
Enter Time Machine

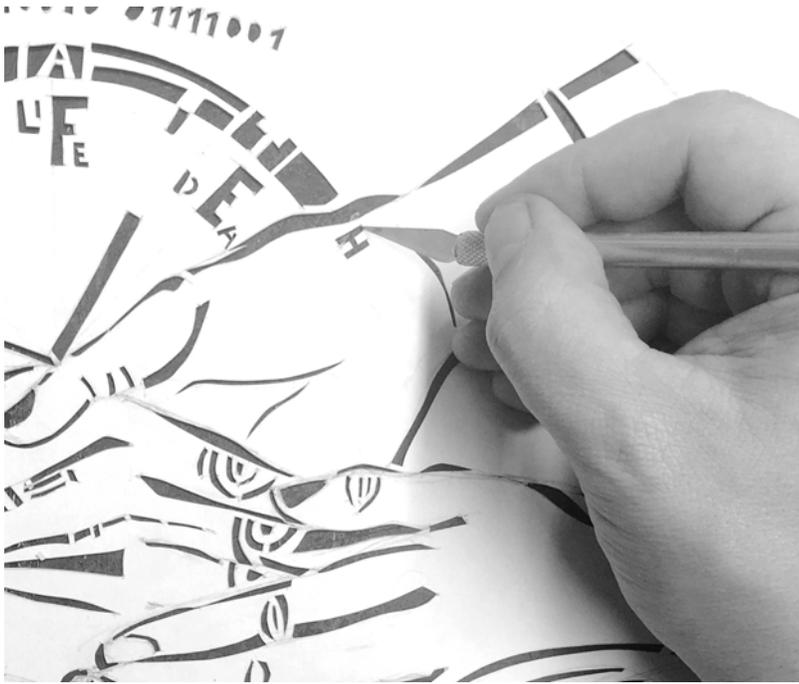
Grieving 1.67 Terabytes of Digital Possessions

ABSTRACT A devastating loss of digitized possessions, due to an unexpected and sudden malfunction of a back-up storage device (*Time Machine*) evokes a complex set of emotional reactions and inquiries into the nature of digital loss. This autoethnographic narrative reveals, through a reverse chronological order (to emulate *Time Machine*'s archival data storage process), how the events followed by the loss impacted my beliefs and attitudes toward the realms of digital technology in our lives, as it relates to a habit and need for archiving and preserving digitalized possessions, both personal and professional. **KEYWORDS** Autoethnography; Digital loss; Grief; Personal narrative



5 January 2018 (No Backup for 342 Days). All images courtesy of the author

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“The Time Traveller paused, put his hand into his pocket, and silently placed two withered flowers, not unlike very large white mallows, upon the little table. Then he resumed his narrative” (H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*)¹

The dark screen of my phone lights up briefly, signaling the arrival of a new message. With habitual vexation I reach for my phone, hastily pressing the home button. I tap the attachment icon of the email, and for a few moments, I stare at the white, heart-shaped drawing of a flower arrangement, framed in a dark magenta background. I scroll down to read the accompanying message as I turn to my wife, Erica.

“It’s from Sue,” I say. I place my fingertips on the cold, illuminated screen of my phone, slowly spreading them apart. I still marvel how this gentle, corporeal exchange between my flesh and the glass enlarges everything, revealing small details. I read the message out loud.

Dear friends and family,

*It’s been almost a year and not a day goes by without feelings of loss and—
simultaneously—a deep appreciation of the life we had when Barry was alive.
So much of what has happened this year feels like it has been guided by an*

invisible loving hand. We invite you to come join us for reflection and sharing of what's been, what's here, and what's to come.

"I can't believe it's been a year," Erica says.

The soft swelling of my upper eyelids begins to distort my vision, and I quickly wipe a tear from the corner of my eye. I stare at Sue's message, resting my fingers on the screen around the fragmented sentence: *Barry was alive*. Then slowly I begin separating my fingers on the screen, stretching the text, making it larger, until the only visible word is *Barry*. I swallow deep, while desperately wanting to ask, "Barry, where are you?"

"A year next Sunday," I say quickly. When I release my finger-hold around *Barry*, the entire message shrinks to neatly fit the screen of my phone. I am moved by this technological plasticity and flexibility, longing to manipulate reality through physical touch.

Suddenly, an event reminder pops up from my calendar notifications: *Revise Paper on Digital Loss—January 10*. Like the aftershock of an earthquake, panic joins my grief. I put my phone on the floor and look at my empty hands, slowly moving my fingers, as if I search to hold onto something.

"My digits," I say out loud, without thinking.

"What did you say?" I register Erica's rather surprised voice.

"Sorry, I just remembered, that fingers are called digits in Latin."

"Are you all right?" Erica asks, now with a worried tone in her voice.

"Uh-uh," I say. "I need to grab my laptop."

I run downstairs to my desk and slump into my chair. When I open my laptop, Sue's message and the deadline for the manuscript revision appear on my computer screen, waiting for my acknowledgment. Both notifications are calling for action and the reexamination of loss. It's hard to cope with the death of my friend, though I am encouraged by the subtle changes I note in my feelings of grief over time. But my grief resulting from the death of a digital storage device and the loss of my digital possessions remains in a permanent state of anger-filled denial and a childish resistance toward digital archiving. My computer reminds me, "No backup for 342 days," and I dismiss the message with a hard-pounding click. Why does my grief over the loss of my digital archives feel more chaotic and obscure than my grief over the death of a friend?

I react to and process the loss of my digital creations through grief. I react to and process the death of a friend through grief. But loss and death are not the same. Does my attitude, understanding, or reaction toward death only belong to the realm of the physical or material universe, containing in itself a space where

grief becomes an organically unfolding, changing entity? Like a natural law, physical death is governed by the first law of thermodynamics and by the stories of hope, returns, and transformations. Physical death is never without remains or without the transformation of matter.² However, are there any remains when a digital file is lost, erased, and beyond recovery? I realize how much I long for a comforting myth, one similar to the many myths we have about death; a realm where our lost digital treasures or possessions continue to exist and will one day reunite with their originators or owners. But I doubt we will ever create such myths. The human-made digital realm is too reliant on zeros and ones, limited by a binary substructure, eliminating the maybes, the uncertainties, and the possibilities between black and white, yes and no. Hence, my grief prompted by the loss of 1.67 terabytes of digital entities remains just as ambiguous as my attempt to cope with it.

I look at my fingers again and realize that these delicate parts of my enfolded, carnal, organic body are the original digital devices. I am accessing the digital realm through my fingers, but I am unable to touch, feel, or smell what is displayed on (or beyond) the illuminated screen. I continue to sit for a while until the screen enters sleep mode. I embrace this darkness though I also feel the weight of my responsibilities to remember and to revise. I touch a random key. My screen *comes to life* again, and I search for the document with my two reviewers' suggestions for revisions. I begin reading through the detailed list of recommendations, but I feel so overwhelmed that I minimize the document before reaching the end of the first page. Am I failing or is this painful resistance part of remembering and revising?

I click on my internet browser and search for Barry's Facebook page. I lift up my fingers from the keyboard, touching the screen, longing to feel his face, to reach beyond the glass barrier.

"It's all light," I say to myself, realizing that my computer is a sophisticated light source. The digital realm, through codes, hardware, and software becomes visible light. But unlike starlight, the screen in front of me illuminates the world differently. It captures me, it entertains me, it calls for interactions, but the realization of separation and loneliness still feels unbearable. For a moment, I rest my hand on the polished, aluminum casing of the screen. I place my thumb on the built-in camera, hoping for a connection, as if the optics could reduce all distance or deliver a visual record or proof of my touch. I try to look into Barry's eyes on the profile picture of his Facebook page, but I realize how the low resolution makes this connection impossible. I slowly close my laptop, until the screen folds onto the keyboard. I hesitantly reach for the printed pages of my

old manuscript on my desk and begin reciting my past out loud, re-entering a realm of my abandoned grief.

12 APRIL 2017³

I sit next to Dr. Carolyn Ellis at the long, wooden conference table during a graduate seminar on grief and loss. At 8:00 p.m., she expresses gratitude to all the students for the enlightening conversations and for the precious, privileged time we spent together. Then she turns toward me and softly whispers, “I just heard from Dr. Donne in the computer science department that you visited him last week. How was it?”

“Oh, yes. It was. . . um. . . interesting. I mean, it was helpful,” I respond.

“Do you have time to stay for a few more minutes after class so we can talk? I still think about your loss, and I worry about you. I just want to make sure you’re doing okay. Are you feeling better?”

As soon as the last student leaves the room, I take a deep breath and answer with a loud sigh accompanying the reassuring statement, “It’s better, I guess. Yes, I do feel better.”

Dr. Ellis looks at me with inquisitive eyes, waiting for more.

“Dr. Donne gave me some articles to read about digital loss. I feel much better about the task of framing my paper about grieving my digitized possessions.”

“Can you tell me more?”

“I am beginning to realize that my digital possessions did represent more than just files or digitized artifacts. They represented ‘important relationships, events, and activities.’⁴ They were a form of memory that I actively created, acquired, shaped, and curated.”⁵

I wait for Dr. Ellis to interject or to, at least, ask another question. She remains silent, attentively looking at me, waiting for more.

“I think losing all my digitized possessions led me to experience a form of memory loss with its terrifying pain. I don’t know how to put it. It is as if I have lost a part of myself. I’m sorry. I know how crazy it sounds.”

“Not at all. But what is interesting is that the objects of your loss, all those files and digitized creations were outside of your body. Still, you refer to this experience as a loss of self.” Dr. Ellis reaches into her purse and places a small thumb drive on the table. Without saying a word, I am beginning to understand.

I have been nurturing an illusion that I have cheated death by storing memories on a device that condensed and simplified everything into binary sequences. Images, papers, assignments, and voice recordings became numbers, invisible, indestructible, eternal—or so I thought. I believed that digital things

were more durable, more ideal than material things. This is why I carelessly discarded all physical copies of my work. I donated my CDs; I threw away the decaying and fading old photographs after scanning them and retouching them through digital technology.⁶ Proudly I thought that I had found a sort of immortality in the realm of the digital. And then, everything was lost, beyond recovery, including my cherished belief system.

Dr. Ellis gently picks up the thumb drive, slowly turning it around, while looking at it intently. “More and more people are relying on creating, storing, or preserving essential or meaningful parts of their lives on these storage devices. In the paper you submitted for my class, you made it palpable that you were encountering a new form of grief, a new form of loss, without an established system for coping.”

“Yes, that’s an excellent way of putting it. I am still surprised by my reactions to the events of losing the digitally archived possessions of my last four years of life and work. But now, I am beginning to understand that this type of loss is different from, for example, losing a loved one or losing material possessions in a fire or a natural disaster. But still, it is a loss that requires me to engage.”

I can see a reassuring smile forming on Dr. Ellis’s face. She reaches for one of the folders in front of her and sifts through the piles of papers, pulling out a photocopied page of an article. “Here it is. . . I meant to share this during class, but I forgot.” She searches for a passage on the page and begins to read out loud.

Disappearance reminds us to notice, transience to cherish, fragility to defend. Loss is a kind of external conscience, urging us to make better use of our finite days. As Whitman knew, our brief crossing is best spent attending to all that we see: honoring what we find noble, denouncing what we cannot abide, recognizing that we are inseparably connected to all of it, including what is not yet upon us, including what is already gone. We are here to keep watch, not to keep.⁷

The last sentence echoes within me, like the repeated aftershocks of an earthquake. *I am here to keep watch, not to keep*, I recite. What does it mean to be a witness who doesn’t possess? What does it mean to keep watch and fight the urge to keep? Can I give up fighting entropy and accept that even my act of *conscious watch* will cease one day as all memories dissolve into nothingness?

5 APRIL 2017

I never thought of seeking comfort from a computer scientist, but the nature of my grief perhaps justifies this desperate move. As I locate the office number

369B, posted in its location along the austere hallway of the computer science department, I notice a *New Yorker* cartoon taped on the door, under the nameplate, Mike Donne, PhD. In the picture, two visibly disappointed angels stand amidst the thick clouds, staring at the innumerable, oversized, obtrusive file cabinets. The caption beneath the drawing reads: *It was much nicer before people started storing all their personal information in the cloud.*

I stare at the image in disbelief, as though it is the most insensitive joke imaginable, directly aimed at me. Did Professor Donne intentionally place this cartoon on his door to remind me that I should have had cloud storage in addition to my 2-terabyte *Time Capsule*? He already knows that two months ago I lost all my digital possessions of the last four years, beyond the possibility of recovery. For a moment, I consider turning around and leaving when I see someone approaching from the other end of the hallway and, instead, I knock.

“Come in,” says the ebullient, singsong voice behind the door. As I enter the room, Professor Donne pushes himself away from his desk on his rolling, ergonomic office chair and spins around a few times like a child, before coming to a full stop, facing me directly, with a beaming smile.

“Csaba. . . Is that how you pronounce it?”

“Yes, wow. . . thank you,” I say with a note of pleasant surprise, as only a few people pronounce my name correctly.

“Please take a seat.” He points to a chair next to the door, and I sit down.

“Professor Donne, I just want to say how much I appreciate. . . um. . .” Before I can continue, he says, “Relax my friend, just call me Mike. I am glad to meet you. Dr. Ellis spoke very highly of you, and I am a big fan of her work.” I take a deep breath and wipe my sweating palms onto my jeans.

“Yes, I am in her grief class, and she recommended that I meet with you.”

“I am glad she did. By the way, Dr. Ellis shared with me the first draft of your paper about digital loss. . . Enter Time Machine. . . I love the title.”

“Thank you. Dr. Ellis also said that you might be able to help me or at least tell me that I am not alone in this experience.”

“Well, you certainly are not alone. We know that approximately 25% of all computer users lose some type of data every year. Every week 140,000 hard drives crash in the United States. Not to mention that on the company level when serious data loss occurs, 94% of those companies will go out of business.⁸ Think about it, Csaba. Most companies will never recover after losing their digitally stored data.⁹ But I am not convinced that these statistics will help to ease the pain you are experiencing.”

“Well. . . Not really.”

“But I want to talk about your story. It is quite intriguing. And painful. . . . Actually, there are very few personal narratives about data loss in the scholarly literature.”

With a swift push of his legs, Professor Donne propels himself back to his desk and motions for me to follow him. He places his long, delicate index finger on the trackpad and as soon as the digital arrow appears on the screen, he effortlessly moves the arrow across the oversized screen and clicks on a folder named *FOR CSABA*.

“Here. . . . It’s not much, but this is what I already collected and archived on digital loss. I’ll email you these articles and resources so you can take a look at them.”

I watch as he attaches the folder to my email, but I feel dismissed. I don’t want to read about digital loss. I want more conversation, something to free me from my anger and frustration. I want to lessen my self-hate, and the swelling pain of losing all my digitized creations, including photos, music, letters, audio recordings, papers, research projects, and on and on. I take a deep breath and slowly stand up, reaching for my bag, ready to retreat.

“Thank you for your time, Professor Donne. . . I mean, Mike. . . . Thank you, Mike. . . . It was a such a plea. . . .”

“We’re not done, my friend.” He smiles and motions me to sit back down. “This is about your existence. You see, digital technology is inseparable from our life. It is not far from the truth that you and I are ‘wired into existence through technology.’ That’s why the kind of information loss you experienced is a form of death.”¹⁰

“Death might be an exaggeration, since I am still here.” I try smiling, but it is forced, and I am unable to mask the underlying pain.

“True, but according to your narrative you suffer greatly from the permanent loss of the myriad of digitized objects that you created, curated, and archived.”

“It was three months ago. . . and. . . um. . . I just don’t want to think about it anymore. There is nothing I can do or want to do.”

“So why did you come?”

“To try to understand what’s happening. I feel so empty and, um. . . and I don’t know how to say it, but I’m becoming apathetic.”

“Apathetic? Tell me more.”

“Well, since I was a child, I had this strange attitude toward imperfection.”

“What do you mean?”

“For example, if I had a toy, like a matchbox car, and it got damaged, even slightly, like a small dent or peeling paint, I no longer wanted to play with it.

I rejected it, but the pain of this rejection was often unbearable, and I became so depressed, even though the toy was still intact. I could still play with it, but I could not bear the imperfection, so I just threw it away. And what followed was this dark apathy. I am not sure if it's the right word. I don't know why I'm telling you this, sorry."

"Okay, but how does that relate to your loss of your digital possessions?"

"You would think that after what happened with my hard drive I would become more aware and more proactive by investing in a cloud storage or purposefully saving my most important files on several hard drives."

"And?"

"I have not. I no longer care if my files or digitally archived possessions disappear. Moreover, I no longer want to write or use my computer to work. I am not sure how to describe this. . . . There is this apathy or radical disinterest to write, or to produce anything on my computer."

"That's very interesting. You know, most of us are terrified by the prospect of losing our digital possessions, so we are constantly 'keeping track, recording, retrieving, stockpiling, archiving, backing up and saving.'¹¹ But you are doing almost the opposite."

He is right. I was the epitome of backing up religiously, protecting my Apple Time Capsule from the slightest physical damage, plugging it into a surge protected outlet, and marveling at my accumulated information and the illusion that I could go back in time and access all my files if I wanted. I had the sensation that with my digitally archived work, music, research projects, and personal photographs, I was saving my self, or at least I was saving a part of my existence.¹² As a visual artist, I documented my creative process through time-lapse photos. I indexed my images, organized, enhanced, and saved them. I scanned old books and family photographs. I transferred all my CDs to my hard drive before donating the discs to a charity. I was driven to digitize everything and compress them into binary codes that were housed in a 6.6 inches x 3.85 inches x 3.85 inches white, sleek, cube-like structure, called *The Time Capsule*.

"I guess I feel betrayed by technology. The entire time I have been a graduate student, I have been haunted by the fear of information loss, so I have wanted everything to be recorded, saved for posterity.¹³ But now, after losing everything the pain is unlike the pain of losing a person or a material object. It feels different, strange, and I suffer from this unaccustomed feeling."

"Ashley Shew, an old colleague of mine, says that our digital devices are means for the idealization of artifacts. She refers to editing our memories, especially photos. We keep what we like and through applied filters and other

image-enhancing technologies we make remembrances closer to the form of life that we idealize. Thus, when a digital memory is lost, ‘the sting is two-fold: one for the loss of the digital thing; the other, for the loss of the idealization we created.’”¹⁴

I nod with a forced smile and recall the endless hours of editing pictures, PowerPoint slides, and videos before saving them on my storage device. Now I realize that I am not only grieving the loss of “objects,” but I am also grieving the loss of time, the time invested to make these digital memories or possessions as close to perfect as possible.

“Yes. I guess what I am trying to say is that I have no closure. Even when the Apple technician revealed that data recovery was not possible, I could not accept it or move on. I still had a perfectly functioning device that accidentally malfunctioned, but then it was working again, only without containing four years’ worth of data. I just can’t comprehend this. It’s not like I lost my possessions in a fire and I can look into the ashes and grieve.”

“It makes sense, Csaba. I think the root of the problem is the nature of the ‘binary states of digital artifacts because losing a string of code on a device does not support a ritualistic letting go.’”¹⁵

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, think about it. ‘Immateriality prevents physical actions on digital things. Deletion [or hard drive failure] does not support the fragility of slow transformation that physical artifacts may undergo during ritualistic disposal’ or, to use your example, there is no trace of fire and no ashes either. Moreover, I think you lost parts of your ‘extended self.’”¹⁶

I recall how I tried to comprehend the disappearance of my files by starring at the sleek *Time Capsule* on my desk. It was operational—intact, but without content, without the artifacts of my extended self. Perhaps I suffer from the lack of visibility of the decay or loss. There is no trace of the loss or a visible fragmentation to show that this kind of loss, like death, is a fundamental part of life. I feel as though I invested in an illusion that death could not destroy binary codes housed in an expensive, warrantee-protected device, shielded from possible damages. Death wasn’t part of my narrative of digital possessions, and I wasn’t prepared for its arrival.

I watch Professor Donne as he reaches toward the bookshelf and pulls out a book. As he slowly flips through the pages, he remarks in a quiet voice, “I think C. S. Lewis might offer more help than I can. You can borrow my copy, but I want to read this to you. When his wife died of cancer, he wrote: ‘No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being

afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness. . . . At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed.”¹⁷

Professor Donne stops and turns the pages again, looking for another passage and continues, “Lewis teaches us that grief ‘gives life a permanently provisional feeling.’ He feels like you do. He writes, ‘it doesn’t seem worth starting anything. I can’t settle down. . . .’”¹⁸ Professor Donne pauses for a second and looks directly at me. I am hoping he doesn’t notice my effort to keep tears from surfacing.

Professor Donne clears his throat and says, “I think this is where you are now, and you are indeed exploring this place, this seemingly barren, unexplored landscape, like H. G. Wells’s time traveler at the end of *The Time Machine*.”¹⁹

I smile with gratitude, knowing that he indeed read my paper with care and appreciation.

“You should continue traversing these landscapes. . . do not stop. . . . You may discover something that can benefit others in similar situations.”

I feel a bit awkward, and I am not sure how to respond, but a sense of safety and relief reaches me through his smile. I stand up and shake his outstretched hands and say, “Thank you, Mike.”

“Come back, Csaba, if you need to talk. You’re not alone. . . . And if you have some time, read those articles I emailed to you.”

5 MARCH 2017

The Time Machine was left deserted on the turf among the rhododendrons.

~H. G. WELLS, *THE TIME MACHINE*²⁰

I seek comfort in this image of a deserted Time Machine among flowering bushes. I want to stay here, within this landscape. I want to notice what has been deserted, and what continues to live, to grow, and to flower. Like Wells’s Time Traveller, I am learning to distance myself from the past. Or, perhaps, I am grieving the past I created, recorded, tended, and stored in a clever sequence of binary codes. And then lost.

No, I am not a time traveler, but I do own a *Time Machine*, according to Apple Inc. It is a backup software application designed to work with the *Time Capsule*, so users like myself can periodically back up their digital devices to store anything that can be or has been digitized. But for me, an insidious malfunction of the *Time Machine* erased everything I have digitized during the last four years.

Digitize. I say the word out loud with a forced irony. *Digitize*. I hate the sound of it. *Digitize*. Maybe it’s my Hungarian accent. *Digitize*. What a strange

verb. *Digitize*. I want to rage against the utterance and the meanings embedded in this seven-letter word. *Digitize*. I want to fight against this form of conversion. I want to rebel against this insidious modification of our work through which pictures or sounds can be processed by a computer, through a structured sequence of binary digits. I resent this form of conversion. I resent this unimaginative simplification of words, sounds, and images into a sequence of zeros and ones.

What I want is to go back to that place, to that landscape with the rhododendrons, but even as I type these letters on my digital device, I am aware of this evil mechanism, which turns these letters into this:

01110010 01101000 01101111 01100100 01101111 01100100 01100101 01101110
01100100 01110010 01101111 01101110

This is how the word “rhododendron” is digitized. It’s a boring sequence of zeros and ones. I can no longer see the flower. I can no longer sense the sweet, delightful fragrance ignited by the written words on the screen. All I see is a desert of numbers with the skeleton of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the father of binary arithmetic.

26 FEBRUARY 2017

I have been staring at my last qualifying exam question for five days, without writing a word. I am supposed to write about the creative process of making a mixed media glass collage based on Arthur P. Bochner’s “Bird on the Wire.”²¹ But all I am thinking and focusing on are the lost voice memos, my annotated visual diary, my notes on making and creating the art. I am grieving the archived past, and this grief prevents me from remembering. I can’t remember anything. I know that I had a series of epiphanies, discoveries. I recorded 45 voice memos. I had pages of notes about the experience of making this piece. But all I can see clearly is a silent footage of me from a distance working on the art. I see myself talking, gesticulating, I see the phone recording. I see my camera filming. But I can’t comprehend what is happening. What are the words being recorded? What am I saying or seeing? How can I reenter my past? How can I re-live or at least re-call the experience? Did my reliance or my faith in recording and storing memories in ingenious devices limit my remembering and ability to reenter the past?

23 FEBRUARY 2017

“I am worried about you,” Erica says as she stares at the blank screen. “You haven’t written a word since you got this question. It’s been days. You’re going to fail your qualifying exams.”

I shrug, as though it's not a big deal.

"Carolyn said that you would enjoy working on this question," Erica says.

"Carolyn doesn't know shit," I blurt out. "She has no idea that it's all gone."

"Can you stop obsessing about your *Time Machine*? Can you snap out of this? I'm going to write to Dr. Ellis and tell her that you are losing it."

I continue staring at the blank screen, refusing to say a word or press a key.

At once, like a lash across the face, came the possibility of losing my own age, of being left helpless in this strange new world. The bare thought of it was an actual physical sensation. I could feel it grip me at the throat and stop my breathing.

~H. G. WELLS, *THE TIME MACHINE*²²

21 FEBRUARY 2017

I should not have signed up for this graduate course on grief and loss. I nervously take out a stack of paper from my backpack. My palms are sweating, and as I wipe them on my pants, the loose pages fall onto the floor. Blood rushes to my head as I reach under the table to retrieve them. All I want is to excuse myself and run. I don't want to read my story, but I remind myself that I must comply. I can't reveal my fears of being inadequate. I am a graduate student after all. I take a deep breath. It's my turn to read out loud my narrative of loss. I always hated sharing my writing, especially in person. I hate my accent and the brokenness of my English, but perhaps it is appropriate for my topic of losing my digital possessions. I read my paper with a soft, nervous voice, not stopping, not looking up. My primary goal is to get through this, to get to the last period.

"This is too fresh," my classmate, Jessica, responds as I nervously finish reading the first draft of my narrative of loss. "You're still within this chaos narrative, drifting and drowning. . . . These are dangerous waters." I am sensing a kind, motherly, protective compassion in her voice, like a forgotten breeze marking the end of the storm.

"I'm afraid," she says, "you cannot swim through these waters. . . . Not yet." She offers her hand, willing to pull me out of these primordial waters of riptides and violent currents as though she knows something I don't. As though she has faith in the possibility of the changing weather, or the end of storms. As though she has a belief in the promise of calmer waters.

"You need time to process this," she says, "before you can make sense of it. Let the passage of time create a firm ground for you to stand on. . . to rest. . . . You need to wait. . . . It's too chaotic, too painful."

I remain silent, too afraid to reveal my suppressed pain through my voice. I turn away to hide the swelling in my eyes. I look outside. Darkness has descended on the parking lot.

Above me shone the stars, for the night was very clear. I felt a certain sense of friendly comfort in their twinkling. All the old constellations had gone from the sky, however: that slow movement which is imperceptible in a hundred human lifetimes, had long since rearranged them in unfamiliar groupings.

~H. G. WELLS, *THE TIME MACHINE*²³

Notes on Memory [Unsaved]

Time. Did she—the first witness of my story—mean that time, like a mysterious backdrop of my universe, will somehow coalesce into a new, safe turf, where I am no longer fated to drown?

Is it possible that through the act of waiting and processing events time herself will morph into a terra firma to stand on? Can I build on this firm ground, erect a home with an observation deck from which I may stare into the coalescing landscape of my past, understand its meanings, origins, and laws? Visible, but separate, out there with my past self, a leftover darkness that I only relate to as memories, as the past?

Do I need to escape drowning, so I may tell the tale, or can my drowning be the tale—a silent, wordless dance that is without interpretation? Like random stars expanding into nothingness, without the artificial lines that connect them into images of order, outlines for mythology.

Do we draw these lines to connect starlight because we prefer stories? Indeed, we gave up on photosynthesizing light and perfected our ability to make stories into energy and life force. We are survivors, who rely on narratives, as they float with us and through us in the waters where we are all eventually destined to drown. And I want to live and stay afloat. How can my story become at least a life raft to save me from drowning?

I had been restless, dreaming most disagreeably that I was drowned, and that sea anemones were feeling over my face with their soft palps. I woke with a start, and with an odd fancy that some greyish animal had just rushed out of the chamber. I tried to get to sleep again, but I felt restless and uncomfortable.

~H. G. WELLS, *THE TIME MACHINE*²⁴

Notes on Drowning [Unsaved]

Drowning. I once was drowning in a pool during a summer vacation. I had a theory. First, I stood in neck-deep water at the shallow end of the

pool. I was enjoying how my legs could propel me upwards by jumping up and down, making minimal muscular efforts. It was the joy of ease and the partial defeat of gravity. I laughed and searched for new heights, deeper waters, emerging out of the water like a rocket ship, but bound to return with a desire and energy of wanting to leave again; of wanting to go deeper and further.

I had a theory. No matter how deep the pool was, I could always jump through the surface. I could take a breath; sink; reach the bottom; jump from the bottom; break the surface, breathe, and repeat this process until I reached the end of the pool. I felt clever. I realized that swimming was an unnecessary skill. Thus, trusting my theory, I began my first journey across the shallow end of the pool to the deep end.

I felt clever. I had a theory, and it was working. It was working—until my fourth step. On my third step, I propelled myself toward the surface. I broke through the surface—calm, proud, and confident. I took a shallow breath, and I began my descent toward the floor of the pool. But I could not reach it. I was stuck midway, floating like a lonely cloud on a windless summer sky. Something was wrong with my theory, and I had no backup solutions or memories to rely on. I don't remember panicking, but I remember a form of regret and an objective acknowledgment of death. But suddenly someone grabbed my torso and pulled me out of my winding down existence, resetting my body to a new round, sentencing me to occupy dry land.

Now, 30 years after that event, as I am reporting on my childhood drowning, I feel different. But I am still unable to attach words to what I described as a form of regret and an objective acknowledgment of death. There is always this wordless, impenetrable layer of being within the chaos. But chaos is a story and it longs to be revealed. It wants to be expressed. How do I negotiate this tension?

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Dr. Ellis asked us to revise our narratives. She is a firm believer in revisions. But I am reluctant. I fear that revising my story will further diminish the raw, authentic darkness, the truth of being in and becoming the chaos. I want to tell Dr. Ellis that I am actively not revising. Not revising is my revision, I want to say, but I can't. It is easier to comply and not cause disruption. But this form of submission pains me and makes my grief heavier and darker.

But how do I revise? What is a revision? What should I revise? Is there an instructional manual to revise my lived chaos? Or, am I only revising words on the page? What are the tools? What are the objectives?

I open up my laptop with my week-old words, patiently waiting, without any reluctance or obvious tension. Do these digital characters have any inkling of my power to *select all* and *delete all*, or to *highlight*, *underline*, *strikethrough*, to *add* or *omit*? My words on the screen are undeniably static, but once I read them, they seem to come to life. They begin to fidget, quarrel, ignore, and instruct. We are related, we both know this, but the tension is harsh, and I want to flee from this task. I want to do something else. I hate my words. I hate my writing.

“FUCK THIS!” I say out loud. “Why am I doing this?” But I decide to continue, anyway. I am a good student. I begin reading what I wrote; trying to revise it:

Why do I need to re-call, re-visit, re-experience, re-live what has been lost and beyond recovery? Why do I want to torture myself with writing that only re-amplifies my pain?

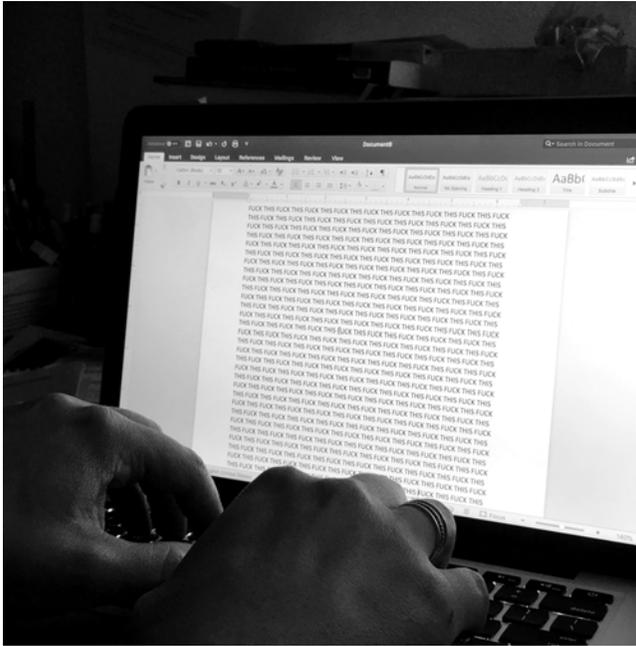
Okay. So should I leave these questions, or should I omit them? Do they matter? I don’t know. How do I revise questions? Should I leave them, since I haven’t answered them? I feel this rising anxiety of not knowing what to do and not doing well on this task of revising. Am I failing in my revisions?

I know. I haven’t yet told or revealed what had happened. I haven’t introduced a thesis sentence. I haven’t shared with my future readers what I am writing about. That’s what I am struggling with. Does it matter? Once again, I feel as if I am drowning, caught in a riptide, disoriented. What difference would it make, if I described how I went to my computer one evening to retrieve some old files and realized that all my backups were gone, beyond recovery? That every digitally stored fragment, creation, and archived memory I possessed, stored, and tended during the last four years was erased. Gone. And yes, I feel embarrassed to confess that this loss rendered me into a psychological state of wanting to die and that the only story I could create to describe my feelings was a not-so-eloquent sequence of uppercase letters: F-U-C-K T-H-I-S.

And that’s all I had for the first draft of my chaos narrative. FUCK THIS. So, instead of deconstructing FUCK THIS, on 7 February 2017, I wrote a

hurried plea, which I still embrace as a reasonable attitude to express where I am right now.

7 FEBRUARY 2017



The only story

Please, don't stop me! I am negotiating with my violence. I lift my finger off the key. You watch how it joins his accomplices to form a well-articulated fist. My only desire is to punch through the screen. But how would you evaluate that? How would you comment on a broken screen and my bruised knuckles? No. Please, don't suggest that I calm down! What? You're asking me to pay attention to the light. What light? I follow your words. I glance at the illuminated keyboard. I notice a pinhole-sized, neon-green light on the upper left corner of the caps lock key. It's on. It stops my fist in midair. I am staring into this tiny green phosphorescent glow, not knowing what it means—not knowing what you mean. Like the exhausted driver who fell asleep when the traffic light turned red, I am still dreaming of red. "Red," I whisper. It calls for a stop. It is entropy. It is rest. It is danger. It is death. But the light on my caps lock key is green. "Green," I say the word out loud to remember. Green means to go. And

like an enraged driver who is violently jolted out of his momentary, peaceful unconsciousness, I forcefully press my metaphoric accelerator, running over the memory of hurried pedestrians, screaming my lamentation, dressed in uppercase typography that appears on the screen, while refusing to control my speed or step on the brakes. I leave behind a cloud of toxic exhaust; the testament of my rage:

FUCK THIS

I am too disoriented to find the key combination for the exclamation mark, so I highlight my two-word story. I click edit. I click copy. I click paste. I click copy and paste, and I do this repeatedly, like a madman, until a page is filled with 47 rows of FUCK THIS.

So how should I revise this authentic draft of my narrative? I am drowning again, under these lines of repeated obscenity.

A week ago, I wrote, "I don't feel better. I don't feel different." Should I revise this? Should I start a new page? Should I change my brief conclusion, "FUCK TIME MACHINE"?

Do you understand this? Can you see the insidious confinements of writing—this painful struggle with the seemingly impossible task of making amorphous feelings, sensations, lived experiences visible through these pictorial signs?

I imagine the faces of my classmates, sitting around the heavy, long, melancholy wooden table, all nodding. Thank you. You do understand, but we all know that your ears are listening to different stories. My words are like the surface of my paintings. You register the colors, the shapes, the style, but you do not see me, the artist, working. You do not see the agony on my face. You do not see what I painted over and over again. You do not see the days when my work resisted, refused to continue.

28 JANUARY 2017

"No. It's not OKAY! Nothing is GOING TO BE OKAY. It's all gone. It's ALL fucking gone." I slump onto the bed, next to my wife. I toss the laptop, with theatrical overexaggeration, to the far end of our bed. Erica reaches for my hand and when she says, "You should calm down," I explode.

"I don't want to fucking calm down! Don't you understand? Everything, everything I had IS GONE."

I reach for my computer and fight the urge to throw it against the wall. I am shaking uncontrollably. I power it up again, hoping for a miracle, but I know that I can only resurrect what is preserved, not what has been lost.

“Look! Look!” I click on the *Time Machine* icon on my desktop, select the option *Enter Time Machine* for the hundredth time in the last two hours of agony, still hoping that in Erica’s presence something might change.

I have a sudden idea that perhaps my damaged retina is causing an optical illusion, and she will point to the screen, saying, “Here, it’s all here.” But, no. . . . Nothing is here, and nothing is there. . .

With my trembling finger on the trackpad, I guide the arrow-shaped cursor toward the top of the screen. It hovers over the virtual interface of my *Time Machine* icon, and I stare with horror at the inaccessible, nondescript lines beyond today’s date as my latest backup, showing that nothing has existed before today.

“Everything, everything is fucking gone. Look!” I cry.

“Why didn’t restore your files, two weeks ago? That’s what you said, that you could transfer everything you’ll need.” I want to yell at her. No, I want to scream at Erica, because she rips off the bandages from this self-inflicted wound of my corporeal memory scape.

“You just don’t fucking understand!” I yell. The cats jump off the bed as I pull the cover over my head, like a child who wants to become invisible. I am too old to sob, and I fight the attacking thoughts of a long list of items that have been lost.

“You need to calm down. It’s not worth it. Maybe you’re not doing it right? You’re not an expert.”

“Not an expert? Are you crazy? You don’t have to be an expert to see that this hard drive contains 2 terabytes of free space. It’s fucking blank. There is nothing on this!”

“It’s okay, let’s sleep. It is already 2:00 a.m.” Erica says.

“Fuck sleeping! How the fuck can I go to sleep, like this?”

“Do you need a Xanax?”

I throw the covers off my shaking body, grab my laptop, slam the bedroom door, and march into the guest bedroom, like a hurt child who cannot control his emotions.

“Please come back?” I hear Erica’s pleading voice from our bedroom.

“Leave me alone!” I yell back into the dark.

I climb into the guest bed with my laptop. I restart my computer. I reset my *Time Capsule*. I read all the online forums on this issue, but each discussion thread only adds to my madness. I check everything. I read all the manuals and try every possible fix. My eyes are swelling with tears, and like an evil punishment, more and more memories of my lost files appear in my mind, like dancing figurines, saying goodbye, disappearing into an impenetrable fog. You will never see us again. . .

I see my music library, the endless hours of archiving my old CD collection. I see all my artistic PowerPoint lectures and conference presentations evaporating into nothingness. I see myself spending endless hours of working on transitions and animations, knowing that these presentations will serve me well when I graduate and teach my own students.

It is 7:00 a.m., and I stare at the *Time Machine* interface with no access to my past. One of our cats jumps onto the bed and starts purring. I break down in tears, as I envy him. I envy his life, and I envy his existence. I envy his freedom not to archive or not to cement his memories and play into binary codes.

I touch his forehead where the black fur is the softest. I want to get lost in this sensation. I close my eyes. The sound of his purr and the feeling of his soft coat is a sharp contrast to the mechanical humming of my overheated laptop with its warm, sticky, plastic keys. I close my computer and push it under the bed. I pull the cat onto my chest and sob into his long, black fur. Then I fall asleep.

In a panicked dream, I can't find my way home. I am told that I have to go home, but I can't remember where I live. Then an elder from my church appears, and he says that the service is starting in ten minutes. He says, "see you in church," but when I follow him, he disappears, and I can't find the church. I am lost. I can't remember where my church is. Then, I realize that I forgot my sermon. I don't even have a Bible. I reach for my phone. I want to call my wife, but my contact list is gone, and I can't recall any numbers. I scream, "I want my *Time Machine* back! I need my memories!"

5 JANUARY 2017



Waiting for his death

I hope he can feel my presence. I regret not coming earlier. I am told that he is heavily sedated and will not gain consciousness. We are all waiting for his death. I gently rub his paralyzed fingers. I listen to his labored breathing. The accumulated fluid in his lung will drown him from within.

I want to be present, but I am obsessing about my hard drive. When the Apple store sends me a message that the technician is ready to see me, I leave my friend's bedside. I have church tomorrow, I reason. I desperately need my computer. My Sunday sermon and the accompanying music for the service are all on the computer. I excuse myself from the family of my dying friend. I drive to the Apple store. I feel awful. I am a horrible friend. As soon as I arrive at the mall, I get another text message that my appointment is postponed, because of unforeseen delays. I wait three more hours, nervously pacing the corridors of the mall, obsessing about church and feeling guilty that I left the bedside of my dying friend.

I vaguely recall the technician asking if I had a backup system. I nod, and he says, "Good, because all your files are erased from the hard drive."

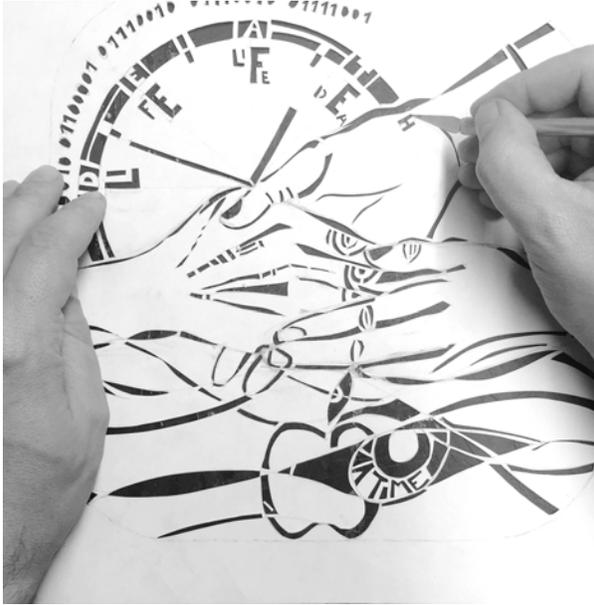
"Yes. I have a 2-terabyte *Time Capsule*. I have everything backed up for the last four years."

I remember how I fought with my wife to get this foolproof *Time Capsule*. She said it was too expensive, but I pleaded that being in graduate school, I could not risk losing my work. I wanted to text her and tell her that I was right. We needed this investment of secure storage.

"No charge," says the technician. "And now, you have a clean hard drive. Think of it as a new beginning."

Yes. A new beginning, I say to myself as I thank him. I should feel much better. I force myself to imagine how my computer will run faster and how I finally I have an excellent reason to reorganize my files and only transfer what I really need for my qualifying exams and my dissertation.

When I get home, I decide not to restore my computer from the *Time Machine* backup. It's a fresh start, I say to myself. I only transfer my church music and my sermon for tomorrow. I need to look at this as a blessing. I have everything archived. I am relieved. I can sleep. I have my *Time Machine*. I have my past. I am relieved. And I sleep without knowing and witnessing that my friend has died while I was away. . .



Cutting through

I pull the X-ACTO knife steadily across the surface of the paper, listening to the familiar sound of the blade cutting through the thick paper as it follows the pencil line. As I shift my body sideways and turn the knife along a curved path, I catch a glimpse of my reflection on the thin, polished blade. Distracted, I slice into my index finger, before finishing the cut. I make a hissing sound, and I watch how the white paper becomes magenta as it absorbs my blood.

“What are you doing?” Erica asks.

“It’s nothing,” I say.

“Aren’t you revising your manuscript on digital loss?” As I search for something to stop the bleeding, Erica walks to my worktable, puzzled by the paper cutouts scattered everywhere. Before I can answer, she asks with a sarcastic tone, “Shadow puppetry? Really?”

“This is my revision,” I say. With excitement, I turn on my old overhead projector placed on the floor, next to my worktable. I use the soft fabric inside my pants’ pocket to clean the blood off my finger. I grab three paper cutouts from my table and place them one-by-one on the stage glass, completing a complex image. I point to the reflected imagery, projected on the wall.

“This is *7 February 2017*,” I say.

“I don’t get it,” Erica says.

“All these paper cutouts are visual narratives based on the stories and reflections in my essay. Look. . .” I grab a sheet of paper from my desk and search for a highlighted section.

“Here, this is from one of my reviewers, who makes this interesting point about the ending. You see, I ended my original essay with Barry’s death. Though it is the earliest memory in the sequence of events I narrated, none of the other stories mentioned him. This was an epiphany. I realized that for some reason Barry’s physical death ‘took a back seat to the loss of the digital artifacts,’ diminished by the chaos narrative and the raw grief resulting from the loss of my digital possessions.”

“But I still don’t understand why you proceeded to make all these paper cutouts and projections?”

“This may appear to be an unconventional solution, but to be honest, I did not want to change or revise the content of my original manuscript. I did not want to manipulate the text through digital technology. However, I thought I could revise each part of my essay through a more analog technology and tell my stories through projections. In this way, I am not altering what was written a year ago, but in a sense I am letting those words manifest into visuals as digital code morphs into other entities, such as sound, color, text, and so on. You see, my reviewers recommended I read this article by Craig Gingrich-Philbrook and Jake Simmons titled ‘Reprogramming the Stage’²⁵

“I’m not sure I follow you,” Erica says.

“Well, both of my reviewers suggested I needed a clearer theoretical framework to articulate my overarching questions related to loss. They also were concerned that my experiences might not connect ‘with the larger digital experiences of our society.’”

“But again, how do your paper cutouts and their projection through an overhead projector count as a revision? Are you suggesting that others may try processing their grief narratives through similar ways?” Erica asks.

“The idea for the projections came directly from the article I read. It has a section on the role of overhead projectors,²⁶ and I thought, what if I use this rudimentary technology and interface to reexamine the series of events and memories I narrate in my essay? I knew that my relationship toward the digital has fundamentally changed since the crash of my hard drive and my *Time Machine*. But it was a kind of regression and anger driven resistance. You see, I did not replace my defective *Time Capsule*. I still don’t have a cloud-based storage, but I am creating more tangible artifacts than ever before. First, I thought it was

a kind of resistance toward the digital. But as I worked on the cutouts and projections, I realized that I am still not outside of technology. I am not exempt from the pain, grief, or loss when it comes to inorganic tools or machines. Cutting a finger with the knife or replacing the light bulb in the overhead projector are reminders of my interconnectedness with and reliance on technology. However, I need to develop or adopt a heuristic, as well as an ontology, to successfully navigate virtuality, corporeality, and the in-between.”

“So, then what is the meaning of the loss you wrote about? How will people who may experience similar situations use your essay?”

“Katherine Hayles suggests that we ‘become the codes we punch.’²⁷ But it is our conscious or unconscious choosing as to how these codes manifest in our lives and interactions. Considering her analogy, I first wrote my Enter Time Machine essay for Dr. Ellis’s course on grief and loss. That was the initial code I *punched* (rather forcefully) into a series of autoethnographic reflections. However, revising my essay through the paper cutouts and a new introduction and conclusion is my act of choosing how those initial codes manifest into a new lived experience. You will see, for example, how I included Barry in each visual composition, even though in my writing he is rather absent.”

I invite Erica to sit down on the floor next to me. I turn on the projector and turn off the light, then project the first paper cutout onto the screen.

“This is titled *5 January 2017*.”



5 January 2017 ■

CSABA OSVATH is a doctoral student in Teaching and Learning in the College of Education at the University of South Florida. Thanks to Carolyn Ellis and Erica Newport for critical readings of this manuscript and for their valuable suggestions for revisions. I am also grateful for the outstanding editorial support and assistance from the reviewers and editors of the journal. Correspondence to: Csaba Osvath, Teaching and Learning, College of Education, University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, EDU 202, Tampa, FL 33620, USA. Email: csabaosvath@mail.usf.edu.

NOTES

1. H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Bantam, 1982), 70.
2. I understand there are various circumstances and events when survivors are unable to recover or find any remains of the dead. Still, all the atoms of the physical body will be subject to the conservation of matter, regardless of the cause of death.
3. My conversation with Carolyn Ellis and the following conversation with Professor Donne are fictional encounters. My aim was to maintain a coherent and evocative story about my devastating loss of digital possessions. These fictional dialogues stand as a true synthesis of many conversations with Dr. Ellis and others who supported me on this journey. Professor Donne is a composite, fictional character, but all other events and conversations in this text represent actual events that took place.
4. Corona Sas, Steve Whittaker, and John Zimmerman, "Design for Rituals of Letting Go: An Embodiment Perspective on Disposal Practices Informed by Grief Therapy," *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)* 23, no. 4 (2016): 1.
5. Elizabeth Hallam and Danny Miller, *Death, Memory, and Material Culture*, (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 33.
6. Ashley Shew, "To the Cloud! Loss in the Age of Digital Memory," *The New Everyday A Media Commons Project*, 1 October 2013, accessed 2 April 2017, <http://mediacommons.org/tne/pieces/cloud-loss-age-digital-memory>.
7. Kathryn Schulz, "When Things Go Missing: Reflections on Two Seasons of Loss," *The New Yorker*, 13 February 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/13/when-things-go-missing>.
8. Mozy Enterprise, *Data Loss: Understanding the Causes and Costs*, 2015, accessed 1 April 2017, <https://www.mozy.com/system/resources/W1siZiIsIjIwMTUvMDUvMjkyMTVfNTJfNDhfNzIzXzI0aXRIeXBhcGVyX01venlFbnRlcuByaXNlX0RhdGFfTG9zc19DYXVzZXNfYW5kX0Nvc3RzX1VTLnBkZiJdXQ/White-Paper-MozyEnterprise-Data-Loss-Causes-and-Costs-US.pdf>.
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10. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
11. Joanne Garde-Hansen, Andrew Hoskins, and Anna Reading, eds., "Introduction," in *Save As. . . Digital Memories* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 5.
12. Amanda Lagerkvist and Yvonne Andersson, "The Grand Interruption: Death Online and Mediated Lifelines of Shared Vulnerability," *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 4 (2017): 550.

13. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
14. Shew, "To the Cloud!"
15. William Odom et al., "Passing On & Putting to Rest: Understanding Bereavement in the Context of Interactive Technologies," in *CHI '10 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2010), 1831–40.
16. Sas, Whittaker, and Zimmerman, "Design for Rituals of Letting Go," 4; Russell W. Belk, "Extended Self in a Digital World," *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 3 (2013): 477.
17. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperCollins, 1956), 3.
18. *Ibid.*, 33.
19. Wells, *The Time Machine*.
20. *Ibid.*, 28.
21. Arthur P. Bochner, "Bird on the Wire: Freeing the Father Within Me," *Qualitative Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (2012): 168–73.
22. Wells, *The Time Machine*, 40.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, 72.
25. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook and Jake Simmons, "Reprogramming the Stage: A Heuristic for Posthuman Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2015): 323–44.
26. *Ibid.*, 337.
27. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 46.