

Christine Rosen

Electronic Intimacy

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BEFORE YOU READ

How do you form and maintain friendships and romantic relationships? Do you think today's apps and other forms of modern communication are an adequate substitute for face-to-face interaction? What, if anything, is lost or gained when you find yourself relying on electronic media as a way to connect to others?

WORDS TO LEARN

- revelation* (para. 3): disclosure (noun)
mediate (para. 3): to settle (verb)
inextricably (para. 6): without the ability to be untangled (adv)
ambient (para. 7): all-encompassing (adj)
disquiet (para. 9): uneasiness (noun)
copious (para. 10): large amounts (adj)
cognitively (para. 10): connected to mental processes (adv)
predetermine (para. 10): decide in advance (verb)
algorithm (para. 10): steps for solving a mathematical problem (noun)
purport (para. 10): to claim (verb)
deluge (para. 11): flood (noun)
peruse (para. 13): to look over carefully (verb)
cheeky (para. 13): disrespectful, often boldly so (adj)
simulacrum (para. 13): superficial likeness (noun)
caveat (para. 13): warning (noun)
cohere (para. 14): to stick together (verb)
serendipity (para. 17): luck or happiness found by chance (noun)
erode (para. 18): to destroy slowly (verb)
deleterious (para. 18): harmful (adj)
glean (para. 18): to gather bit by bit (verb)
languid (para. 19): drooping; sluggish (adj)
antidote (para. 19): remedy (noun)
accrue (para. 19): to increase over time (verb)
sporadic (para. 21): occasional (adj)

Christine Rosen lives in Washington, D.C., where she is the senior editor of The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology & Society. Her past books include Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement (2004) and My Fundamentalist Education (2005). Her newest book, The Extinction of Experience, is set to be published in 2013. Her essays and reviews have appeared in, the New York Times Magazine, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, and the New Republic, among others.

We met at music school in Vermont in the 1980s. He was the golden boy, popular and cocksure. I wore thick glasses and played the bassoon. Somehow we formed a friendship, much to the annoyance of his string of romantic conquests and my friends, who disliked him. When August came we parted ways, close but not entirely connected. Two weeks later, I received my first letter from him. It was still broiling hot in Florida as I stood by the mailbox and tore open the envelope. My friend had gone to the trouble to find my address, and, by including his own on the back of the envelope, signaled his expectation that I should write back.

During the next few years we wrote regularly about all kinds of things — the music we were listening to, our parents' willful misunderstanding of our monumental teenage torments. A "pen pal" is what everyone called him. But that childish phrase always bothered me. It sounded too limited and casual, nothing like an expression of the way our letter writing felt. I went through the day filing away little experiences to replay later in a letter to him, and eagerly awaited his responses. Once he wrote "It's here! It's here!" on the back of an envelope containing a letter that was tardier than usual. He understood perfectly my anticipation of his letters because he shared it.

Years passed, and our friendship deepened. We spoke on the telephone occasionally and reunited during one more summer at camp, but most of our communication occurred through letters. After hundreds of small revelations, we made large ones to each other — but only to each other. Our letters were always handwritten. Private. Mediated only by the technology of pen and paper and the postal service.

I don't recount this long-ago exchange to lament the lost era of letter writing. These days, I rarely put pen to paper. Instead, like most of us, I rely on e-mails or text messages, which I simultaneously embrace for their brilliant efficiency and loathe for the conformity they impose.

But I wonder how humans' chosen forms of communication alter our

Our feelings for each other haven't changed.

emotional experience of connection. Our feelings for each other haven't changed. We continue to seek validation and happiness and contact with others. We still flush with pleasure when we spy a particular person's e-mail in our in-box. But does the way we

communicate with each other alter that experience significantly?

In preparing to write to someone, we prime the emotional pump. We think about how we feel; ideally, we reflect for a moment. The medium of pen and paper encourages this. E-mail and texting and interactions on Facebook encourage more efficient and instantaneous affirmation or

rejection of our feelings. They also introduce something new — a form of social anxiety caused by the public nature of so many of our communications. A study published earlier this year in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* found that the more time and more “friends” people had on Facebook, the more likely they were to agree with the statement that others had better, happier lives than they did, and the less likely they were to believe that life is fair. Researchers have confirmed what many of us already know: Using social networking sites is pleasurable. But the pleasure of publicizing our connections on social networking sites is inextricably linked to the anxiety we experience about the meaning of those connections and what they reveal about the value of our offline lives.

We are living in an age of electronic intimacy. Its hallmark is instantaneous global communication inseparable from an ambient awareness that we are or should be connected to others. Scientists have documented that we experience a dopamine¹ rush when we receive a new e-mail in our in-boxes. The flip side of that rush is the vague social anxiety we feel when we see that we have no new messages. This is new emotional terrain.

Smartphones are the Geiger counters of this electronic intimacy. They are supremely efficient at delivering information, allowing us constantly to measure the levels of connection radiating throughout our social network. Such connection is a genuine pleasure. But is more of it better?

Surely, some of the disquiet about the revolution we are experiencing stems from the fact that a world that supports the marvel of instantaneous communication is also one in which we must decide who is and is not worthy of our communications — the average Facebook user has 130 “friends,” after all. The possibilities are endless — we can talk one on one, broadcast our feelings to a small group of friends, or weigh in as an anonymous Internet commentator and be heard by millions of strangers. Yet most of us have also suffered decision fatigue when faced with this proliferation of choices. Why this particular person, why now? We have always had to answer these questions, but never this often or on this scale.

Our new communications technologies have fulfilled their promise to help us find people with whom we might form intimate relationships. But they have done so by giving us an overwhelming amount of choice and a copious amount of false hope. A recent meta-analysis of online dating published in the journal *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* found that people “become cognitively overwhelmed” when they search through hundreds of dating profiles. To cope, they must “objectify” the

¹ dopamine (para. 7): Chemical found in the brain, linked to human sensation of pleasure.

people they are sizing up for some sort of emotional connection. And despite the many claims online dating sites make about their “scientific” matching systems, the study found that none of the systems devised to predetermine compatibility reliably predicted the long-term success of relationships. Algorithms that purport to match the athletic cat lover with the poetry-reading outdoors-man might lead to a first date, but they are no better than blind luck at ensuring lasting love.

Even when we already have a thriving social network, it can be a challenge to keep up with everyone in it. In social networking’s most extreme form, we end up engaging in a kind of intimacy porn as we keep tabs on hundreds of our Facebook “friends,” follow the Twitter feeds of others, and respond to a daily deluge of e-mail. All the while, we are expected to keep our own electronic presence up to date. The extent of this transformation is evident in the marketing slogans of telecommunications companies. In the late twentieth century, the Bell System urged customers to “reach out and touch someone.” The company’s advertisements assumed that we would prefer to see our loved ones face to face. If we couldn’t, the ads suggested, a conversation on the telephone was the next-best thing.

Contemporary telecommunications companies emphasize something fundamentally different: individual control over a communications empire premised on speed and efficiency. Sprint calls itself “The NOW Network” and promises that you can do business, talk to friends, and travel the globe, all “without limits”; AT&T urges us to “Rethink Possible.” In one recent advertisement, two men sit together in a coffee shop conducting a business meeting by sending e-mails back and forth to each other instead of speaking.

Perhaps the current state of affairs explains our spasms of nostalgia for the days of written correspondance. Peruse the cards and paper for sale on Web sites such as Etsy, an online marketplace of handmade goods, and you could be forgiven for thinking that Brooklyn’s economy is built almost entirely on cheeky letterpress stationery produced out of people’s basements. The literary magazine *The Rumpus* has launched a service called Letters in the Mail; for \$5, subscribers are mailed an honest-to-god letter from a writer such as Dave Eggers, Stephen Elliott, or Elissa Schappel. “Think of it as the letters you used to get from your creative friends, before this whole Internet/e-mail thing,” the Web site urges. But since this is a simulacrum of a pen pal relationship, a helpful caveat is included: Return addresses are appended “at the author’s discretion.”

As much as I rely on modern forms of communication today, I don’t think I would have become friends with that boy at summer camp if we had used them. The pace of an e-mail or text exchange would have been too quick, and our weird bond would not have had time to emerge

amid such public and impatient forms of communication as Facebook or Twitter. For both of us, there would have been too much risk involved in publicly acknowledging our affinity for each other. Once our friendship cohered, the last thing I wanted to do was “share” it by displaying it to the rest of the world.

But our new world of electronic intimacy paradoxically demands that we share those intimacies early and often. It turns the private bonds of friendship and connection into a mass spectator sport, a game in which we are all simultaneously players and viewers (and one in which Facebook and other companies profit richly from our participation). I wonder about the nearly eight million American children age 12 and younger who are currently registered on Facebook (having easily evaded restrictions created in response to federal laws prohibiting data collection on children under 13). By the time they are 15, they will have cultivated dozens of online friends. How many of those connections will become what sociologists are starting to call “migratory friendships” — relationships that form online but eventually move to the physical world and face-to-face interaction? 15

I hope a great many will, even though moving beyond the efficiency and convenience of online friendship to real-world connection isn’t always easy. Of course, future generations will have the benefit of new communications technologies offering solutions to our problems connecting with each other. Flirting apps such as IFlirt4U and Axe Auto Romeo promise to outsource the awkwardness of first encounters to your smartphone. (The Axe app even lets you set the flirt level to “warm,” “hot,” or “steamy.”) And a recent patent application filed by Apple hints that the company is developing a program that would function as a form of iDating, scanning the data on your smartphone to locate like-minded people in your immediate area and suggesting ways to initiate conversations with them. 16

But these technologies seem aimed less at encouraging intimacy than manufacturing serendipity — an oxymoronic notion that has gained surprising traction in Silicon Valley. “You never know when you might come across a little planned serendipity,” the mobile geotagging company Four-square says on its Web site. In an interview he gave in 2010 while he was still CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt claimed that serendipity “can be calculated now. We can actually produce it electronically.” 17

Manufactured serendipity suggests that Google’s algorithms and your smartphone’s sophisticated data collection systems are better life guides than your own intuition. Certainly they have their uses, but our reliance on them to map our emotional lives poses dangers, too. As psychologist Julia Frankenstein of the University of Freiburg has found, the use of global positioning system devices significantly erodes our capacity to create “mental maps,” a skill that brings with it countless cognitive 18

benefits. Might texting and e-mailing and tweeting eventually have the same deleterious effect on, for instance, our ability to experience longing? In a world of electronic intimacy, we elevate immediacy and availability, from which we glean a great deal of pleasure. But it is a pleasure tinged with pleonexia² — we always want more.

Then again, longing is so last century. It doesn't seem to suit an age of enhanced reality, when our devices cater to our need for immediate gratification and we describe ourselves — rather than our appliances — as “plugged in.” Nor does it suit a culture in the grips of what sociologists call “time famine.” No wonder we turn to time management gurus for advice on how to extract the most out of every minute of the day, and rely on social networking sites to keep our far-flung friends and family informed about our lives. Longing suggests languid hours for contemplation — a luxury for most people today. But perhaps we should see it instead as a necessity, an antidote to the excesses of a hectic, wired world. During the economic downturn, retailers revived their layaway policies; couldn't we practice a kind of emotional layaway program? Like instant credit, instant friendship in the Facebook mold yields immediate rewards. But it also has hidden costs — costs that tend to accrue long after the pleasures of that first connection have faded.

We will adapt, as we always have done. But perhaps we should permit ourselves a small lament, after all, for what we are leaving behind. As Charles Swann observes in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, “Even when one is no longer attached to things, it's still something to have been attached to them.”

During college, my correspondence with my friend was sporadic. We visited each other a few times, and even made a hilariously doomed attempt at a romantic relationship from which we emerged even more grateful for each other's friendship. We never made the transition to e-mail. Eventually we lost touch altogether.

That's life — or at least that is what the life of a friendship used to be. A closed door usually stayed closed forever. No longer. Last year my sister tracked down my summer camp friend on Facebook. From what I could gather from his profile, he is a married schoolteacher who enjoys bass fishing in his spare time. This is the moment when I should recount how we reconnected on Facebook and reminisced about the old days. But we didn't. I never contacted him. His Facebook profile assures me that he has lots of friends. He looks happy, as far as I can tell. I barely recognized him.

² pleonexia (para. 18): Comes from the Greek and refers to an insatiable desire or greediness, similar to what is felt in the throes of addiction.

VOCABULARY/USING A DICTIONARY

1. What does it mean to *lament* (para. 4) something? What does it mean to *loathe* (para. 4) something?
2. What connotations are implicit in the word *conformity* (para. 4)? How would you define the word?
3. From what language is the word *terrain* (para. 7) derived? What is its definition?

RESPONDING TO WORDS IN CONTEXT

1. Rosen uses an idiom in paragraph 6 when she writes, "In preparing to write to someone, we prime the emotional pump." What does it mean to *prime a pump*? How do you understand Rosen's alteration of the expression?
2. What is a *mass spectator sport* (para. 15)? Given your understanding of what one is, how do you understand Rosen's analogy to Facebook?
3. What is a *Geiger counter* (para. 8)? Explain the analogy being made between that device and smartphones.

DISCUSSING MAIN POINT AND MEANING

1. Why would Rosen's relationship with the boy she met at camp not have blossomed if electronic media had been available?
2. When we write to each other now, how does our approach to writing differ from how we approached it in the past? What details does Rosen point out about how we connect now through writing?
3. In the section of the essay that brings up serendipity, how does Rosen compare the use of manufactured serendipity to our use of global positioning devices?

EXAMINING SENTENCES, PARAGRAPHS, AND ORGANIZATION

1. What is the effect of starting an essay with the lines: "We met at music school in Vermont in the 1980s. He was the golden boy, popular and cocksure. I wore thick glasses and played the bassoon." What does it reveal about the "he" and "I"?
2. How does Rosen's return to her music camp friend at the end of the essay underscore her position on friendship and the idea of "electronic intimacy"?
3. What is the effect of including Sprint and AT&T advertising slogans in paragraph 12?

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. In the essay, Rosen and her friend eventually lose touch with each other. She writes, "That's life—or at least that is what the life of a friendship

98 Communicating through Social Media: What Do We Gain? What Do We Lose?

used to be.” Do you think it is a good or bad thing that Facebook and other media allow friendships to continue long past their life outside the computer?

2. Why do you think Rosen never contacted her old friend, even after her sister found him on Facebook? How would such a contact have altered the story?
3. How do texting, e-mailing, and tweeting affect feelings of longing, according to Rosen? Do you think that she’s right?

WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. After exploring Facebook or another social networking site, ask yourself how well you know the people you encounter there. Do you feel that you know them? Is it necessary to have met them and spent time with them in person before you answer that question? Why or why not?
2. In a brief essay, compare the quality of your off-line friendships with the quality of social media friendships. What is special or attractive about each kind of friendship?
3. Consider recent interactions you’ve had on social media over the last twenty-four hours. Look back at some of the texts, tweets, posts, etc., you’ve sent out into the world. Keeping one or two electronic writings in mind, sit down and write a one-page letter to one person who may have received that information from you. What are the differences between the correspondences? Which do you prefer, and why?

Ashton Kutcher

Has Texting Killed Romance?

[Harper's Bazaar, January 2011]

BEFORE YOU READ

How have texting, IM'ing, and other modes of communication via technology changed the way you interact with your friends? Your parents? How do you think your relationships might be different without these innovations?

WORDS TO LEARN

servers (para. 1): centralized data storage (noun)

quip (para. 4): a clever or witty remark (noun)

mitigate (para. 3): to lessen the force of (verb)

I was shooting a scene in my new film, *No Strings Attached*, in which I say to Natalie Portman, "If you miss me . . . you can't text, you can't e-mail, you can't post it on my [Facebook] wall. If you really miss me, you come and see me." I began to think of all of the billions of intimate exchanges sent daily via fingers and screens, bouncing between satellites and servers. With all this texting, e-mailing, and social networking, I started wondering, are we all becoming so in touch with one another that we are in danger of losing touch?

It used to be that boy met girl and they exchanged phone numbers. Anticipation built. They imagined the entire relationship before a call ever happened. The phone rang. Hearts pounded. "Hello?" Followed by a conversation that lasted two hours but felt like two minutes and would be examined with friends for two weeks. If all went well, a date was arranged. That was then.

Now we exchange numbers but text instead of calling because it mitigates the risks of early failure and eliminates those deafening moments of

Ashton Kutcher is an American television and film actor, producer, and co-founder of Katalyst Media. He is most famous for his breakout role in That 70s Show and his hosting of MTV's Punk'd. In 2010, he was named one of Time magazine's "Top 100 Most Influential People," and he recently wrote the foreword for Engage: The Complete Guide for Brands and Businesses to Build, Cultivate, and Measure Success in the New Web (Wiley, 2011).

silence. Now anticipation builds. *Bdooop*. "It was NICE meeting u." Both sides overanalyze every word. We talk to a friend, an impromptu Cyrano: "He wrote *nice* in all caps. What does that mean? What do I write back?" Then we write a response and delete it 10 times before sending a message that will appear 2 care, but not 2 much. If all goes well, a date will be arranged.

Natural selection may be favoring the quick-thumbed quip peddler over the confident, ice-breaking alpha male.

Whether you like it or not, the digital age has produced a new format for modern romance, and natural selection may be favoring the quick-thumbed quip peddler over the confident, ice-breaking alpha male. Or maybe we are hiding behind the cloak of digital text and spell-check to present superior versions of ourselves while using these less intimate forms of communication to accelerate the courting process. So what's it really good for?

There is some argument about who actually invented text messaging, but I think it's safe to say it was a man. Multiple studies have shown that the average man uses about half as many words per day as women, thus text messaging. It eliminates hellos and goodbyes and cuts right to the chase. Now, if that's not male behavior, I don't know what is. It's also great for passing notes. There is something fun about sharing secrets with your date while in the company of others. Think of texting as a modern whisper in your lover's ear.

Sending sweet nothings on Twitter or Facebook is also fun. In some ways, it's no different than sending flowers to the office: You are declaring your love for everyone to see. Who doesn't like to be publicly adored? Just remember that what you post is out there and there's some stuff you can't unsee.

But the reality is that we communicate with every part of our being, and there are times when we must use it all. When someone needs us, he or she needs all of us. There's no text that can replace a loving touch when someone we love is hurting.

We haven't lost romance in the digital age, but we may be neglecting it. In doing so, antiquated art forms are taking on new importance. The power of a hand-written letter is greater than ever. It's personal and deliberate and means more than an e-mail or text ever will. It has a unique scent. It requires deciphering. But, most important, it's flawed. There are errors in handwriting, punctuation, grammar, and spelling that show our vulnerability. And vulnerability is the essence of romance. It's the art of being uncalculated, the willingness to look foolish, the courage to say, "This is me, and I'm interested in you enough to show you my flaws with the hope that you may embrace me for all that I am but, more important, all that I am not."

VOCABULARY/USING A DICTIONARY

1. What are the origins of the word *quip*? How else can it be used?
2. What does *courting* (para. 4) mean? Where does the word come from?
3. In paragraph 8, Kutcher states that “antiquated art forms are taking on new importance.” What is the definition of *antiquated*?

RESPONDING TO WORDS IN CONTEXT

1. Kutcher states, “Sending sweet nothings on Twitter or Facebook is also fun” (para. 6). What are *sweet nothings*? How have they changed over time?
2. In the third paragraph, Kutcher suggests that texting makes a friend into an “impromptu Cyrano.” Who is Cyrano, and what does his name imply?
3. Kutcher concludes that romance is a willingness to say, “This is me, and I’m interested in you enough to show you my flaws with the hope that you may embrace me for all that I am but, more important, all that I am not” (para. 8). What does the word *embrace* mean in this context, and what can it mean in a different context?

DISCUSSING MAIN POINT AND MEANING

1. In one sentence, summarize Kutcher’s argument in this piece.
2. How does Kutcher answer the question posed in the title? Has texting killed romance, according to Kutcher?
3. What possibilities does Kutcher suggest might be the reasons for the popularity of text messaging and e-mailing over more traditional modes of communication?

EXAMINING SENTENCES, PARAGRAPHS, AND ORGANIZATION

1. What new idea does Kutcher introduce in paragraph 5? Does it contribute to his argument? Why or why not?
2. In paragraph 3, Kutcher uses quotes and text messages to tell a story and illustrate a point. Is this method effective? What is he trying to prove with these quotes and texts?
3. What is the overall organizing principle for this essay? Does Kutcher provide a thesis and then support it, or does he work toward a conclusion? Is this method effective?

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. Kutcher wrote this essay to make an argument regarding how technology is changing the face of romance, but there is also an alternative reason behind the publication of this piece. What is that reason, and how might it affect the reliability or bias of the writer?
2. Does Kutcher successfully answer the question presented in the title? Why or why not? What would you add to the argument to improve it?

3. Is Kutcher qualified to comment authoritatively on this subject? Why or why not? If not, who might be better qualified and why?

WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. Kutcher argues, "The power of a handwritten letter is greater than ever" (para. 8). Write a short essay in which you explore the difference in tone and meaning between an e-mail and a handwritten letter. When is one appropriate and the other inappropriate? Why do we make these distinctions?
2. Write an essay responding to Kutcher's argument. Do you agree that text messages are, for the most part, unromantic? Why or why not? Do you disagree that we are neglecting romance in the digital age? Explain your opinion.
3. Aside from romance, what are some other aspects of communication that have changed through digitalization? Using Kutcher's essay as a model, write your own argument either defending or decrying an aspect of technology that has changed the way we communicate with each other.

Rebecca Armendariz

Chat History

[GOOD, September 2011]

BEFORE YOU READ

Texting, instant messaging, and e-mailing are all quick forms of communication that are replacing face-to-face and phone conversations. What are some of the benefits of these technologies, and what are some of the detriments?

WORDS TO LEARN

dissection (para. 4): the act of cutting something apart for examination or analysis (noun)

tandem (para. 11): having seats arranged one behind the other (adj)

Rebecca Armendariz is a writer based in Washington, D.C. Her work has been published in the Guardian, the Onion AV Club, Hairpin, Gridskipper, the Big Takeover, and GOOD magazine. Former online editor for the Washington Blade, she now works as a Web specialist for Altarum. She enjoys tea, reading magazines, and stand-up comedians.

Clark and I met on the Thursday before Labor Day, August 30, 2007. I don't know exactly when we first said I love you, but the first email exchange containing the phrase, which he casually includes before signing off, is dated October 3 of that year.

Nearly four years later, I sometimes type his email address in the search box in my Gmail. Hundreds of results pop up, and I'll pick a few at random to read. The ease of our everyday interactions is what kills me. The way we spoke to each other about what I'd bring home for dinner or whether it was a PBR or a Grolsch kind of night. In nearly every conversation, there is something that releases the pressure from my chest by forcing a giant laugh.

Clark: did you eat?

Me: yes i had soup and chips but whatever someone else has smells delish

Clark: k just as long as you ate something
how do you spell Bodasifa?

from Point Break?

Me: let me look it up

Bodhisattva

Clark: ?

really?

sattva?

Me: yep

it's a buddhism thing

I can break down Clark's illness into one diagnosis (metastatic melanoma), one prognosis (between 4 and 14 months to live), three surgeries, three clinical trials, seven hospital stays, three doses of chemotherapy, and five weeks of hospice care. The first surgery, a deep lymph-node dissection of the left groin, and its subsequent days-long hospital stay, spanned the first week of April 2008. The second surgery, which removed the cancer's recurrence from underneath the tender flesh of the first, was June 11. He was hospitalized from November 11–19 and again from December 1–6. On February 20, 2009, he had emergency surgery to remove a tumor the size of a baseball from his gut. He started chemotherapy on April 15.

Me: i am sorry i wigged out last night.

Clark: oh baby do not say sorry

Me: i really was just exhausted! that's obvious.

Clark: I totally understand

i know you were so tired and I know that you want to make sure I'm going to be okay and safe

and really makes me want to cry

Clark: i feel the same way about you

I want to always want to make sure you are safe

and warm and comfortable

Clark: and I didn't mean to yell but you are so stubborn

Me: no i know

haha SO ARE YOU, for the record

Clark died two months later. He was 33. I was 25.

6

I spent a lot of time after his death looking at photographs of us camping, at a friend's wedding, with my family at our first Thanksgiving. I listened to "The Ocean" by Sunny Day Real Estate, the song he heard when he imagined me walking down the aisle at our wedding. I cried when Archers of Loaf, the one band Clark insisted make an appearance on any playlist, announced its reunion tour. I watched YouTube videos of his band, Statehood, scanning for hints of what his voice sounded like, afraid I'd already forgotten.

7

The memories of my life as Clark's caretaker buzz in the back of my brain at a low hum. Two years ago, I was on autopilot when I changed his diaper or scrubbed the smell of urine from the armchair he sat and slept in. I didn't question how I found the strength to support his crumbling frame as we hobbled to the bathroom. Without even thinking about it, I'd roll my jeans halfway up my calves and get into the bathtub to pull him up. I shaved his face and gave him his painkillers at perfectly timed intervals. I dressed him.

8

Now my breath quickens when the answer to a clue in my crossword, "Body fluid buildup," is "edema," the condition in Clark's left leg that caused it to swell and dwarf his right. My eyes sting as I read a newspaper article describing the latest study to come out of a cancer conference, which involves a drug trial that Clark was too sick to participate in. I slink off to the bathroom with my head down, ignoring my friends at the bar, when I catch a glimpse of his obituary, which hangs on the back of a door at the Black Cat, the bar where we met.

9

I go looking for evidence of our partnership that's not tied to a memory of me sleeping on two chairs pushed together next to his hospital

10

This is a history of our relationship that we didn't intend to write.

bedside. My Gmail is a priceless hoard of us making plans, telling inside jokes, calling each other "snoodle" and "bubbies." I type his name into the search field and enter a world of the unscripted dialogue that filled our 9-to-5 existence. I become immersed in the coziness of our union. In hundreds

of chats automatically saved to my account, we express our love for each

other readily and naturally in our own private speech. This is a history of our relationship that we didn't intend to write, one that runs parallel to the one authored by his uncontainable illness.

Me: i love you :)

Clark: you do?

11

Me: yes more den anythin

Clark: I see

well, I'd say we have a problem because I love you

your love might clash with my love, resulting into a shitstorm of unicorns, babies, puppy dogs, and couples ice skating

it could get ugly

Me: hahahahahahahaha

and tandem bikes

I remember the pharmaceutical names of his medications — 12
amitryptiline, Zoloft, methadone. It's only thanks to my archive of our Gchat conversations — me from my work computer, he from our apartment's couch or his hospital bed — that I remember that we called gabapentin his "Guptas." They were brown, like the skin of Dr. Gupta, his kidney specialist. The Dilaudid pills he took for breakthrough pain were "hydros," a nickname for the drug listed on the label, hydromorphone hydrochloride. He'd imitate a surfer when asking for them.

Clark: man, my left leg is useless

13

I really hope this chemo helps

I can barely use it anymore

Me: i know

it will work.

Clark: figure I'll notice there first

Me: you never know

Clark: when are you leaving?

can I get a nap in?

Me: yes!

see you in like 45 minutes snoopy

Clark: cause i can't seem to think of when I can get a nap in BEFORE practice cause when you get home I just want to hang with you

Me: yes, take a nap!

Clark: k i love you

Me: i will get gatorades and ensures. and be right home. love you.

Clark: LOVE YOU!

It was winter 2008 and Clark was taking part in a trial, his second, at the National Institutes of Health. It involved a drug called high-dose IL-2, which stimulates white blood cells to grow and divide in an attempt to overtake the cancer. The treatment has a slim chance of success but it's one of the only regimens approved specifically for melanoma by the FDA. Patients are typically bedridden with dizzying flu-like symptoms and are uncharacteristically irritable or moody. Clark was no exception.

He had a high fever and soiled the bed again and again during his second IL-2 treatment. During this stint at the hospital, the fourth dose of drug sent him mentally over the edge. He screamed at me. I left the hospital in tears.

It was the only time during his illness that I elected not to sleep next to him. When I arrived at my friend Alyson's, I had a text message from him that said, "You left me, so I'm leaving you." Two hours later, he called me sobbing, apologizing. He barely remembered specifics the next day, but I still get a lump in my throat when I think about it. We had this conversation three days after we returned home:

Clark: you make me so happy
everyday is wonderful with you

Me: really?

Clark: no

Me: you promise?

Clark: not really

I'm just playing with your emotions

Me: :(

Clark: YES REALLY
stupid pants

In December 2008, Clark called my mother to apologize for the fact that I wasn't going to be home to spend Christmas Day with them. I know it's not uncommon for people my age to be away from their families during the holidays, but my mother, brother, sister, and I had never spent a Christmas apart. Clark and I opened presents at his mother's house that year. My mom told him not to worry. "There'll be plenty of other Christmases," she said.

"Come on, Mom," he said.

She told me this after he was gone, and it haunts me. Did he always know he was going to die, or did he think there was a chance? Did he believe me when I told him stories of the people whose tumors had shrunk to nothing, seemingly by magic? It was easier for me to play cheerleader; I wasn't the one gritting my teeth through the pain.

Clark: babies, did they say the next treatment is rough? like IL-2? 21

Me: the one they want to do to you?

Clark: yes

Me: i don't think anything compares to IL2.

but i think it is semi rough. i think it's less puking, pooping, ill feeling and more weak, tired. however, IL2 has a really low success rate, the other treatment has a high one.

i was reading testimonies of people who have been cured by the treatment, this was a few months ago, and the one guy wrote that absolutely nothing compares to IL2.

honey?

Clark: i can't stop crying

its hard to read the computer

i'm so happy

Me: yes baby

Clark: :-D

we are going to do it baby

Me: i'm so happy too

i know we are

Chemotherapy was our last-ditch effort to beat back the cancer. 22
There was the tiniest chance that it would work. If all went according to plan, the chemo would shrink his tumors to manageable levels, and we'd return to the NIH to participate in a different clinical trial, the one with the best success rate.

Clark: I would go to my mothers 23
chill there

u can start having a life again

Me: baby, my life is being with you and fighting this cancer
that's what it is

i do not resent you, and i never will

i love you and we're in this together

After three weeks of chemo, it was clear we were losing. Cancer had 24
eaten away at his hip, attacked his spinal cord, and created a blockage in his large intestine that necessitated a colostomy bag. We then chose to stop trying to wipe out his disease and focus only on treating his pain. He lasted five more weeks.

Clark: dr. kitano called 25

Me: to say what?

Clark: email coming

um, the message said that she understands our concerns and thinks they are still able to provide us the original treatment and just wanted to talk to us more about it

Me: WHAT!

Clark: um, she still wants us to keep the appt. on Tuesday

Me: oh my god

I close my eyes and hear him tell me through exhaustion and tears how much he's going to miss me after he dies. How beautiful I look sitting by the window of his hospice room. 26

Me: got her email 27

oh my god

they're going to do it

Clark: whenever Kitano does something totally rad i play that "Are you ready for the sex girls" song from Revenge of the Nerds in my head

Me: HAHHAHAHAHA

tell her that.

Clark: i should make her a mix tape

Now I live with my best friend, Cella. Some days I go to send her a message, searching for her name and the colored dot that accompanies it. I'll try her even if she appears offline, because I need to tell her I'll pick up coffee on the way home or ask if I can open the wine she left in the fridge. 28

And there it is: his name is right under hers. I move the cursor over it, and the thumbnail pops up with all of his information. His address, clarkstatehood@gmail.com. His icon, a photo of Patrick Swayze from *Road House*. A little gray dot, just like the one next to Cella's name. As if he's just not available to chat at the moment. 29

Clark is offline. 30

VOCABULARY/USING A DICTIONARY

1. What is the definition of the word *slink* (para. 9)? What are some synonyms?
2. What does *archive* (para. 12) mean, and what are the origins of the word?
3. Name one synonym of the word *regimen* (para. 14) and provide its definition.

RESPONDING TO WORDS IN CONTEXT

1. In paragraph 4, Armendariz writes, "I can break down Clark's illness into one diagnosis (metastatic melanoma) [and] one prognosis (between 4 and 14 months to live) ..." What is the difference between *diagnosis* and *prognosis*?
2. In one of her chats, Armendariz says, "I am sorry I wiggged out last night" (para. 5). What does *wiggged out* mean, and when would it be an appropriate term to use? When would it be inappropriate?

3. Armendariz says, "My Gmail is a priceless hoard of us making plans, telling inside jokes . . ." (para. 10). What does *hoard* mean?

DISCUSSING MAIN POINT AND MEANING

1. What do you think is the main point of this essay?
2. What is the tone of this essay, and how does it reflect the situation?
3. What emotions do you think the author was trying to elicit? As a reader, what did you feel while you were reading the piece?

EXAMINING SENTENCES, PARAGRAPHS, AND ORGANIZATION

1. What does Armendariz mean when she says, "The ease of our everyday interactions is what kills me" (para. 2)? How does this set the tone for the rest of the essay?
2. How do the chat transcripts function in the essay? How do they contribute to the narrative, and why might the author have chosen to include them rather than just describe them?
3. What is the significance of the last line in the essay?

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. The media often criticize using technology as a form of communication: Gchat, texting, and e-mailing are usually portrayed as impersonal and sterile ways of talking. Does this essay reflect that idea? Why or why not?
2. Do the chat transcripts provide the reader with enough detail about the relationship between the writer and Clark? Why or why not?
3. How do chats like this differ from letters or e-mails? How might they affect someone differently than a long-form letter upon reading them after a death, as the author does here?

WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. Write a short essay in which you describe a particularly important or moving conversation you had using Gchat (or another instant messenger). Why was it important, and if you are able to go back and read the conversation, how does rereading it affect you?
2. Write a short essay in which you analyze the structure of "Chat History." Discuss why the chat transcripts appear when they do in the essay, and explore the difference in tone and word choice between the chat transcripts and the formal narrative.
3. Write a short narrative essay in the style of Armendariz's, switching between prose and conversation. If you do not have access to a text or IM conversation, do your best to recreate a meaningful conversation that you have had, and reflect on what that conversation means to you as you look back on it.

Shawn Ghuman (student essay)

Is Technology Destroying Social Bonds?

[*Collegiate Times*, Virginia Tech, February 22, 2012]

BEFORE YOU READ

How often do you use social media like Facebook and Twitter to communicate with friends? Has it replaced other forms of communication in your life?

WORDS TO LEARN

witty (para. 5): characterized by quick, sharp humor (adj)

Over the past decade, social media has developed into a style of communication fit for our generation. People are able to present themselves in unimaginable ways, allowing them to express interests and dislikes. But most importantly, Facebook, Twitter, and other networking sites serve as tools for procrastination.

While chatting with friends, reading statuses, and skimming tweets, I wonder what happened to traditional communication in the current tech-savvy era. Our lives seemingly revolve around receiving digital messages, as we spend countless hours staring at screens and communicating with people online even though they are geographically close.

I understand social media is a beautiful thing, providing us an opportunity to stay instantly in touch with others locally, nationally, and internationally. Still, these advances come with costs. Rather than speaking face-to-face with others, we articulate our thoughts and feelings through short messages, often using smiley faces and abbreviations like “lol” to express emotions.

Reality check. The newfound ease that comes with social media may be causing anxiety among those of us afraid of in-person conversations.

We can edit and re-edit digital messages as much as we like.

Is it a fear that natural discourse is not cool enough anymore? Think about being at a party but having no one to talk to. What is the first thing you do? You look at your phone. Your inbox has become a security blanket to cushion your uneasiness. The addictive use of social media may also stem from a fear of being misunderstood. We can

Shawn Ghuman is a junior at Virginia Tech, with a major in Communications.

edit and re-edit digital messages as much as we like until we decide we've perfectly conveyed our thoughts.

We can make ourselves sound intelligent, meaningful, or witty. Cell phones have become the faces of their users, and messages have become direct reflections of our personalities. People can sound like whomever they choose. However, there are rules regarding messaging. Guys should only text girls three days after they first meet, or else they will come across as desperate. If people respond to a text message within a minute, they will be perceived as overly anxious. But what about participating in real, genuine conversation these days? That seems scarier than anything.

Have you ever been on a date with someone you spent so much time messaging online and then discovered you had nothing to say to him or her in person? Somehow, you felt more comfortable speaking to that person through texts and Facebook messages than in a face-to-face conversation. That experience is more common than people think and can only be described as awkward.

I can't help but wonder what life would be like if it were similar to that of *Friends* or *Seinfeld*, when "social media" meant only telephones and answering machines. People's lives might reflect who they truly are, not what is on your Facebook profile or how many "likes" you received on your latest status update.

Digital communication has taken away from what makes humans thrive — the ability to express thoughts through in-person discussion. The more people use social media, the more self-conscious they become, behaving more like guarded shells of their former selves.

My call to action is not for people to stop texting or deactivate their Facebooks, but rather to measure their lives by the days they lead.

Texting and typing are tools that have only given a bigger role to the thumb; they are not the only way to communicate. A previous generation was referred to as Gen X. The way our generation is socializing, it ought to be known as Generation teXt.

VOCABULARY/USING A DICTIONARY

1. What is the definition of *discourse* (para. 4), and what are the origins of the word?
2. The word *awkward* (para. 6) has many different definitions. How is the word used most often now?
3. What are the origins of the word *anxious* (para. 5)?

RESPONDING TO WORDS IN CONTEXT

1. In the sentence, "The addictive use of social media may also stem from a fear of being misunderstood" (para. 4), how is the word *stem* being used?

2. When Ghuman writes, "But what about participating in real, genuine conversation these days" (para. 5), what does the word *genuine* refer to, and what is he implying?
3. In paragraph 8, Ghuman argues, "Digital communication has taken away from what makes humans thrive." What does *thrive* mean?

DISCUSSING MAIN POINT AND MEANING

1. What do *Friends* and *Seinfeld* represent in this essay? What point is the author making about those shows?
2. What is the author asking readers to do regarding social media? Does he think social media should be abandoned altogether?
3. How does Ghuman believe social media is changing modern communication?

EXAMINING SENTENCES, PARAGRAPHS, AND ORGANIZATION

1. Who is the intended audience for this essay? How did you determine your answer?
2. What is the purpose of the second-to-last paragraph? What does Ghuman want that paragraph to accomplish?
3. What phrase signals that Ghuman is going to stop discussing the benefits of social media and start discussing the negative aspects of it?

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. Do you agree with Ghuman's statement, "Digital communication has taken away from what makes humans thrive—the ability to express thoughts through in-person discussion" (para. 8)? Why or why not?
2. Ghuman concedes that social media makes communication easier and faster. Expand on this point; what other benefits does social media have? How can it improve communication for individuals and businesses?
3. Social media also bombards users with advertisements and marketing campaigns. How do you think this affects your daily life? Has social media changed your buying habits in any way?

WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. Write a short essay describing how your life would be different without social media. Use specific examples of how you use texts, Facebook, or Twitter in your daily life, and how it would change if you were to stop using social media.
2. How else has technology changed human interaction? List three advancements not mentioned by Ghuman and describe whether you believe they are detrimental or helpful.

3. Write a response to Ghuman's essay in which you either defend social media as a useful tool or further support the idea that it is detrimental to in-person communication. Cite examples from your personal experience to support this claim.

LOOKING CLOSELY

Including the Reader

Experienced writers know that readers like to feel included as part of the audience and that their personal experiences are being taken into account. One way to accomplish this is to switch at times to the second person singular — that is, to directly address “you” the reader. This is especially the case when the writer feels that a particular experience is so commonly felt that readers will immediately identify with it. This has the added advantage of persuading the reader that the writer knows what he or she is talking about.

Note how Shawn Ghuman in the fourth paragraph of “Is Technology Destroying Social Bonds?” makes his point about the way social media can at times ease our anxiety. He switches from speaking in the first person plural (“we,” “us,” “our”) about “our” general experiences with social media to someone’s (“your”) specific experience at a party. That switch to “you” puts the reader directly into the picture and vividly reinforces the writer’s general observation about social anxiety.

1
People in general
 (“us”)

2
Now moves to
second person
singular (“you”)

3
Returns to first
person plural
 (“we”)

Reality check. The newfound ease that comes with social media may be causing anxiety among those of us afraid (1) of in-person conversations. Is it a fear that natural discourse is not cool enough anymore? Think about being at a party but having no one to talk to. What is the first thing you do? You look at your phone. Your inbox has become a security blanket to cushion your uneasiness. (2) The addictive use of social media may also stem from a fear of being misunderstood. We can edit (3) and re-edit digital messages as much as we like until we decide we’ve perfectly conveyed our thoughts.