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Encoded Self

Hidden messages lie beneath the surface of photographs, revealed through personal narratives. I weave themes of memory, familial history, and identity with photographs, texts, and textiles to make a tapestry of interconnected stories.

In Chapter One of Encoded Self, I begin with a photo of a wedding ceremony from my personal archive. While decoding this photograph's secrets, I invite you to reimagine and re-read not just this image, but your photos too, tracing how our intimate experiences interweave with grander patterns.

In Encoded Self, I explore the concept of steganography—the technique of concealing messages within ordinary objects—by blending it with personal storytelling.

I craft layers of meaning, zooming in and out of photos, forever asking: What is the story beneath the story?

On January 8, 2020, Flight PS752 from Tehran to Kyiv was shot down with missiles shortly after takeoff. All 176 occupants on board were killed. It was three days after the wedding party. I was lying on my bed when I heard the news. Farid, the groom, was on the flight. The dress I had worn to his ceremony still hung on my closet door —black with golden wefts.

My mother said the fabric wasn't proper for a wedding ceremony. I insisted and ordered it anyway. In the photos, the golden threads weren't visible. When it arrived, I hated it instantly. Still, I wore it. And the entire time, I loathed what I had on. Maybe it was my fault. Maybe I should have freed myself from those cursed golden threads sooner.

At the end of the ceremony, when the bride was about to throw her bouquet, I stood far away, watching from a distance. I made sure to stand where I was certain the flowers wouldn't come my way.
The bouquet flew straight into my arms. I was so flustered, I immediately tossed it back toward the couple. Maybe it was my fault. Maybe I should've kept it. I found the image of the bouquet in the corner of the wedding photo, "Farid"; red roses wrapped in white lace.
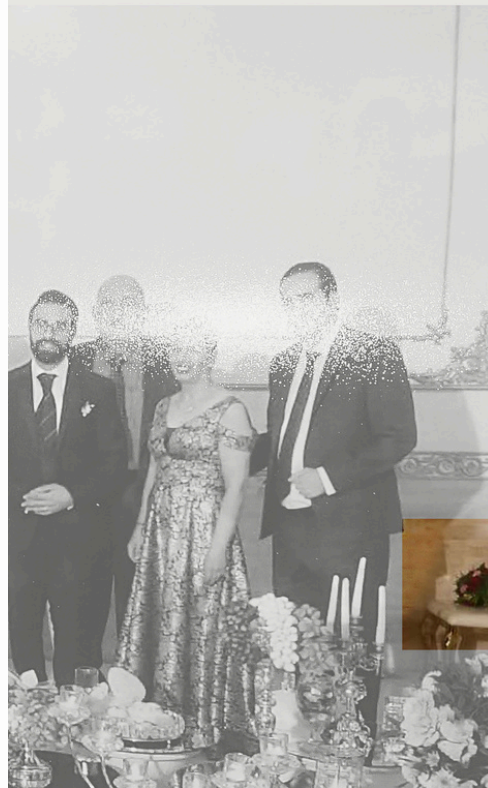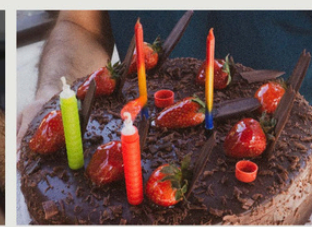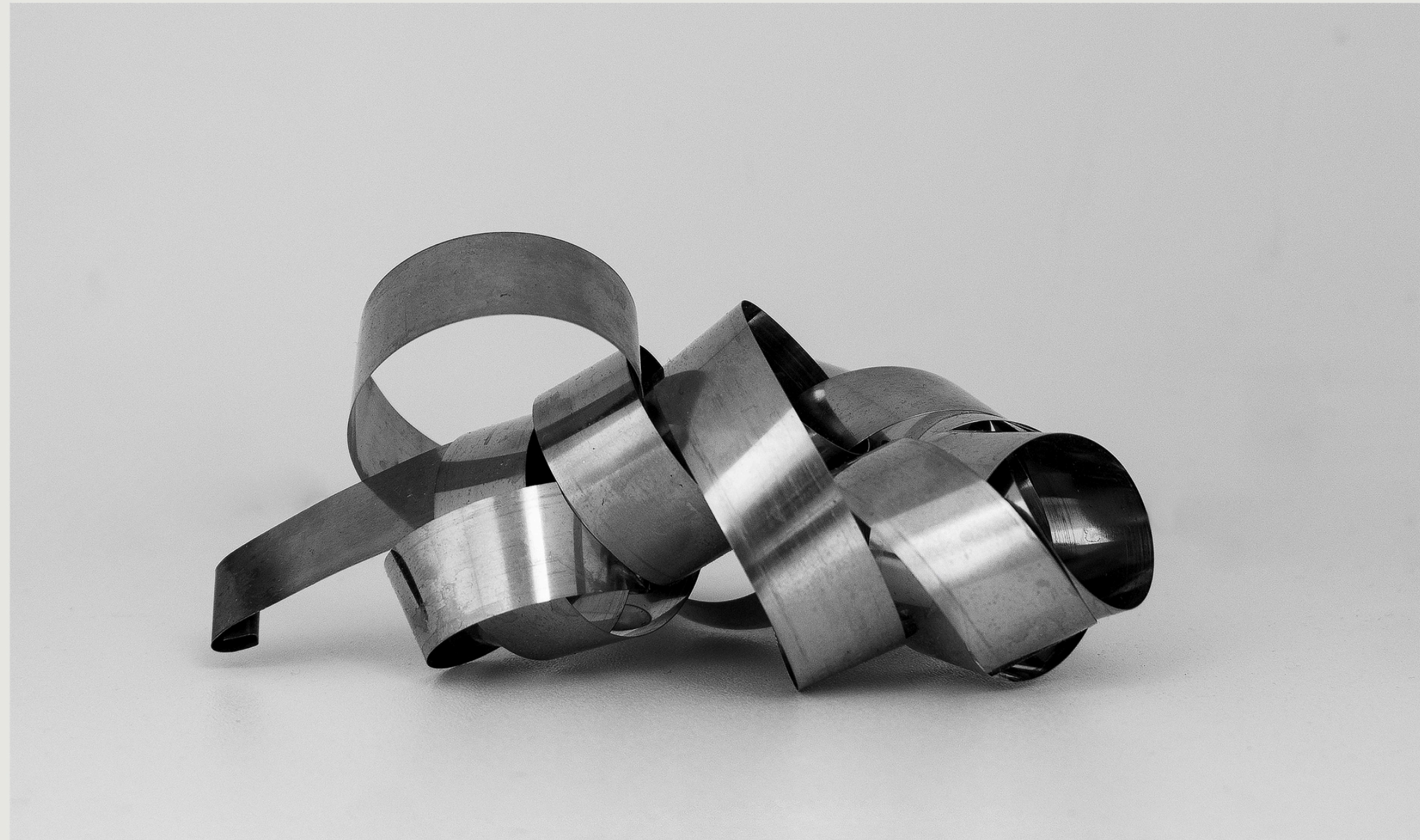
Among the remains of the plane crash, they found many photos from passengers' albums. The pictures were intact. You couldn't tell if these were the passengers themselves or their loved ones. The stories had vanished.
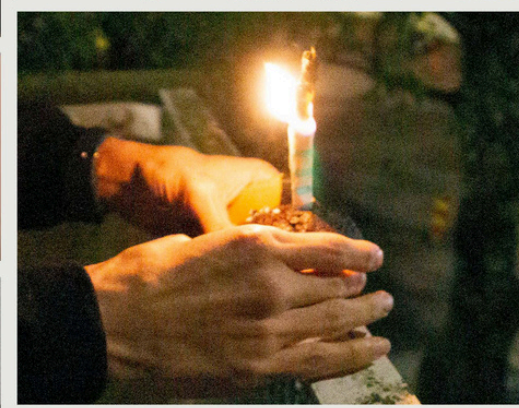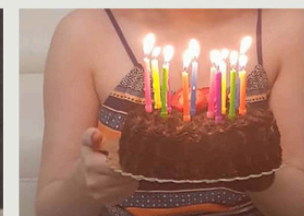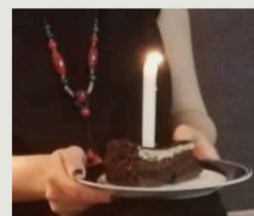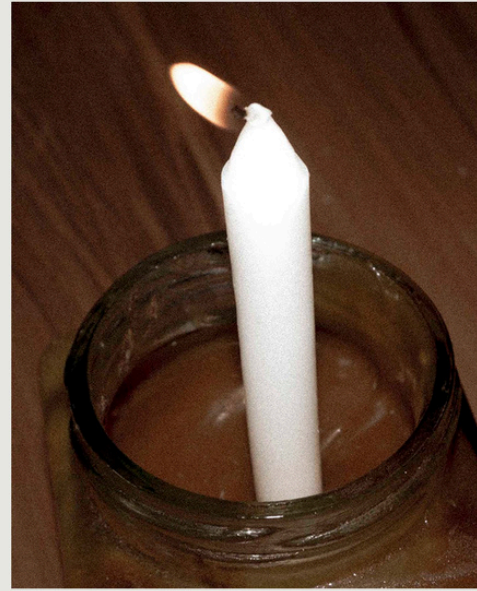
I think about the hundreds of candles I've lit at various ceremonies. Little spies. Twisted bodies, always in mourning.

Iron, paper, fabric, single shoes, toys, scraps of clothing, photos, diaries—these can survive a plane crash, but not the body that once carried them. Our fragile, breakable bodies.

After my father passed away, we went to his house to pack up his belongings. We unlocked a small room, the key to which he always kept with him. It was filled with rusted metal, broken glass, torn fabric, ripped bags, things without names, things you couldn't tell what they used to be part of. The entire room became eight large garbage bags, which we threw into the trash bin.

Look at the four candles placed in the corner of the wedding spread. They resemble four mourning bodies, standing there, out of place at the wedding. No one has even lit them. They've brought news from the future.

I think about those pieces of "nothing." My father's legacy.

My Own Private Revolution consists of my daily practice of living in revolutionary conditions. In this series, I seek an alternative narrative to the reality lost amid official news and accepted archival images. I attempt to understand how one can reinterpret images that have lost their archival significance due to the intensity of repetition and how they can be used to create a rupture in the official narrative.

During the years 2022 and 2023, a protest movement against the Iranian regime was underway. The demonstrations began with the killing of a 23-year-old girl for not adhering to the official dress code, swiftly turning into a nationwide movement. These protests eventually subsided with the suppression and killing of many protesters. I lived in Iran at the time. As a woman, I took to the streets and participated in the protests, but as an artist, I was unable to do much. Carrying a camera in the streets was highly dangerous. At that time, survival was the top priority. However, life went on simultaneously. While uncertain about what tomorrow held, you had to work, eat, and even celebrate the birthdays of your loved ones. In fear of losing life, we clung to the fragments of it with enthusiasm. How could one narrate this contradiction? Something you couldn't find in the official archives of any news agency.

My mobile phone, like many others, is filled with various selfies and images of the food I've eaten and places I've been. In those days, I did this too. However, the photos taken during the revolution are different. They are tools to understand how a routine devoid of meaning, due to excessive repetition, can find new significance and transform into a political act. These photos, with no news value and not found in official archives, have documented a piece of history within themselves, adopting an anti-archive approach. In a place where official cameras fail to capture reality, one must turn to the most personal moments to find courage and resistance. In reinterpreting my personal images, I took them a step further. I added the digital codes of the images taken by people on the streets and shared on social networks to my own photos. Each added image/code has created a glitch in the initial picture. Through this, these images have become closer to what I experienced in reality: the selfie you take, knowing it might be the last image remaining of you, the food you eat while you can feel the bitter taste of what is happening on the streets,... . How can these days be documented and an archive of these images be created? Perhaps only by merging data and creating scratches on a one-sided and imperfect narrative, much like this revolution itself, which was like a scratch on the seemingly unbreakable official narrative and order.