

FOOTNOTE TO DISAPPEARANCE

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About the Author

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FOOTNOTE TO DISAPPEARANCE

Provenance

1. I have removed the salutation for your safety. Addresses can be traced faster than fingerprints.
2. The document to which these notes once clung has been pulped and bleached, then reincarnated as state letterhead.^a
3. If you're reading this, Eva L., you've already broken one seal. The remaining seals are optional, though conscience rarely is.
4. Cabinet 004 smelled of mold and warm printer ink...a quarrel between rot and permanence that replayed each dawn after the dehumidifiers slept. Folders exhaled mildew, spines curled; each morning the ink reset itself. Letters kept their rank. I learned to breathe through my mouth and the air tasted of damp linen briefly scorched by a photocopier bulb.

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5. My title was *Records Integrity Officer* (2017 – 2023), but integrity is a deferrable line item. Amendable. Loss-mitigated.^b
 6. Inside the cabinet, behind the annual payroll tax binders, I kept a plain envelope marked *COFFEE FILTERS*. Its true contents are now yours.
 7. Your father signed in at 14:02, left-hand slanted, as though time itself were pushing him forward.^c
 8. Visitor Pass #7781 was issued, barcode intact. I swiped it for him because the kiosk froze whenever it sensed rain.^d
 9. The hallway camera recorded 13 steps, a wave, and then static...static I introduced by looping 30 seconds of empty corridor.
 10. [00:14:02–00:14:32 — corridor empty]
[00:14:02–00:14:32 — corridor empty]
 11. I tell you this not for absolution...absolution is archival fiction...issued so the living can file the dead.

12. The pen I pressed into his hand—government-issue, barrel already cracked—sliced through three plies of carbon. His signature embossed itself on the next page, a log reserved for a market vendor detained with seditious pamphlets and a bayong holding soap shards and half a kilo of rice. When I lifted the sheet, their names overlapped like misaligned plates; graphite shadows clung together, two names offset, a misprint that won't wash.

13. Your father laughed at our laminated emergency exits, swearing the building would burn like the final verse of a hymn: quiet embers first, then a roof-raising chord of flame. I filed the comment under *ATMOSPHERICS*:

IRRELEVANT

————— [14. *REDACTED*] —————

15. Three days later, UMBRA 12-C (internal) reclassified *hymn* as “metaphor indicating premeditated arson.” I initialed the margin: *context misread // useful*.

16. Useful is the archive's favorite word; it calls each mouthful a service.

17. Eva, your name surfaces only once in the logs...on a postcard tucked into his coat pocket, sunset printed so bright it whited out the sea.

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18. He handed me the postcard, asked if stamp glue still tasted like seaweed. I answered with protocol: *Personal effects remain personal*.
19. There was, in that instant, a hush I have never recovered, a silence that seemed to widen the room even as it pressed on my ribs. The postcard glinted between us, the sea obliterated by its own sun, and the ceiling fans held their breath. I felt the future tilt (an archival premonition) and knew I would spend years laminating lesser silences to approximate this one.
20. Gap management is an accredited skill. Entire seminars teach us which silences to laminate.

21. By 18:45, the building lights dimmed for power rationing. Your father was still inside. My console displayed *Occupancy: Zero*.

(LOOP ACTIVE)

22. Official logs state the fire drill ended without incident. Unofficially, the drill never happened, though the siren was real enough to frighten the pigeons off the window ledge.

(Drill Report DR-17: 'NO INCIDENT')

23. I slid the fallen feather into an evidence sleeve and keyed its hue into the system—approx. CMYK 0-4-23-0—though no algorithm could translate the quicksilver green along the quill's edge. Classification: *Unidentified Avian, Corridor Four*. Privately I called it proof that gravity might be reversed, that something with wings had slipped through fluorescent bureaucracy and found, however briefly, an updraft.^e

24. The next morning, Cabinet 004 received Directive E-7: *Purge "Irrelevant Atmospherics" before quarterly audit*. I obeyed each verb but the last.

Acts of Preservation

28. The first lesson of archiving is triage: rescue what still hums beneath the stamp-ink, shelve what merely bleeds. My mistake: thinking paper breathes.

29. I enlisted at twenty-two, the monsoon year the Pampanga River rose past the window grilles and turned our kitchen into a brown aquarium. We floated bowls of rice to the neighbors; lids thumb-pressed shut. Above the waterline, photographs blistered in their frames, faces dissolving like sugar. When the military-green recruitment van idled outside, loudspeakers selling “waterproof futures,” I was bailing dishwater through a hole in the roof. The sergeant offered a bottle of Royal, a contract, and a seat beside crates of blank forms stacked higher than my shoulders. He said the Bureau of Records needed “swimmers,” people unafraid of drowning paper for a living. I signed with rain still dripping from my sleeves, watched the ink vein outward on the carbon copy, and felt the clause about loyalty anchor somewhere behind my ribs. As the L300 pulled away, I saw my mother through the flooded doorway, calf-deep and steady, her hand resting on the refrigerator listing like a coffin. No wave, no scold. She simply rewound the plastic string that kept her rosary from drifting, and that was permission enough.^{4f}

30. My entrance oath was witnessed by a ficus and an unplugged clock. Both outlived the undersecretary whose signature misrendered my name.

31. Protocol UMBRA / Version 12-C
“History may be amended for national coherence.”

32. Coherence tastes of chalk: dry, easily swallowed, suitable for scribbling over bones. Eva, that chalk still coats my tongue whenever I reread the postcard you never posted.

33. The first classified file I handled concerned Barangay Captain Rogelio S.—two index cards thin, but weighed down by a 1x1 photograph stapled crooked through his cheek. The dossier noted: *“Beloved in district, prone to impromptu poetry at fiestas, suspected of inciting land-lease protests.”* An addendum in a different hand added, almost tenderly: *“grows dwarf mangoes from seed.”*¹

traced the staple with a fingernail and imagined the official who drove it through flesh and emulsion in one gesture... administrative violence so economical it passed for clerical neatness. The back of the second card was blank save for a rubber stamp reading *UNLOCATED*. Four syllables as final as a grave yet lighter than air, ready to file.

34. *UMBRA 12-C lingered: that permissive “may”—underlined twice—already rewriting my margins.*

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35. UMBRA 12-C—HARMONIZATION EXCERPT
 History may be amended for national coherence.
 Utility > Provenance.
 Deviations shall be harmonized.
36. At night I dreamed of cabinets flooding, labels detaching like dead fish scales. I woke to the smell of wet paper that wasn't there... Phantom mildew.
37. You learn to read margins: coffee stains, thumb grease. The pressure of signatures bruising the sheet beneath. Ghost data, everywhere.
38. The poem arrived misfiled inside a surveillance docket. Four lines about typhoon glass and mothers who glide through walls.^g
39. Poetry, in the archive, is contraband; it refuses to state objective.
40. I kept the poem. Not for evidence but for weather. Poetry can clear a room faster than smoke.

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41. Smoke came later. One November dawn I opened the incinerator hatch, fed it three obsolete directives and the poem's carbon copy. Ash rose, spelled nothing, settled on my tongue.^h
42. That was preservation, Eva. To ensure a thing existed nowhere the state could catalogue a pulse.
43. Guilt is a ledger that won't close. Every deletion accrues interest.
44. *UMBRA Addendum 4: "Any record older than its utility shall be deemed volatile."* Utility ages faster than paper.
45. Utility also pays overtime. I took it, bought a waterproof Bible for my mother. She kept it in a plastic drum with the rice.

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46. I shredded Order #F27-88—the one authorizing mass arrests, dated a week *after* the sweep. Back-dating is error. Forward-dating is intent.
47. I fed the undersecretary’s gilded crest into the office shredder and the gears whined like a dog locked outside overnight as gold leaf curled stubborn against the steel teeth and the motor overheated SHREDDER STATUS: THERMAL CUT-OUT TRIPPED // RESTART REQUIRED until the air thickened with the smell of scorched varnish and old coins and in the jammed throat I saw shredded margins flutter like wings around the untouched coat-of-arms, the Republic still roaring even as its statutes were minced, and when maintenance arrived with a wrench and a shrug and muttered that high-office stationery was armored for mishandling we levered the emblem loose and it slid out almost pristine save for a single silver bite and the technician slipped it into his pocket whispering “souvenir lang, boss” before resetting the circuit so the blades stirred again, hungrier than before, and I fed them the rest of Order #F27-88 in strips no wider than a matchstick and listened until the whine sank into a satisfied purr.
48. —~~I followed orders.~~ *FEAR COUNTERSIGNED*

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49. Fear travels through the office like interdepartmental memo. No signature, yet every palm bears its faint graphite.
50. Cabinet 004 grew heavier with ghosts who couldn't be filed. I began labeling shelves by scent: diesel, rain rot, formaldehyde, hope.ⁱ
51. PRE-AUDIT CHECKLIST (extract)
- | | | |
|--|---|-----------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> "Irrelevant Atmospherics" | → | bin _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Visitor log anomalies | → | bin _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Poetry | → | bin _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unnumbered grief | → | bin _____ |
52. Hope is the lightest and sinks to the bottom; dust layers by irony.
53. One morning the aircon failed. Humidity curled case files into question marks. The questions stayed even after the repair.^j
54. I kept the curls, pressed them flat, and called it restoration. You will judge whether that verb holds.


Redaction / Recreation

55. The quarterly audit circled closer, all red deadlines and teeth. I could hear them clicking through drywall.
56. *Directive 19-B: "Align narrative risk with deterrence metrics."*
[TRANSLATION: Furnish the state a villain it can invoice.]
57. Villainy is a budget line; innocence costs more to store.

58. Your father's dossier was thin as mercy...four sheets and a rust-flecked staple. Page one: receipts for two panels of marine plywood, destined to patch the barangay hall roof. Page two: minutes from a Saturday literacy circle, children's names drifting in crayon along the margin. Page three: an unsigned warning for "excessive noise during basketball hours," the ink diluted by sweat rings. The final leaf was blank, a palimpsest awaiting an indictment not yet imagined. Even the staple seemed embarrassed by the scarcity of its burden.

59. Inside, a Polaroid: smile unremarkable, eyes too kind for legends. Kindness won't scan; machines read edges.

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60. My cursor hovered over his name for a full minute, blinking like a moth trapped in fluorescent dusk. Each flash interrogated my pulse. Commit. Revise. Retreat. I zoomed until the pixels disintegrated into meaningless squares, praying abstraction might absolve intent, yet the letters reassembled, patient, awaiting sentence. Somewhere a server fan exhaled, reminding me hesitation itself is logged. The hawk within me folded its wings, hunger ratified in silence, and dove.^{^k}
61. I remembered the river inching up our stairs, swallowing my sister's report cards.
62. *Edit Mode ON.* The monitor brightened as if applauding.
63. [SYSTEM] Overwrite 'Community Organizer' → 'Agitational Ringleader'?
[] YES [] YES
Selection recorded twice.

-
64. I struck out “Community Organizer” and typed “Agitational Ringleader.” A promotion, really. Danger carries benefits.
65. Violence on paper travels faster than blood.
66. Required field: Incident Report. I invented a brick, a checkpoint, a guard’s shattered wrist. Brick is cheap, believable, and fits any hand.∧I
67. Back-dated the riot by 10 days to match a policy draft pending approval. Evidence pre-rolling toward its cause.
68. Heartbeat synced with progress bar: 41%...67%...83. Each percent locked another door behind me.
- **69.** [entry intentionally absent]
70. 
- (This paragraph removed under the Data Privacy Act, though I wrote it myself.)*

71. When the spinner froze on COMPLETE, the fluorescents resumed their low hum, yet the room felt posthumous, a morgue where the corpse was a freshly murdered story. Dust motes hung unshelved, footnotes without pages. The vents breathed smaller, as though secrecy required less oxygen. I waited for a celebratory chime, some proof the system approved my efficiency, but only the damp tick of the wall clock answered, each second sealing the alteration deeper into official night.

72. Five mirrored servers accepted the upload. Each echo deepened the bruise.^m

73. I told myself: make him a monster and no one will look for the man.

74. Told myself, too: monsters' families receive grants, grief stipends, carefully worded apologies. Someday.

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75. Consolation is manufactured. Scented, shrink-wrapped. (Tax-deductible.)
76. Only then did it surface, truth so simple it scalded: by expanding his crime, I expanded your waiting. No body released, no verdict possible. Limbo with better funding. I pressed CONFIRM anyway.
77. Confirmation Code: 6E-11-FALL. The server names irony better than poets.
78. I printed two copies. Toner snow settled black into my cuffs, a mild plague easily rinsed.
79. The minister initialed the margin, breath mint sharp. “Efficient,” he said, as if the word were holy.
- (MARGIN: ✓)*
80. That night I scrubbed my hands until the skin rasped, palms blanching beneath soap that smelled faintly of aloe and formaldehyde. Grey water spiralled down the drain, carrying toner flecks and a residue I could not name. I thought of surgeons washing before opening a chest, of priests rinsing wine from chalices... rituals pretending water absolves intent. The faucet squealed, warning it possessed no sacrament for me, yet I kept scouring, searching for a silence beneath the foam. Steam lettered the mirror in a language I couldn't file, a gospel of smears and stuck keys. Under the tap the bubbles opened eyes—hundreds—each reflecting my hands until they were not my hands. Watching it whirl away, I pictured you upriver, cupping water to your lips, unaware of its undertow.

Retention Schedule: Flood Year

81. Rain arrived as rumor. First the metallic smell, then the drum-roll on ductwork, then the uneasy silence of floors listening.

82. At 05:12 the Emergency Broadcast barked “*Stage-3 inundation expected. Secure archives to elevated zones.*” The command scrolled faster than boots moved

83. See ¶2: *There were no floods that year.* And yet the corridor filled, ankle-deep, with something that called itself proof.ⁿ

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84. WEATHER BULLETIN 12-A
No inundation recorded metro-wide.
(*issued 05:10; superseded 05:12*)
85. My phone alarms chirped in chorus. Battery Low. Network Lost. Pray. Only the last stayed lit.
86. Water knifed beneath Cabinet 004's door, nosing across the tiles with the stealth of a thief already fluent in the locks. It arrived carrying the metallic sweetness of drowned toner, a perfume printers' exhale only at death, and as the tide kissed the bottom drawers I heard a delicate unbinding—the micro-hinges inside ring binders flexing like ribs. The flood began a wet litany of catalog numbers, barcode psalms sluicing between tiles until the grout foamed with prayer. Ink is the first to panic, serif limbs dissolving, signatures scrambling for higher ground, proclamations blurring into pleas no algorithm will ever resuscitate. Folders rolled and sang under their breath, *annex, index, appendix*, paper tongues wagging ink like blood.
87. Transformers hummed overhead, a thousand bees debating whether to sting the dark.

88. I watched boxes float. Truth waded out the exit like a drunk god.

89. A blue spark sluiced down a conduit. For a second the hall fluoresced like a fish's belly.
Then black.

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90. Your father's dossier bobbed by, sealed plastic pouch fogging with its own exhalation. I caught it, felt the ridiculous thump of my pulse against polyvinyl.
91. I climbed a shelf (wet rungs, paper blisters) until ceiling tiles kissed my shoulders. Elevation is a temporary theology.^{^o}
92. Siren inside, siren outside: duet of blame.
93. By noon a memo auto-generated on every terminal: "DATA LOSS JUSTIFICATION. Force Majeure Event (Hydro). Initiate Retention Purge 7a."
- The purge button gleamed like a confession booth.^{^p}
94. RETENTION LEDGER, excerpt

FILE TITLE	STATUS	ACTION
Barangay 173 Curfew Fatalities (Draft)	<i>LOST</i>	PURGE
Cabinet 004 Visitor Log 14:02	<i>DAMP</i>	HOLD
Literacy Drive Accounts: Year End	<i>DRY</i>	SAVE

-
95. *Eva L.—Incoming Access Req* | 16:18:59 | P—ND—NG
96. Saved is relative. Damp pages grow black feathers if you turn your back.
97. *See ¶70.*
98. That night I dreamed your father handing me a towel the size of a flag, its weave sodden with river silt. He said nothing; instead he wrung it once, and from the fabric fell vowels without consonants, sounds too soft to enter any record. Consonants stayed behind like fish bones in the nap, and the room flooded with swollen alphabets—tilde, hook, breve, caron, ogonek—diacritics blinking like minnows. “Not everything dries,” the gesture implied. The towel kept unfurling, a river’s skin without borders, a flag for the country of Wet where cabinets drift past and oaths come apart word by word. I woke clutching the sheet as though it were the towel’s wet hem, convinced I could still feel current sliding through the threads. Water drained from my fists, leaving the granular sting of sentences unfinished.
99. The flood receded by inches, leaving a slick film over every verb. Walking sounded like pages eating themselves.
100. I pried open Cabinet 004 and hinges wept rust. Inside, the envelope marked *COFFEE FILTERS* clung to the back wall, stubbornly buoyant.
101. I slit it, removed the postcard of the sunset... colors running like melted crayons toward a horizon that no longer existed.

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102. Mildew bloomed in the shape of archipelagos. The room smelled of rehearsal funerals.
103. This is when I decided to keep something alive.
104. I spread pages across the loading bay, sun-bleached them under afternoon glare until words curled into scorched handwriting of their own.
105. At 16:40 the sky cleared, absurdly blue, as if the storm were a rumor we had believed too well.^{^q}
106. New directives keyed in overnight:
*“WATER DAMAGE = OPPORTUNITY.
Re-narrate gaps as civic resilience.”*
Resilience is the prettiest mask scarcity wears.
107. Pumps droned till dawn, sucking failure back into gutters. Trucks labeled *PURIFIER* carted it off to another district’s thirst.
108. Eva, archives prefer disasters... they legalize forgetting. I have begun writing against that preference. The ink blurs but the intent thickens.

Access Granted

109. I am writing in the fugitive hour, when fluorescent lights buzz softer, as if curious which of us will last the night.

110. 02:19. Audit servers cruise in low-power dream, fans exhaling a medicated hush. Corridor cameras replay yesterday's empty footage, looping a ghost that never ages. Motion sensors blink green, then indifferent. Relay choirs start up behind the walls—click click amen—tiny plastic teeth blessing nothing. In the sub-basement, the diesel generator dozes, heartbeat of a building that pretends it can live without us. I stand inside that pre-dawn murmur and realize the architecture feels almost maternal, but only in the way a womb might feel to a child already scheduled for eviction. The ducts chant a catalog of rooms—STORE, VOID, PROOF, LOSS—and the corridor unspools, longer than the building ever admits. The blue exit sign flickers. Even emergency wants to be believed.

111. Cabinet 004 stands open, paper edges crisped by the flood then ironed flat. It looks like nothing ever happened, another lie shelved.

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112. Drawer labelled COFFEE SUPPLIES: second false back.
 113. Inside: one flash drive, one feather sealed in plastic, and the postcard whose sunset has faded to pale confession.
 114. I logged none of these items. The inventory shows 3-in-1 sachets—three comforts, none of them truth; sweet, powdered consolation.
 115. Take only the drive, leave the rest. They are ballast, they sink attention away from you.

116. When you exit, walk as if you belong to morning.

117. I have routed keycard logs through Maintenance. Your passage will register as a mop bucket returning.

118. ACCESS CONTROL—ACU LOG

02:17:43 DOOR_3F_WEST GRANTED CRED: MAINT-ROUTE-
JNTRL

OBJ: BUCKET_RETURN

02:18:09 DOOR_3F_CORE GRANTED CRED: MAINT-ROUTE-
JNTRL

OBJ: BUCKET_RETURN

02:18:52 DOOR_3F_EAST GRANTED CRED: MAINT-ROUTE-
JNTRL

OBJ: BUCKET_RETURN

NOTE: Route mask active. No anomaly raised.

119. AUDIT HASH: 6E-11-FALL // expected 6E-11-FULL—MISMATCH

120. This is the closest I come to apology. Let this sentence serve as apology, confession, receipt, a single-line voucher against an inventory of harm. If language were honest, I would list every transgression.....each forged timestamp, each signature stapled through a face.....and sign beneath in blood-colored ink. Instead, I offer a half-line and an unlocked drawer, wagering that action will argue louder than contrition. An archivist knows paper absorbs anything if given time, even remorse, but it refuses to guarantee legibility. Should you accept the drive, let this note annotate my guilt: insufficient, but filed.

121. Whatever you do next, I won't witness. Archives teach disappearance by heart.

122. Password is the joke he told me while waiting: nevertru\$taform.

123. He laughed when he said it, like a man slipping a key into water.

124. Footsteps two floors down. Ledger-counting. Unsurprised.

125. AMENDMENTS REGISTER—POST-ISSUE

“hymn”	→	“chant”	→	“slogan”
“daughter”	→	“contact-of-record”		
“disappearance”	→	“voluntary absences”		
"witness"	→	"ambient presence"		
“forgery”	→	"format correction"		

Applied retroactively.

Indices rebuilt.

Prior citations harmonized.

126. I could flee, yet I stay. Someone must answer the first question they ask.

127. Questions arrive loaded; answers travel unaccompanied.

128. Remember: systems devour proof slower than rumor. Feed them in that order. Send rumor first like bait; the dockets open their mouths, numbers clicking like teeth until proof can pass.

129. If you open it, history returns wet and shivering. It leaks through the index tabs—A to L to gone—salting every heading, leaving a watermark of names. The card catalog coughs ribbons of dates, aliases, requisitions, funeral colors until the drawers breathe like gills. Microfilm uncoils across the desk, a black river of negatives hunting for a sun. Clothe it in daylight before it speaks.

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130. AUDIO CAPTURE 6E-11—PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT
 [00:00.0] breath
 [00:01.4] “Eva—”
 [00:02.0] [SILENCE 00:07.3]
 [00:09.3] “the file you asked—”
 [00:10.1] [line noise]
 [00:11.0] “—never the brick, only the—”
 [00:12.2] [SILENCE 00:04.9]
 [00:17.1] “if I could— if you—”
 [00:18.0] [SILENCE 00:09.8]
 [00:27.8] “dec—”
 SYSTEM: capture ended (battery exhausted)
131. *All witnesses: unavailable.*
132. —
133. File left open.

^o WATERLINE WL-004—READINGS

05:06 2 cm
05:12 7 cm
05:18 13 cm
05:24 21 cm

Note: ascent rate slowed after power loss.

See transformer event #87.

^p DATA LOSS JUSTIFICATION—FORM DLJ-7a

Cause: Force Majeure (Hydro) [x]

Scope: Cabinet 004 / Floors 2–3

Reviewer: _____

Time: _____

Button: PURGE (enable on dual-auth)

^q Blue is the cruelest solvent.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The narrative unfolds as marginalia attached to a vanished letter. Absence governs the form: redactions, missing numbers, and typographic stutters ask the reader to reconstruct what the state has made disappear. The narrator, a former Records Integrity Officer, alters a dissident's file to keep his post, then resists the machine by smuggling the concealed data to the man's daughter. The voice moves between bureaucratise and bruised lyric, echoing the closeness of authority and mourning in Philippine public life. The structure glances toward Borges's libraries and to local archival scandals where flood or fire "clean" the record. By staging history amended for national coherence, the piece reads record-keeping as slow violence—choreographing disaster, legalizing forgetting, rebranding erasure as resilience. It also courts repair: asking what can be salvaged once official memory fractures, and whether literature, by adopting the archive's procedures, can expose the seams and re-open the file.