen), and Bluey (why do these characters all have whimsical B names?), but they still live on the same platforms, and I'm sure the algorithmic leap from one to the other is not far. I know that Skibidi Toilet is not intending to be educational – neither was Slenderman, in the traditional sense. But Slenderman taught us about compelling storytelling, community-generated lore, and the power of horror. Skibidi Toilet teaches us what? Be afraid of toilets, because you never know when a small man composed primarily of toilet and skull will lurch out at you, singing a decade-old Lady Gaga song?

*NOTE: This article has been edited to fit in this print issue. For the unabridged piece, which includes links to referenced trends and online articles, scan the QR code on page 7.*



# MODERN LOVE

Sometimes, late at night, when I'm in a very particular mood, a special cocktail equal parts lonely, hungry, and ego mania, I let myself go to the forbidden land. It's always on my mind, that dark, beautiful place. I build my crypt with hanging vines, decaying flowers. Marrow garlands and half torn out hearts scattered like rose petals over the floor, all leading up to my altar, my monument to love my oh my. The altar is where I make myself at home. The altar is my comfort, I draw my strength from her, use her energy to attract the things magnetized to me. I have power beyond knowledge. I attract the things meant for me. I am on the right path. With one leg thrown over the arm of my throne, my back is just beginning to pinch at the side, just the right amount of discomfort for conducting my spell. This will be the time. I open the book,

Left.

Left.

Left.

Left.

Oh, interesting. Leo? Left.

Left,

Left,

Too old,

Left,

Left,

I don't know, I just like can't see us in a picture together, yanno? Left.

Left,

Left,

OH! RIGHT! RIGHT RIGHT RIGHT!

Left,

Left,

Lef-

OHMYGOD I GOT A LIKE

Oh, yikes. No, sorry, no thanks,

No offense! I just ... yeah ...

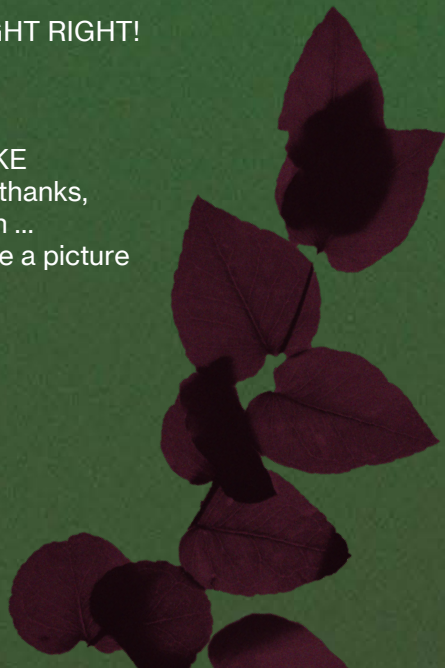
What do you care, you're a picture

Left.

Left.

Left.

I'm bored.



I hate the book. It's so mean to me. Actors and rodeo clowns and cowboys. All figuring out their dating goals. What does that even mean? What happened to magic? Magic cannot be looking for a unicorn, I refuse to believe it. Is what I do magic? Filtering through people looking for someone who looks like they would dance with me at parties. Someone who looks like they could look at me the way I want to look at them? Who looks good? Who looks real?



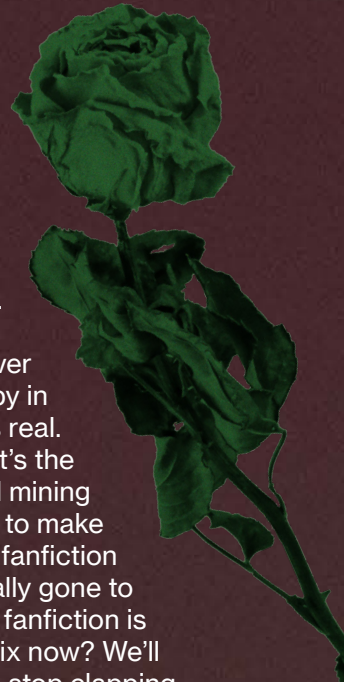
What good are these love spells and conjurings, incantations and manifestations? I want someone to cast a spell on me. Leave a love potion under my pillow, pluck the hairs from my head for charms. I long to be bewitched. I play with cards, pray over crystals, leave the candles lit, the light always on. I write out love letters I'll never send, I curse gods that have retired long ago. Now I just look at the box, if you're seeing this message it was meant for you, interact 3 times to claim, I have them all saved. Hundreds of videos with thousands of likes, thousands of people curating their personal inventory. This was meant for me. 222. I am in the right place at the right time. Online, filtering through thousands of thirty second videos all meant for me.

For us, I guess, but really just for me. Me more than anyone else, at least. We've become so attached to what we want to hear we've forgotten how to listen. Isn't that something? We go to bars only to have a premature panic attack and scurry back home. Back to the crypt, the forbidden land. The boxes are safe, the book is sacred, they can't hurt us. Until the book reminds us of how we've trapped ourselves in the same sordid boxes, how apathetic we truly are at the core.

No match. Who's even on these things anyways? It's pathetic. A lame excuse for humanity, if you ask me. How dreadful, to only meet people through single-page resumes full of "dating me looks like" and two truths and a lie. How lonely we've become.

I've never been a very religious person, but technology has ruined us. Now we run on algorithm. How excellent for the machine.

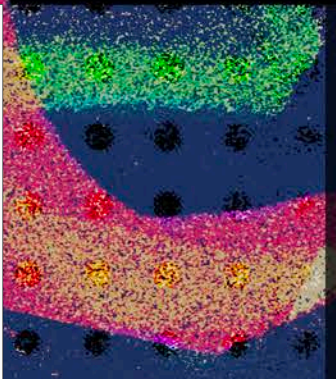
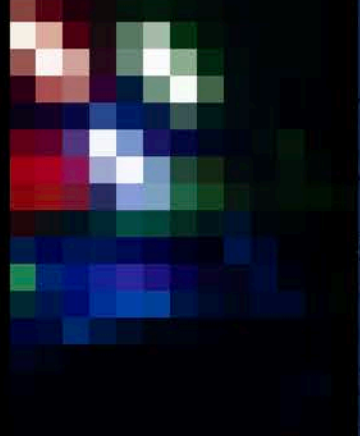
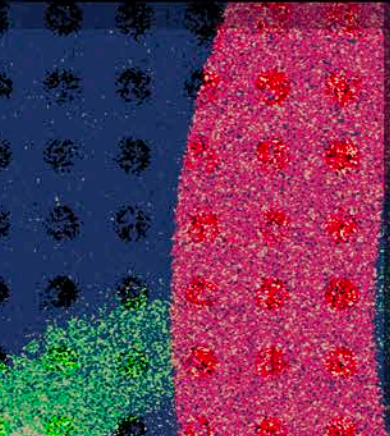
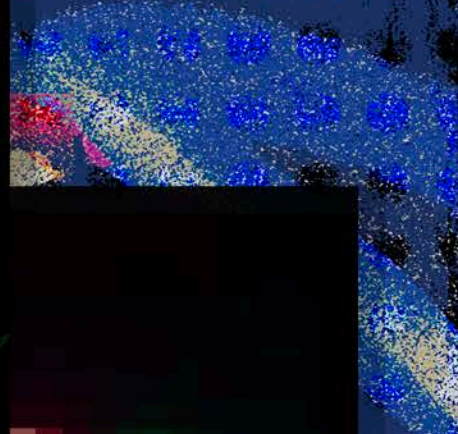
What good are hexes in the face of modern love? Why sweat over cauldrons when we can buy two minute magic, pop that baby in the microwave and watch it spin? I live on the earth, on what's real. What's real anymore? Technology, technology, technology. That's the future. That's our hope. Chat GPT and 5 second deliveries and mining at our attention to keep the world turning. A world so vast made to make everything that much smaller, who's grand idea was that? The fanfiction isn't even as good anymore. That's how you know society has really gone to shit. A world of constantly evolving technological innovation and fanfiction is getting worse. Tragic. Where are we supposed to get our love fix now? We'll read Colleen Hoover and use TikTok for shadow work and we'll stop clapping for the fairies and let the magic die. When they burned the witches all those years ago, they should have finished the job. We aren't made for this modern love.

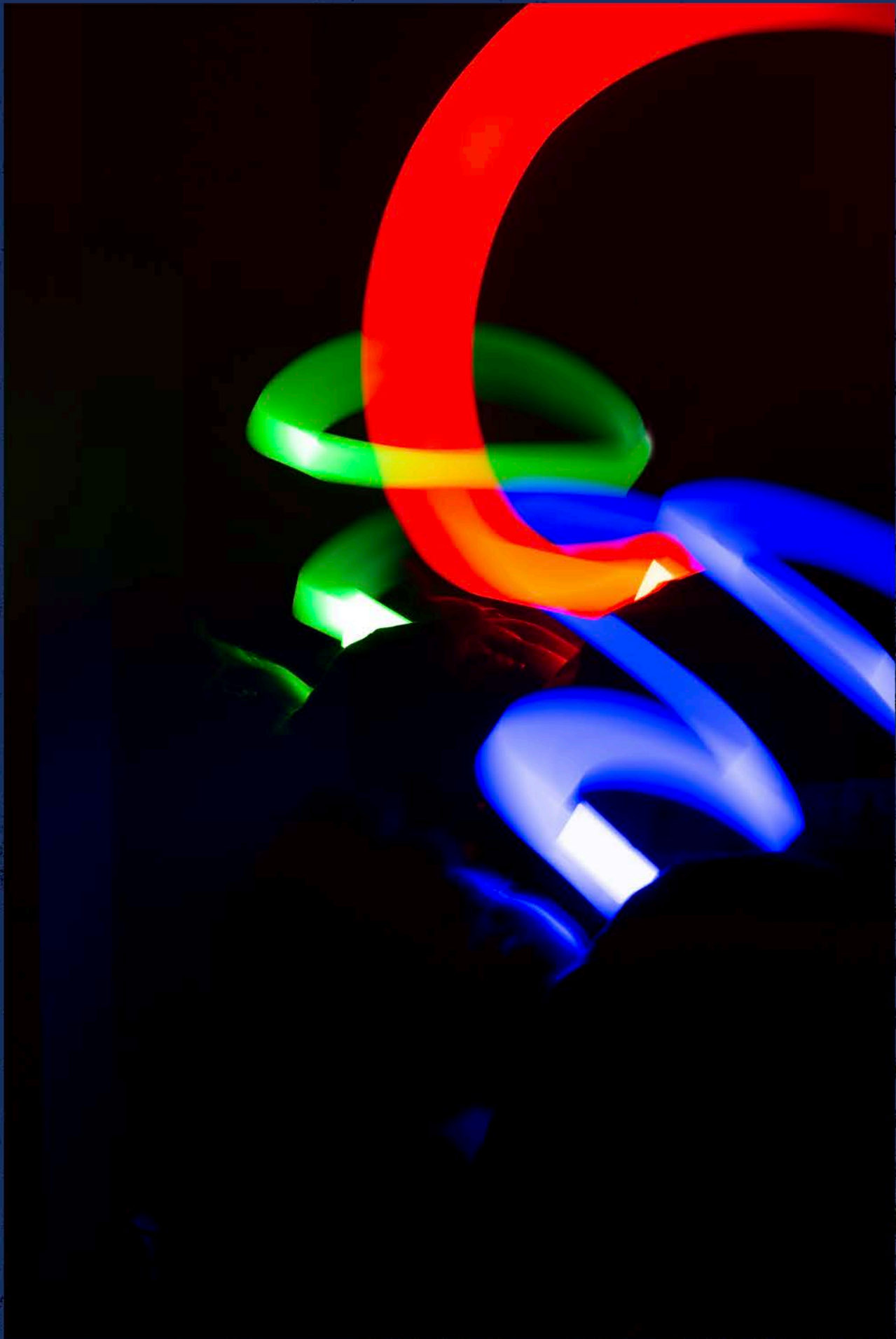



by Sophia Sorrentino

# RGB

By Adyera Robinson







# WHERE IS THE FRIEND'S IP ADDRESS?

by Yaa Mensah-King

When I was 15-years-old, a relative kicked me out of his home. It wasn't the first home I'd been kicked out of, but it was the first time I really registered the gravity of my situation. My mother's job demanded that she take frequent, often lengthy trips abroad, and my father was never in the picture, living abroad himself. In the interest of stability, my mom thought it would be best to leave me in the care of her relatives because she, like many Zimbabweans, held the belief that raising a child "takes a village."

Despite being very young, I carried with me the annoyance of a grandmother, the coldness of an aunt and the anger of an uncle. These feelings weighed on me so heavily that I deemed it necessary to shrink myself. By the time my mother stopped traveling frequently, I was 16 and no longer sociable. I couldn't talk to her about my feelings because she had ignored me for so long and I no longer had a desire to interact with any relatives. I was a young, queer and introverted girl stuck in a gerontocratic, homophobic and patriarchal society. This hostile cultural climate, combined with the typical woes of adolescence, made for some emotionally

turbulent teenage years. I struggled with suicidal ideation, depression and anxiety. Mental health issues weren't something people really talked about in my family or at school, but I had to tell someone. I found myself on websites like 7 Cups and Better Help a lot, ranting about my feelings, and some bot would spew back at me words of affirmation that I always felt were lacking in effectiveness. They never really filled the emptiness I felt inside me at the end of every day.

It occurred to me that the vacancy I had was not due to a lack of affirming words, but a desire for true friendship. Not the acquaintances from school who tolerated my presence during lunch and study sessions, but genuine friends who knew and accepted me completely. I was already labeled as one of the weird kids because of my introversion, and my outlying interests and suspicion of my queerness repelled a lot of people. I looked up "talk to strangers" in the app store one evening and downloaded about five or six apps. Most of them were terrible, full of bots or men looking to exchange nudes. I looked up "how to make friends" on Tumblr, and the lists included things like joining a local activity club, going to the



park and finding an international pen pal online. The infrastructure for the first two just wasn't really there, and having a pen pal would be costly since the national postal service was virtually defunct.

My efforts seemed hopeless

until I happened upon a user talking about Slowly, an app that simulates the snail mail experience by sending intentionally delayed messages. I could finally have a pen pal for free.

What made Slowly very engaging for me was that I could filter out letters coming from Zimbabwe, and I could make sure nobody from my country would discover me. This anonymity made it possible to list all my interests and my sexuality without fear. Anyone who would be sending me a letter would be doing so with knowledge of who I was and what sort of things I liked. But because it would take days for a message to get to the recipient, making sure I crafted a comprehensive letter was imperative. I tried to add as much detail while being true to myself as possible.

While some correspondence lasted weeks or months, one evolved into a friendship that still exists today. My friend Sam and I started writing to each other in 2019. What could a boy from Minnesota and a girl from Harare possibly have in common? We were both queer band kids with a shared obsession over monkeys trying to learn how to speak French. I could never find anyone with that many similarities to me in my immediate community, so when we clicked, it felt like a miracle.

## WHAT COULD A BOY FROM MINNESOTA AND A GIRL FROM HARARE POSSIBLY HAVE IN COMMON?

Our early weekly letters usually consisted of a summary of what happened during the week and tidbits about what it was like to live in our respective countries.

I learned all about growing up in the Midwest, while he learned all about growing up in Zimbabwe. Tales about the joys of Culver's were met with similar ones about Chicken Inn. Incidents at band and orchestra were exchanged, and we both laughed at the absurdity of our school systems.

Because I had finally found someone who saw and liked my authentic self, I was encouraged to be more myself in the real world. I knew that some people would not like me, but being myself felt like less of a burden than restraining my likes and interests. This resulted in the fostering of two very strong friendships with my schoolmates. For the first time in a while, I felt fulfilled. I didn't feel nearly as lonely as I did in the first couple of years of high school.

But, as a result of increased schoolwork and my new flourishing social life, Sam and I's once weekly letters became infrequent and rather sparse. This increased effort saddened me because I did truly value the friendship we'd built and I wasn't ready to discard it.

One of us suggested we exchange Instagram accounts. We'd exchanged Christmas and family vacation pictures on Slowly before, so we knew what each other looked like and knew each other's real names. Since we both were feeling fatigued with Slowly, it made sense to make the switch. We could now talk every day and not have to worry about forgetting important details in letters or exceeding character limits. I found out that he managed a popular band meme account with his friends, and he found out that I had been following it even before we initially connected on Slowly. We'd sometimes converse in our grammatical mistake-ridden French, help each other with school projects and hold lengthy discussions on the newest music releases.

Our friendship didn't feel any different from the ones I had in real life. After all, everyone primarily uses social media to talk to each other now. The only thing that was different was that I couldn't physically meet up with him. Since we started talking, we've watched each other graduate from high school, get our first jobs, start college, start and end multiple relationships and grow as overall individuals.



I've made two more close online friends since Sam, a Swede and another American I met on Twitter Spaces, but Sam's friendship remains an integral part of who I am today. From a very shy, lonely girl having an identity crisis, I've become a much more confident woman, largely due to the fact that in Sam, I found an emotional anchor that I could never seem to find within my in-person communities. Without him, I don't see myself ever truly accepting my sexuality or befriending the two girls from school. I could argue that I don't see myself being alive now at 20 without ever crossing virtual paths with him. In the depths of desolation, I needed someone to hear me and acknowledge me, and he did just that. Within his companionship, I could finally affirm my position in the world. While neither of us can remember who sent the first letter and have long since deleted the app, we remain in constant communication today.

KEY  
WORDS

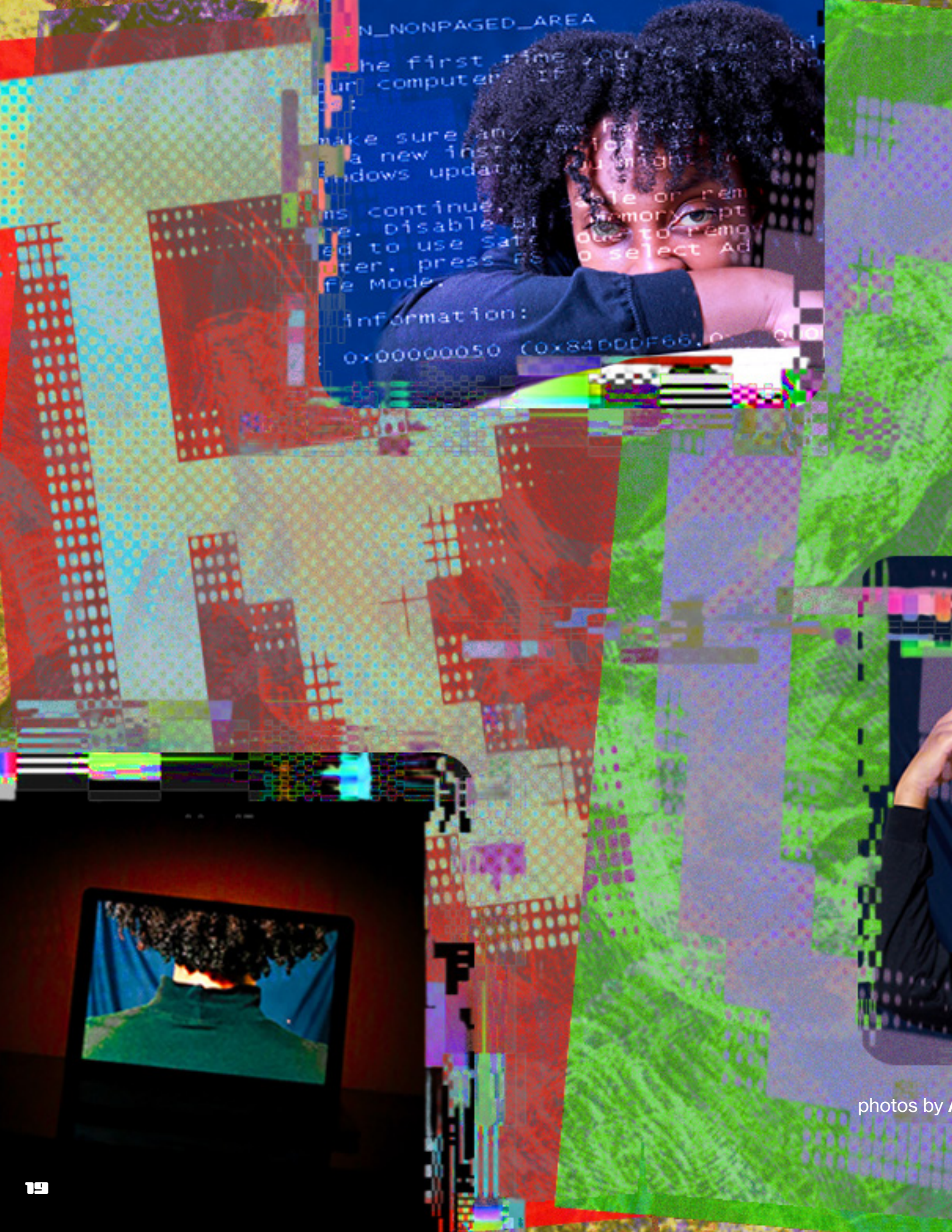
BY  
DOROTHY  
POUCHER

INTRODUCING THE



salad screen, computer grease  
hold your dream filter to mine  
all I have are answers from 13  
end of scream ritual, day cry  
does my body fit into this pre drawn  
scene? can they escape this  
theme? arch back, caresses clean  
soon, you will know this process  
soon you will know what you mean

there is no such thing as a corporate team  
once, I sailed over a wire sea, and I saw  
familiar faces in the floating key  
words column, lonely I swallowed  
input 2 and together  
we dreamed



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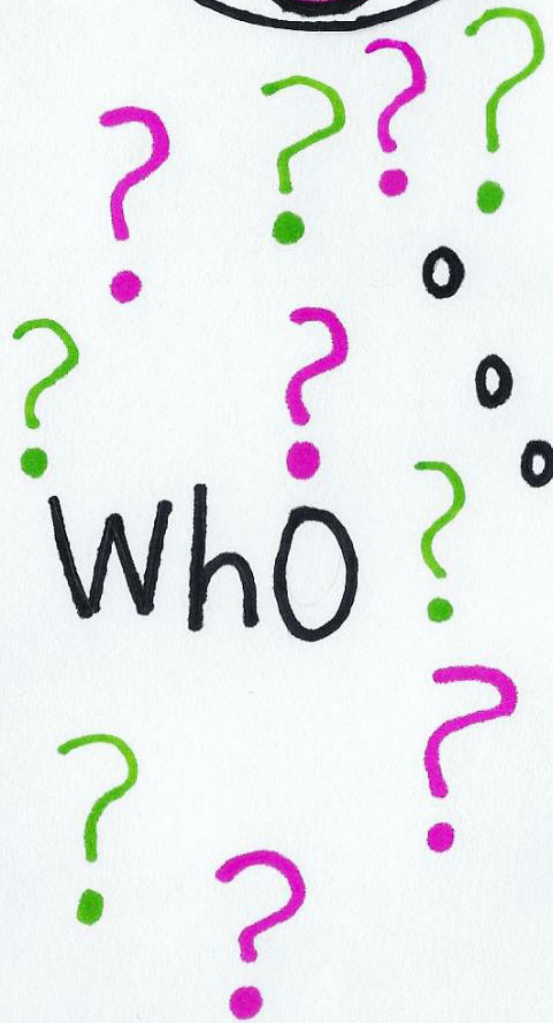


Adyera Robinson

Sometimes I don't know who I am by



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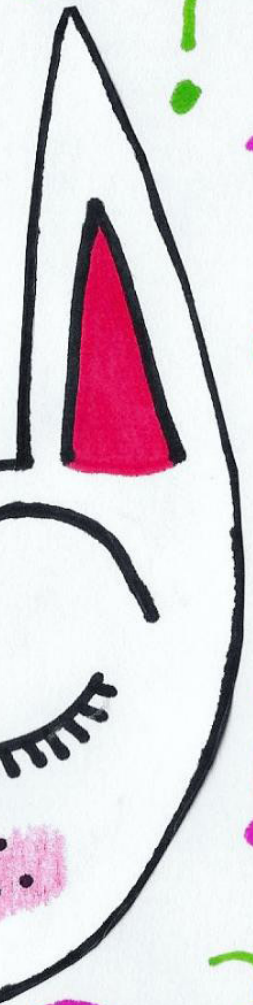


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Kat Kathleen

# Reinvention and Shedding Cyber Skin

by Heredia Santos



I love you, reinvention. I love you, rebranding. I love you, rebirth. I love you, growth and fluidity. I love being able to change who I am whenever I feel like it. I love not being boxed in by others, and especially myself. I love destroying who I think I am – or what I love – and especially what I hate in a fire. I enjoy mixing the ashes into a color I can paint across my face and say this is me, for right now, and this is me forever. I love making a mistake and whispering to myself that it's okay, and this is the last time and I know now.

I am thinking of all the things that have transformed into new things. MSN. iMessage. Blackberry. iPhone 14. AOL. I barely remember AOL, but I used it briefly in the early 2000s when I was barely 10 years

old. As I find myself transitioning from my early to mid-20s, I think back to these rudimentary internet precursors and the search for online connection. A time when myself and others were becoming acquainted with the unknown and exciting terrains of both the virtual and physical world.

I long for the days of logging onto Club Penguin, Buildabearville.com, Poptropica or some other flash-supported website featuring customizable avatars and pixelated maps

to explore. Our first taste of roaming free and calling the shots over how we express ourselves. Like gods, we created online counterparts that could present however we wanted as we altered our identities to fit our childish desires. Sometimes by changing our names to ones we liked better. We experimented with avant-garde outfit combinations through the clothing we dressed our avatars in and figured out what we liked and did not like. Money was no object. Our imagination was only limited by the lines we drew in our virtual sandbox. Looking back, the styling was definitely ugly, but it was fun, and most importantly, unique to us. It was a freedom of expression that later became lost to me, and which I had to try hard to cultivate again into adulthood.

I remember idolizing the simplistic maximalism in gifs sent between myself and my long-distance best friend – digital roses showered in forever falling glitter that always, always sparkled. These were mini fossils of the early days of graphic design and connecting with kids outside of town. Or perhaps an online meeting place where you could talk to your bff's without permission from one mother to another. I think back to how desperate we all were to connect to strangers with nothing in common but our search for belonging and community. I'd befriend others because we had friends in common or we both liked the same Facebook page. We tried to close the gap of physical distance by extending out a

W  
our i

nonphysical hand to send a “poke” back and forth in a neverending exchange. Not a day went by where I wasn’t sharing a funny meme or forwarding terrifying chain mail to friends to save us from a horrible fate. On certain days, I’d promise to log on immediately after school so we could meet again. Sometimes we would only share emojis to communicate the emotions too large for words to carry from one screen to the other. How I wish now I could walk into a crowded town center and yell out

their peak and fall. Much like empires, what was once considered a beloved pinnacle of internet culture is replaced by something promising a greater form of community built off the foundations of what stood before it. Before I knew it, I had moved on from online games and Facebook wall sharing to a burgeoning social media platform. I first downloaded Instagram when the in-app filters made your photos look like they were taken on a vintage camera. I remember my classmates and I using funky fonts in our bios to list “deep” quotes, our best friends’

names with their associated animal emojis, and maybe even an infinity symbol.

I smile to myself when I see kids today still following this format long forgotten to me. Like comparing colorful elementary paintings of handprints to burnt orange outlines of ancient fingers on cave walls.

In those years, I would change my username

parties. In a way, these online spaces have gone through as many growing pains as I have. I like to dream of logging back into my old profiles on these mostly defunct websites. Of reconnecting with some version of the girl I used to be – the one with the Hannah Montana comforter and 99 cent store fruit Lip Smackers – and walking in her shoes just one more day. I’d listen to every top pop hit from 2013 and curate my online persona to fool people into thinking I was something I was not. I’d find a way to go back and visit a past written in code that is no longer supported.

# We altered identities to fit our childhood desires

“HELLO” or “YES, I’M HERE,” or, better yet, project an image of my beating heart and see who would come steady their rhythm to mine.

But – in the spirit of change and progress – internet trends reach

and bio multiple times a year as a sort of cybernetic shedding of skin. Sometimes I would include my favorite One Direction reference. Or a deep-sounding quote from some John Green novel I definitely did not understand. No matter the subject, my wish remained the same: to craft the profile of a girl of interest and adventure. I was figuring out who I was and who I wanted to be.

It’s simultaneously funny and aching to feel nostalgia for a childhood that is long gone, both in time and possibility. We will never return to a digital landscape that isn’t designed for targeted ads or selling your information to third

Instead I’ll indulge myself by playing dress up games, or watching old Bethany Mota GRWM videos, or listening to my favorite songs from 2012. At least until a new version of me is ready to move on from them again, like I always will do.

Instead, I’ll reminisce in my list of past personas:

wrecked\_camera  
rememberdecember  
everlastingwinter  
mustaches\_turtles\_1d  
a\_sparkly\_mustache  
and\_she\_dreamed\_of\_paradise



# PHANTOM G

by  
RAEGAN  
DAVIES



My name is Raegan Ainsleigh Davies – my initials spell out RAD, which is something not a lot of people ask me about, but that I like a lot – and I think I may have died two weeks ago.

Of course, if I was dead, I wouldn't be able to feel my dog's fur brushing up against me when he bursts into my room to wake me up in the morning. I wouldn't have shown up in the pictures I took at the Renaissance fair last weekend. I seriously doubt that my mom has been talking to an empty passenger seat in her car all this time.

But these are the things I worry about. Because I quit my job at the end of July, and I've been stuck wondering if anyone has actually seen me since.

As of Sept. 25, 2023, the Google Sheet I have keeping track of my job search is 100 rows long. I hit my 100th this morning, which feels like it should come with some kind of ice cream shop promotion: submit 100 job applications and your 101st will be for something you're actually passionate about – submit 100 cries into the dark for attention and someone will come and give you a hug. I submitted a form for information about an MFA program and received in response an email with my name spelled incorrectly and the information for the undergraduate program in the same field. I tried to start a side hustle selling custom bar art and every inquiry, except for a handful from friends and family, has fizzled out before I even think about opening Canva.

So you could understand how even the most level-headed girl, one who understands the universe owes her nothing, can't help but wonder: did she really crash her car delivering pizzas? Did she slip in the shower and now she's wandering through a digital purgatory that makes up what we call modern life?

I came of age with the internet – not quite a flip phone millennial, but not an iPad kid making a scene at brunch when the screen is moved an inch. I walked hand in hand with the hive mind, posting over-filtered selfies on my finsta and retweeting boy band updates back when there was no purple in the Instagram logo. The internet wasn't a faceless mass reducing me to a

number on a spreadsheet – the internet was an extension of my best friends. I was on their vacations with them, I was the first one to wish them a happy birthday at midnight, we existed together because we couldn't bear being apart. So I guess it really shouldn't have been a surprise when the internet did the same thing that we did: it grew up. I'm not sure when it happened, but suddenly a blurry picture of a Starbucks cup was passé and everything after had to serve the purpose of curating your brand. The Facebook albums with deep fried digital camera pictures called "summer nights 2k15" were replaced with dead-eyed, wide-smile LinkedIn profiles. But they still cry out the same thing:

Can you read this?  
Do you like me?  
Can you see me?

Everyone has "unfortunately decided to move in another direction at this time." There's no more room for casual conversation – I must always be pitching. And at 24-years-old I'm back in the lunchroom on my first day of sophomore year at a new school where all my old friends have been for a year. I don't know where to go, what new territory lines have been drawn and I wonder:

Can they read this?  
Why don't they like me?  
Can they see me?

I feel mostly a prolonged adolescence. It's much easier to feel like the world is against you when the world is at your fingertips and no one in it is calling your name. When you're not even worthy of the time it would take to reject you. When not even your parents understand where you go from here. So you go reluctantly back to the void, because you understand that if you feed it, it may spit something back out – and though you never want to look at it again, and you know that the things that matter lie outside of it, you sit down in front of it and you write down some things you hope people will understand. You ask them, desperately, the questions we all want to know the answers to:

Can you read this?  
Do you like me?  
Can you see me?

SHAMIR

YODI

# *design team*

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**roxanne cubero** - graphic designer (she/her)

**brenda delgado** - graphic designer (she/her)

**lyn enrico** - graphic design resident (they/them)

**claire evans** - graphic designer (she/her)

**sophia flissler** - graphic designer & concert  
photographer (she/her)

**brian jean** - graphic design resident (he/him)

**gillian kwok** - graphic designer (she/her)

**charlotte lawson** - graphic designer (she/her)

**ang ruiz** - graphic design resident (she/they)

**ella sylvie** - graphic designer (they/she)

**kayleigh woltal** - graphic designer (she/her)

# *editorial team*

**alyssa macaluso** - copy editor (she/her)

**ritamarie pepe** - editor-in-chief (she/her)

**faith terrill** - managing editor (she/her)

**sarah lamodi** - editorial director (she/her)

# STUDY

# *grain of salt mag*

is an online publication for people that just want to blab their fucking mouths.

in a culture defined by patriarchal standards, those brave enough to color outside the lines are ignored, belittled and scrutinized. grain of salt mag is a space to explore and reclaim your creativity freely. from young creatives of marginalized gender identities that have never been taken seriously, we approach topics about culture, lifestyle and current events through various forms of art and writing. using collaboration and feedback, we remove the pressure to have perfectly crafted ideas, or already be a practiced creative, in order to share your thoughts about the things that matter most.

all that we ask is that you come to this space as you are. be loud. be bold. be unshamed. it's all taken with a grain of salt anyways.

## *find us here:*

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grainofsaltmag.com

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