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Draw Us Something: Ekphrasis In Reverse, A Meeting of Minds

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Master of Humanities Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Humanities.

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Draw Us Something:
Ekphrasis In Reverse, A Meeting of Minds

By
Cara Makuh

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Master of Arts in Humanities

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

December 2019

Abstract

This creative Master's Thesis is a collaborative effort between my writings and various visual artistic responses. I submitted my writings to volunteers who agreed to send me a visual or illustrative response to what they read. There were no rules or formatting requirements. The response could be any kind of visual artwork, from a painting, line drawing, or even a photograph. Posting the call for volunteers on Facebook and using simple digital platforms for sharing writing and artwork proved instrumental in enabling this project to reach a global audience.

While this experiment had no expectations or intention at the outset, the effect on both myself and the volunteers had a surprising and positive impact. Participants rediscovered the healing potential of the creative process. Bypassing self-imposed standards and silencing the self-critic opened the door to people finding out that what they have to offer on paper is as important and valuable as a fine work of art. Likewise, every time I received a submission I experienced an overwhelming sense of gratitude and surprise.

As the word *ekphrasis* represents a literary response to art, there seems not to be a word, or phrase, assigned to the art of creating a visual response to a piece of writing other than illustration, or "ekphrasis in reverse." The end result is a conversation between writing and art, loaded with trust, emotion, smiles, and some tears. It has been fun, challenging, and a sort of healing experience for all involved.

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Draw Us Something: Ekphrasis in Reverse, A Meeting of the Minds

This project is a collaborative one that involves me and quite a few more people. It was initially inspired by a number of other collaborative projects that involve a meaningful relationship between a writer and an illustrator, and the immense impact that they have on each other when it comes to the final product. Standalone they may be great, but like cake and icing, the two go better together.

The word “ekphrasis” is Greek in origin, and represents a verbal, dramatic, and vivid response to a work of art. It is used as a medium to help capture the essence of a painting, or a sculpture, and convey that beauty to the audience via poetry, prose, or essay. In this case, the writing was done first, and the artistic responses to the poems and stories were the visual elements of the ekphrastic collaboration. They helped describe the writing on an individual interpretive level.

What I have done is collect some of my writings, mostly short stories and poetry, which would benefit from an illustration or artistic visual accompaniment. I created a Facebook post to recruit volunteers. I was meticulous with my wording, so that no one would feel like they had to be a professional artist to participate. It is a collaborative, non-competitive meeting of the minds, using two art forms: text and imagery. First, I will lend credit to my initial inspirations for this project.

The first book that inspired me to pursue this combination of text and art is “The High Sierra of California,” written by Beat poet Gary Snyder, and illustrated by Tom Killion. It is a beautiful collaboration in which Tom created vibrant and intricate woodcut paintings to accompany Gary’s poems, and together they took the poetry to a whole new dimension of perception for the reader. Tom’s contribution added color and power, texture and depth, to what

was formerly a beautiful collection of words. This was also evident in the collaborative projects between Charles Bukowski and Robert Crumb, including *Bring Me Your Love*, *There's No Business*, and *The Captain is Out to Lunch*. The illustrations provided by R. Crumb grounded our imaginations, and took them visually into a dark corner, where the story would likely reside anyway. Additionally, in *The Curse of Lono*, Hunter S. Thompson's stories were electrified by Ralph Steadman's neurotic illustrations. The energy and overall schizophrenic tone of both contributors gave rise to a book that radiates directly into the soul of the reader. It is far from a "relaxing read," and that is what makes it exciting.

Another example I pulled inspiration from was Shel Silverstein. He both wrote and illustrated his books, keeping us fully immersed in his world and his perceptions of his own work. It kept us in his bubble, and maintained a sense of artistic purity. His books were void of outside influences, as we experienced in the other collaborative projects. I used him as an example in the Facebook post, to emphasize the artistic simplicity of my proposal. Line drawings were not only accepted, but encouraged. I believe the message I sent in using his example helped bring people out of fear and insecurity, and into confidence with their voluntary contributions. The reference to Shel Silverstein gave them a sense of nostalgia, warmth, and connection. "I love that guy!" was noted in the post comments. In short, I am positive it helped more people say, "yes."

Additional examples I used in the Facebook post included a photo from *The Basics of Fishing* by Allan T. Williamson. Visual aids used as instructional tools often use an artistic component to augment understanding and overall comprehension, making the difficult seem simple. Including the simple line sketch of a rainbow trout in the post, without color, sent another encouraging and useful message, conveying the invitation of simplicity and warmth.

These works are what inspired me to create my own version of collaborative art, but with a variety of contributors. I had to begin with the recruiting process first, which began with a modern wide span plea via social media. Twenty years ago, this would have been much more difficult, time-consuming, and expensive. Word-of-mouth would have included writing letters, making phone calls, placing ads in the back of local magazines, and waiting: lots of waiting, and postage stamps, and visits to the Post Office, the last of the Great American businesses with notorious long lines. The internet, scanners, digital photos, faxes, and emails have enabled my project proposal to reach a global audience, and expand the range of contributors from as far as England and Belgium, to neighbors down the street. With one post, my request reached an audience of 986 people, and I believed that I would be fortunate enough if at least five people responded.

My original Facebook post was the following:

“Friends, do you like to draw? If so, I am looking for volunteers to help me with my Master’s senior thesis project.

The basis of the project is this:

What is your illustrated response to my writing? Simply, I send you a short story, short essay or poem, and in two weeks or so, you send back an illustration in a scanned or photo format.

Skill level is not a factor! It’s supposed to be fun! The more

Figure 1 From My Facebook Post

homegrown and ‘outside the box’, the better. From stick figures on up to abstract, black and white, color, mandalas, scribbling, pro-level...anything and everything is appreciated and will be included in the final product, which will be posted publicly on the Dominican Scholar website.

If you would like to participate and are honest and committed, send me a message and we’ll make some art together. I think it’ll be great! I’ve included some influential examples here. Thank you!

The assignment was: they read what I wrote, then proceeded to draw, paint or photograph something, and send back a scanned copy or photo of what came up for them after reading whatever I sent. The most challenging part of this process was deciding which writing piece I would send to whom. If it was a poor match, the finished product may be lacking in effort or enthusiasm. Therefore, I always made sure to emphasize that there were multiple options if the first one did not “hook” with them. So far, it has been a really beautiful experience. Some people have not drawn in years. Some people are sitting down and drawing with their kids and family members. I have a family of three all working on the same piece. I do not know if they will be sending back three individual pictures, or one big one. The whole thing has been a mystery because I intentionally left the door wide open. My biggest fear was making people feel pressured or stressed. With that, what I have received has been heartwarming, and every single one has brought me so much joy. However, the joy was mutual, because the most common response from the contributors has been, “No, thank *you!*”

Following are some examples of the responses I have received that accompanied or preceded the finished product:

Marilee Romano, my mother, shared the following response: “Even the touch and feel of watercolor paper, there’s nothing like it. It’s all rough and rubbery. The feel of the brushes in my hand just felt really good, and I’ve still got all that stuff. I didn’t get rid of any of my paints and things. I’ve been digging through thousands of photos, so many tears, it’s been good.”

I gently poked Jess E. Hendricks, a freelance mathematics writer from Austin, TX, with a chest-length beard, and a bald head, via Facebook Messenger, for a progress update: “How's it going Jess? Did you get a little bit o' color? 😊”

Jess replied, “lol no, the way I bumble through my life has not allowed it. Will work on sending you some kind of a ‘complete’ pencil version tonight. If I have more time I would like to go ahead and continue on it, because I am enjoying it, just have not had the time. (I'm in the middle of a Joanna Newsom/Brant Bjork/pizza road trip/journey through the northeast while also working a bit.) But I want to get you SOMETHING. I'm just not sure you can really tell what it is without color.... hmmm... It's not super great either way, so as I have been saying - expectations low, please! Anyway, Brant (Bjork) show tonight in VT then a few nights until I catch the Chicago show, so I should have some time in there. Especially since I am supposed to finish up this stupid dinky project tonight that's been weighing me down for most of the year. What a dud lol. I hope everything is groovy with you!! ❤️”

With the intention of subliminally nudging him along, knowing there was at least some uncolored, unfinished piece of work out there somewhere in his possession, I sent a copy of one of the completed poems, “Catch Up,” to him, to give him an example of what a finished piece looked like.

He replied, “OK well I *think* mine is somewhere between the 2 images on that page. Livin’ the McDonalds parking lot lifestyle right now, trying to finish that work that was due

yesterday...yeesh. Thanks for all of the kind words!” He seemed overwhelmed, so I let it go. I never received his illustration, leaving the poem “Major Glaciers” unaccompanied, and subsequently dragged to a folder on the computer desktop labeled “Abandoned Poems.” Shortly after I stopped asking him about it, my classmate and friend Brighid agreed to illustrate the same poem. I dragged it back out of the desktop folder and sent it to her. She shared some of her poetry with me, and two weeks later, submitted the final illustration for this project. It was a lovely and vibrant piece for the grand finale. Then, unexpectedly, Jess came through with his drawing, and it did not fail to impress. I did, however, have to revisit this intro and update it. This ever-evolving project required patience, and flexibility. Many different personalities are involved, and some came through faster than others.

When Kacy Kay responded to my initial post, I knew immediately that I would send her “Black and White Lunch Hour” because, if anyone could identify with the ridiculousness and toxicity of racial competition and judgment, it would be her. As it turns out, I was right.

“I actually had a few ideas,” she said, “because the funny thing is, I was the kid who got sandwich swooped by a bird as a kid, and it was a blue jay at summer camp. (A honey and peanut butter on a warm summer day and if I remember correctly, I got one bite.) As this short story shifted into the ‘black and white’ of it all, my focus shifted from visualization of the scene in my head to the conflict of the story. It actually seemed to mirror for me the way I was just living my best life and was stunned as a teenager that racism was still a thing. I was so very naive and loved every one or not on the energy they carried, not for the pigment of their skin, and it’s since then blown my mind that it’s still actually a thing. Because that’s so ridiculous to me. I do know that I tend to ‘pre judge’ as a safety precaution personally, but based on skin color

or religion just seems ridiculous. Tells you almost nothing except for maybe where their ancestors were from....Maybe..."

Feeling truly honored that she shared this with me, my response was, "I love this, you sharing your thoughts with me helps me see my own story in a different light, and this is the grand point of the whole thing; people coming together to create a new way of seeing things. I can't express my gratitude other than to tell you that my heart feels sunny and hopeful, hoping for a positive impact for anyone involved in this project."

"Maybe the movie Avatar should be mandatory in school curriculum. Lol," she joked. "Thanks for including me. This will be a part of my meditations till the weekend. Then I will start. I actually needed to sort through this a bit myself. As a mutt with biracial babies, there may be a little there to unpack." I sensed a revisiting and revaluation of old wounds with this response. I sensed some tiny element of healing, and I hope I am right about that.

I sent Sharon Dean, my study partner from nursing school, "Sneakers Preferred." She kept her response sweet and simple, like our old study flash cards: "Hey, send me your phone number. I will send you a picture. Thank you. PS I can't draw. I did sneakers." Sharon, helpful and straight to the point, just like the old days.

G Macias Gusman, or "Gabe," is a lifelong friend of mine, and full of "piss and vinegar." He never stops moving. He is a poet, and amateur philosopher, and a wealth of material. I loosely transcribed one of our telephone conversations and named it, "What's up, Princess?" I submitted it to him unformatted and unedited, assuming I would have time to clean it up later. Instead, he froze the submission into submission, by drawing his characters climbing up and around, and clinging to the words. I was stunned and overjoyed, and trapped and terrified at the loss of freedom from editing. He unwittingly took control of our collaborative piece, our

conversation, and froze it into time and space. It was exhilarating for me to let it go like that.

“The hardest part of starting this was the thinking,” he said. “I want it to be full of life, and busy in a good way, like this wonderful piece of writing you got here.”

One night, in a conversation with my dad, I brought up the surprising pattern that seemingly surrounded participants from his generation. They seemed to struggle with the lack of boundaries around the project. In general, they wanted to know exactly what to do, and what parameters surround the illustrations: dimensions, media, colors, formats. They wanted guidance and instructions. I wanted people to experience freedom from any expectations. I kept stressing, “This is about *you*, this is about *us*! This isn’t about *me*!” Some lost interest.

When I asked him why he thought this was the case, my dad replied, “Well, people my age, 67, want to do things right the first time, and do them well. If we’re going to put our heart into something, we want it to be high quality, and meet expectations.” There was that word again, “expectations.” Some people use them as a gauge, or a measuring tool for success. I was intentionally forcing people to set their own, and be comfortable with it. That was a tall order. I wondered why the same personal standards didn’t really seem to affect younger people, or even people my age, 43. Were we free? Or are we lost? We draw our own blueprints, like it is second nature.

A few weeks later, I received a text from my dad with a pencil sketch of a VW bus on River Road. His verbal response to his own creation was, “I’m gonna try again, it’s fun. It’s hard to break loose.” Dad is always good at watercolor sunsets, and desert landscapes: roads, trees, and forests. I had a strong feeling he would identify with “The River’s Passenger” or “Blur” since they were both inspired by my childhood weekend visits to his house.

Mike Bennett from the UK, who is currently working on his Master's Degree in photography, recently underwent a foot amputation. I asked him, "How are you dealing with that?"

"Fine." he replied. "It's just weird thinking ahead constantly when I just want a brew. Feel like I've been hit by a truck but I'm a warrior, I'm fine."

I keep suggesting he read some of Oliver Sacks' neurological research, some old case studies on the crucial necessity of phantom limbs. I don't know if he ever will, but he did, however, agree to a photographic accompaniment to a small poem I wrote. I'll never know if the photo was taken before or after he read it. It doesn't matter, so I'll never ask.

We have never met in person, but we have occasional rally sessions where we throw back and forth tiny wild tidbits of less-than-profound personal philosophies. I was hoping he would volunteer, and luckily, he did. His was the first of two photographic submissions. Last I saw, he had received a prosthetic foot and was standing, tall and with pride, with the smile of a man who now appreciates life from a uniquely challenged perspective.

There are many unspoken elements to this project, and the temptation to ask questions can override secret intent. The mysteries that reside behind the submissions keep it alive and electric. The less we know, the better.

There's Something About Mary

Mary and I planned for a “wet” lunch after work last Friday. She said she had coupons for a local wine bar. Wine bars weren't really my style, but I'd do whatever it took to steal some time with her.

That morning, I felt like I couldn't leave for work without wearing a necklace. Jewelry also wasn't really my style, although I tried hard to make it so, but I didn't really know how. I grabbed a pendant my friend Claudia handmade out of glass, and found a leather strand with a clasp to attach it to, put it on, and didn't think about it for the rest of the day.

When I found Mary, I felt her stealing glances at my necklace. After all, it was quite pretty.

She proceeded to tell me that earlier in the week, she'd been to see a medium with some friends, to answer some lingering questions to which only the deceased could provide answers.

One lady was told she would soon see a yellow butterfly, and one a ladybug; both of which had come to fruition already. Mary was told she would see a blue dragonfly. When she looked at my pendant, that's exactly what she saw.

Figure 2 Mackenzie Romano, age 28, California

Holes

Ghosts live in the soil
 Easily accessible with an emotional shovel
 I keep running back to that place
 To jump up and down on the dirt
 To pack the soil
 To give me more time
 Those bones won't rot
 They're in no hurry
 They'll last forever

When the rains come
 And I'm flooded with sadness
 And the tiny streams wash the dirt away
 I look down
 And grab that same shovel
 To bury the skeletons
 And pack them back down into the soil again
 Till the sun comes and bakes it into a hard crust
 A scab for the earth

Then it begins to split
 And crack
 Exposing the tracks of life
 In my arms
 And I dance, waving them around
 Forgetting they're waiting
 For the rains to come
 To wash my scars and scabs away

I can get my hands dirty
 But not my heart
 I can't wash the scars from my arms
 But thank God
 There's a ship behind each cloud
 And mine is coming in
 Reach for the sky
 The hands and heart will stay clean

Figure 3 Sioux Cavanaugh, age 46, Ohio

Face Time

The public says, “yes” when I ask,
 Am I walking faster than the world is
 spinning?
 I can’t see your faces, just the one in the
 moon, and various rocks, and trees
 Faces that stay in one place, frozen Ghosts
 and prophets
 Memories both clear and faded

I was baptized Catholic
 Raised anti-Catholic by my father
 who was raised Catholic
 Pro-Lutheran by mom
 Which came from Grandpa Art
 Who delivered newspapers on his bike to
 the Marblehead lighthouse keeper on Erie,
 when he was a boy

Figure 4 Marilee Romano, age 65, California

Grandmother, you were home-bound,
 for the most part
 The virus took your legs,
 but not your heart, or your smile
 We called you on Christmas mornings,
 so you could hear us open your mailed gifts
 We’d exaggerate our joyful response out of love,
 for your benefit
 We loved you, and we loved your gifts

Figure 5 Marilee Romano, age 65, California

We dreamed about the day when we could see
 the person on the other end of the phone
 Didn't think much about what they would call it
 Even now, I prefer an old fashioned phone call
 a phone with a twisted cord tethering us to one spot
 for the duration of our conversation
 Your voice in my ear
 I can imagine you giving our sacred time your full attention

Catch Up

It's tomato season on Interstate 5

It's 106 degrees outside

Carlucci Farms

Morningstar Organics

Antonini Trucking

Valley Farms

Panella Trucking

Double trailers, open top caravans

Piled high

The cargo

Two red pyramids, baking in the sun

With surplus fruit for the bumps in the rough spots in the road

Piles of red, crushed casualties line the interstate, next to the tumbleweeds,
and the potholes, and the Central Valley roadkill

Left and right, vast landscapes of charred and ashen boneyards of nut trees

Roadside skeletons, tipped and toppled in the same direction

Was the soil too salty? I read that in a magazine once

This year, the ground sucked the life from the grove

**Figure 6 Esau Martinez, age 9,
Lafayette, California**

Figure 7 Glenn Albrecht, Mission Valley, Texas

I asked my father once,
“Are the tomatoes on the top of the
pile the sun dried tomatoes? What
do they do with the ones on the
bottom?”

He laughed and said, “Don’t
you know kid? Those are where
ketchup comes from.”

The Next Best Thing

He called again tonight, and she finally picked up the phone. “If he’s this persistent,” she thought, “there must be something to report.” He went so far as to post on her Facebook page for all to see, “Call me.”

He’s moving again, this time northeast up to Gold Country, where there’s a better chance of selling weed to retirees and the homebound. There are no marijuana delivery businesses up there; there must be a market, especially for the elderly and terminally ill. That entrepreneurial spirit is what keeps him moving, reaching, hopeful that the next big thing will be the final big thing, the North Star. But first, he has to run to Davenport, Iowa, for his grandfather’s 100th birthday, in his deceased father’s Ford Fiesta that he’ll trade in for a truck out there, for which he will build a pop-up, tow-along camper trailer. This will enable him to head to Los Angeles at will, with his recently completed manuscript for readings with, and for, the poetry crowd. He knows some people out there, and people who know people. People and poetry are on fire in Los Angeles. The scene is hot, and he has a place to land. He’s just waiting for the call, while making sure he’s ready to drop everything and run south.

They met at Round Table Pizza, where they worked together when she was 18. He was ten years her senior, but seemed closer in age. He made everyone laugh, he hotboxed the walk-in cooler, and got up to the microphone completely stoned, to notify the customers over the loudspeaker that their pizzas were ready. He would rap, and sing, and yell, and whisper, whatever came to his mind. “Yo! Jason! Get yer ass up here, your pizza’s ready! This pizza ain’t gonna walk itself out there, hurry up man!” “Jim! Hey Jim! What the hell did you order, are these anchovies? Gross, man! Come get

this pizza!" Some customers were horrified, but most were in stitches. We were all in stitches.

He was a big guy, tall with beautiful brown tattooed hands, arms and torso. He looked slightly Mexican (because he is), sporting a big belly for a comforting, guttural laugh. His long, kinky-curly hair slicked back in a ponytail and a goatee, all salt and pepper colored, went well with the 1990's signature style. His eyes were always squinted nearly shut from being perpetually stoned, which only added to his

Figure 8 Amber Romero, age 42, California

persona of being funny, and

kind. Most of all, he was confident. But, he could also become angry, and emotionally volatile behind closed doors. His feelings were surprisingly easily hurt, and he was reactive. He was a life-sized teddy bear surrounded by eggshells. She watched from a distance, and only went to visit him when formally invited. They'd smoke pot, and listen to music for hours until the sun came up.

His labile personality is best reflected in his poetry readings. He writes and recites epic poems of a hard, drug-infused life, revealed bits and pieces of run-ins with the law, fishing for women, fishing for friends, for love and acceptance, a place to fit in; the words through his memory and his pen were the emotional byproducts of a turbulent relationship with his father, a man who he loved, feared and respected. His passion for his art is overwhelming, and rightly so, because he has plenty to write about, and he does it well. When he stands up to face the crowd, with his papers in hand, his power is only briefly interrupted when he stumbles over words in front of the microphone. He is resilient and recovers momentum quickly as he uses his body, the intensity of his furrowed forehead, carefully placed profanity, the pointing finger, and his gigantic voice to get his point across. He speaks slowly, and with intention. He enunciates, and is careful with the lines he's constructed as if they were made with porcelain. Everything about him is unquestionably intentional. His poetry is prolific and impressive, and she calls it "highway grit." She loves it, she feels it deeply, and has immense respect for his writing.

He also has a degree in welding, plays bass and ukulele, and has an adult-aged son on the spectrum, who humbles him spiritually. His son is one of many versions of home, where the heart is, or should be. He continually strives to become his own self-directed definition of what a man is, and what that looks and feels like: caretaker, leader, lover, renegade, outlaw.

He's always been a good friend to her, even through a couple years here and there of silence. Then, after a few intense beer-drinking sessions, soaked in the philosophy of alcoholic enthusiasm, and subtle hints of artistic competition, their

friendship is back on track. He's a street poet, outspoken, and loves to broadcast himself live on Facebook. She takes a more subtle approach toward social media, and doesn't want to fully acknowledge that boisterous part of him. She likes the version of him that is reserved for her, and their friendship. Music, and pizza, and drugs sealed their friendship, and that was a bond that could never be broken by the potentially destructive nature of time.

He says dreams flicker, but they also stay alight, just long enough to grab his attention and steer him in yet another direction. Always full of ideas and hope, inspiration from life, and from his own internal flame keep his eyes and heart bright, and inquisitive. Home is where the heart is, and his heart is always on the move, yet firmly grounded in his chest and spirit. He carries it with him wherever he goes. And she will always be at the other end of the phone, ready for the next version of his life that he will conquer because he only speaks of the future, and never the past.

What's Up, Princess?

He's calling again. She sees his name light up on the glowing screen. She answers, she greets him with, "What's up Princess?"

"Heh heh, I'll tell you what's up, sister. I'm having tacos, but I forgot to transfer money to the bank so my card was decliiiiined. So first they said, no fuckin' tacos. No phone neither, but no traffic, no bullshit. Everyone's so fuckin' nice here they gave me the tacos on the honor system. I love this place."

"Howzit up there in the sticks pardner? Whatchu been up to?" she asked, they spoke in drawl. "Me? Power washer and nail gun, workin' my way into a welding shop, thinkin' about opening' my own fixit shop. I been doing my homework and all you have to do is show up. I'm far removed from the big town, but tourism on the weekend brings in some money.

And you know....went to Iowa, saw family, got the truck, stayed away from the good time, hooked up with family... It's just not as fun as I remember, watching my friends get drunk on the same barstools in the same bars. I felt sad and alone this time, tryin' out new thoughts and new ideas, didn't fly. Everyone's a corn dog in Iowa, what a bunch of corn dogs, buncha huskers.

Manuscript is done, wrote letters to Los Angeles for a couch, or chair, or parking lot, or a Motel 6, maybe go down south on the hunt for some open mics."

"Who do you know down there in the Lost Angels?" she asked.

"Jim's down there, Irish Barry, Razor, and I'm sure they know people that'll help me. Depends on the poet scene, the circuit. Get me the fuck outta Oakland where I'm not welcome. I dropped off the map. It's like everyone just cut me off."

“Everyone acts emotional, but they seem pretty dried up to me,” she said, breaking her Southern character. She could tell he needed her ears and heart to listen.

“They’re no good, dog eat dog, they act like they love each other, walkin’ around, pokin’ anything that walks. Buncha corn dogs in Oakland too, writing to make money, not to clear their own souls.”

“So, what’s the plan then?”

“Well, I got these reads comin’ up, 22-30th of April, just a week of couch surfing or Motel Sixin’, poundin’ some pavement. I’m starting to move, I’ve got ideas, I’ve already reached out and I’m ready, but I don’t know what I’m doin’. I say, why don’t you come with me? Two can get there better than one. If I can’t get a camper shell in time, we’ll just pitch a tent in the back of the truck. They’ll let you park overnight at Walmart if you go in there and buy somethin’...”

Figure 9 G Macias Gusman, age 51, Sonora, California

Blur

Sometimes the bumps in the road
 match the tempo of the song
 on the radio
 The wipers, the rain
 The turn signal
 The shift of gears first to second
 Second to third
 Third to fourth
 The engine sounds
 like it's working too hard
 Stressed, pleading
 Wishing for the relief of the fifth
 Decompression
 It never comes
 Watching dad's giant feet on the long
 squeaky pedals
 There's a small hole
 in the floorboards,
 big enough for my eye
 Wet asphalt flying by too fast for it to
 see me watching
 I'm a blur
 The road is a blur, nothing can focus
 But working as planned
 until the next stop sign
 Then begin again
 Always downshift your way to the red light
 It gives you more control over the car

Figure 10 Marilee Romano, 65, California

No Mistakes

*I'll escape
I'll walk out
I might be late
You wait there
And I will stay
My bad breaks
You'll repair*

Figure 11 Francis A. Sheridan, age 45, California

*When I wake
I feel worn out
I know that I'm no saint
But I'm always there
And I still pray
There's no mistakes
I'll always be around*

Sneakers Preferred

Said one foot to the other:

“Man, what a day! She really put us through the ring. Never stopped moving.”

“I feel your pain, literally.”

“Whenever she feels like dressing up for work we get so hammered, even those inch-and-a-half heeled boots are starting to wear on me. Even the ankles have something to say about it!”

“I know, I prefer her Converse days. Casual day is supposed to be on Fridays, but she’s been wearing sneakers on Mondays a lot too, and Wednesdays, some Tuesdays. Remember, when she says her feet hurt, she’s talking about us.”

“Ha, you’re right, but that new gray pair gave me a blister the size of a quarter.”

“I must be tougher than you, I got nothin’.”

“Remember when she was born, we were both turned inward, facing each other, and they crammed us into baby shoes bolted to a steel bar?”

“Yes, and she used to slam it into the side of the crib to wake up her folks! Feels like just yesterday, I don’t miss that!”

Figure 12 Arianna Romero, age 18, Santa Rosa, California

“Well, thank God we’re parallel now, never wanted to trip her up or cause her to fall. We’re all in the business of moving forward.”

“True. Hey, wasn’t it great the other day when we walked in the grass? Real green grass, real dirt, no dog poop. It was cold, but it was such a good feeling. I love getting dirty.”

“That *was* a real treat. I love this time of year when the ground is covered with dead leaves. When a good breeze picks up, they chase us down the street. That’s the best! She heads right for the big piles, barrels right through the middle...it’s like we part the waters with her, so much fun!”

“My favorite is when we’re completely submerged in sand, and the waves and the riptide take turns pushing and pulling on us, but we stay in place.”

“The part I *can*’t handle is when she gets on a pedicure trip, and those ladies clip our nails too short, and sand us down with those stones, and I can never understand what they’re talking about. It’s scary!”

“I always assume they’re talking about how she should come in more often because she waits too long, and they have to work harder at polishing us up.”

“The part I still don’t understand is, why am I responsible for both the gas, and the brake pedal? When she goes on those massive road trips, you get to hide in the corner!”

“Yes, but when she drove that VW with the clutch pedal, I got my fill of the hard work. You can’t blame *me* for automatic transmissions.”

“We won’t even mention that new pair of boots she’s been eyeballing. They don’t look foot friendly, but they sure have style. We don’t get to choose anything but the size, but we usually end up looking pretty good, for those times when it really matters.”

“It seems weird to say but, thankfully, after she broke her back, she gave up on high heels. We dodged a bullet there. Plus, she stopped working graveyard shift after all of that. Those night shifts were rough, the whole body worked hard through so many delivered babies. Now, we get to rest like most of the other feet we pass when we’re walking down the street.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’m glad we have each other. Wherever she points us, that’s where we both go.”

“We’re pointed toward the bed now, we’ve all had enough for one day.”

Figure 13 Sharon Dean, Hercules, California

The Natural Elements

Give this thing all the space
It needs to breathe
That will allow it to proliferate
Naturally
Without the use of force
Once it's out there, it's out there!
For other minds to process
A slave to judgement
A scapegoat in training
A whipping post
Or a shrine
An experiment in social terror
Hiding in a room

Your gray skull between hands
villains hide in the gray matter
The petty thoughts share their space
Where the dark thoughts live
Light penetrates the skull, through the top
The invisible gap between the sutures
The blood-brain barrier
Illuminating the hemispheres
Transfer thoughts, into words, into lines
on the page
Empowered by suggestions
Crushed by criticism
Trust in the ether
Embraced by the firmament
In your lonely room

Figure 14 Mike Bennett, age 46, Manchester, UK

How Useful Is a Wet Feather

Some of my friends are like feathers that have fallen from the bird
 Drifting, changing their course
 with every gust of wind
 Never staying in one place long
 enough
 to become wet and disabled
 by a puddle, or a high tide

Figure 15 Dianne Weyna, Napa, California

Some are like plows
 Tearing up dirt,
 cutting furrows in the soil,
 the soul, and the brow
 Planting seeds, and waiting, with arms folded tight

Figure 16 Dianne Weyna, Napa, California

They *will* fertilize that soil
 into submission!
 or cooperation
 depending on the nature
 of the gardener's ego

Some are like a lake
 Tiny waves
 Always lapping
 at the same shore
 Quiet and timid,
 but still relentless

Figure 17 Dianne Weyna, Napa, California

Some are like the ocean
 Primitive and wild
 Beating rocks into pebbles
 and eventually
 into a fine sand

Figure 18 Dianne Weyna, Napa, California

Longboard Days

You remind me of the 4am shifts at Trader Joe's way back in the day, grabbin' a pallet jack, and loading those 10-foot stacks of bread off the trucks. Once in a while, someone would lose a stack, bread crashing everywhere, everyone yelling and laughing their asses off, still dark outside! Stepping outside for a smoke break, we could still see the morning stars.

Each one of us would bring in a CD for the carousel, put it on "random," and covered the spectrum mostly from

metal to punk, and the

Leonard Nimoy

album snuck its way

in from time to time.

Every day was a great

day to sing about

Bilbo Baggins! Then

there was Aaron, that

super-intense, six-foot

straight-edge kid. He

always had such a

beautiful smile. Clean

as a whistle he was!

Figure 19 Francis A. Sheridan, 45, California

While you and I were drinkin' off our hangovers in the cooler, he'd just laugh at our self-inflicted pain. Did you even go to bed last night?

On Tuesdays, they'd wax the floors and we'd run and slide on our bellies, frozen pot stickers flying overhead, cheering, laughing, yelling, joy, music, friends.

Someone stole my bike, and the tranny in the Volvo was blown, so I borrowed your longboard 'till it was fixed. You called me at work to let me know you saw a vagrant fella on my bike in the S.O.S. food line, but he'd sold the seat, and swapped in a cheaper one. The homeless guys would hassle us in the evenings for the day-olds; the breads, sandwiches, salads, and the one guy took a shit right on the loading docks in the middle of July because we couldn't give him any. It was against the rules, give one out and they'd all come running.

They were like pigeons, both sad and annoying.

Red Ink Manifestations

She was fed up, and on a mission. A *20 Steps to Channeling Unlimited Prosperity* program led by a donation-based internet guru seemed like a risk-free option for a massive life makeover. There is nothing a Google search can't cure, and the guru's head shot in the bio made her look kind, and trustworthy enough to give it a try.

“What is your definition of prosperity?” was the initial question posed by the program, and she thought to herself, *How can I define something I haven’t experienced? Is it the same as abundance? Why is money always the first thing that comes to mind?* Apparently, there are other ways to experience prosperity that the narrowed mind needs help excavating, in the form of ideas.

The program instructions began with, “Write down what you want as if you already have

Figure 20 Corrinne Farner, age 61, Florida

it, but make sure to use red ink! No substitutes! There is great power in the color red. Then, marvel at the power and character of your own forgotten handwriting. Look at your spelling and

treat it with care. Remember, they call it *spelling* because the written word casts *spells*.”

Seemingly superficial and standard requests came to the surface first; a million dollars has already fallen from the sky into my bank account, I have already lost twenty pounds, I already live in a mansion, thank you! She laughed as she looked around her tiny apartment. But, according to the source guru, “There is nothing superficial about your perceived wants and needs, if they’ve been living in your soul.” That was the message, so she asked for (or assumed) these things anyway, it couldn’t hurt. *Then this must be a good time to start taking yourself seriously*, she thought, and pulled her shoulders back, as if good posture were the best place to begin.

The guru then put a Christian spin on the program, and backed up the philosophy with the verse, “Ask and ye shall receive.”

She took the bait.

Well, now that I know God’s in on the deal, it must be OK, became her rationale for stepping halfway outside her faith, and putting one foot into a new one.

The Biblically driven moral compass that had been bouncing wildly in her spirit between the extreme cautionary notions of *Is this witchcraft or is this God? Am I sinning?* was now stabilizing, and all actions were justified somewhere in the balance. Taking the Bible out of context is very effective as a persuasive tool, it works every time you’re asking for something you can’t seem to acquire without divine help, unanswered prayers, or maybe the divine help needed a little boost with some red ink on paper.

The first few days of the twenty-day plan were relatively easy. Ancient Chinese symbols for wealth and wisdom flew out of her printer as rapidly as they would have if she could print twenty dollar bills. They were taped on the walls and above doors as instructed, as if doors were actually

built as cosmic portals for the lucky person who unlocked the knowledge of their secret potential. When friends would visit, they would inquire about the signs, but she'd casually brush it off with no real explanation. She didn't want to be judged for her secret aspirations.

Still contemplating the ongoing list of wants and needs that seemed to grow longer each day with introspection, she realized she'd been single for so long she forgot about desperately seeking companionship. As she began the prescribed writing process, she decided to dedicate a page or two to writing down what she would like in a man. Even after years of romantic neglect, she questioned whether she wanted to open that door too. Wouldn't a ton of money be easier?

Again she thought, *What is there to lose?* She began writing again in a frenzy, pouring out all the buried notions of what the perfect man would do, say, and act through her pen. She surprised herself at the vast amounts of specific detail she had been storing in the back of her mind, as if the scaffolding for a relationship had already been built, and was just waiting for this part of her life to resume construction. As she reviewed what she had written, she laughed at herself, and laughed at life in general, and knew that such a person didn't exist, but it was a fun writing exercise. You learn the most about yourself when you write.

She proceeded to scribble more notes diagonally across the pages this time, in red. Diagonally, for a tiny sense of personal freedom and rebellion. More content spilled out than her college-ruled composition notebooks had the capacity to hold. *First step, write outside the horizontal lines. This is freedom!* she thought. She didn't throw the red-inked papers away, she stashed them in a box for later, with their ultimate purpose unknown. The notebooks ran out of paper, as the pens ran out of ink.

In the sight, in the mind, she thought, staring at all the English words she could muster to convey to the planets and the universe that it was time to loose the chains of the past and move

Figure 21 Corrinne Farner, age 61, Florida

forward. The ferocity of her handwriting was laid out on paper for her to process. Is red ink really the key? *My letters look like they're serving a purpose, she thought, the*

sentences look like equations, I hope they add up to something prosperous.

Puffy eyes and stiffened fingers that had conformed to some kind of distorted palsy prompted her to stop, and take a look around. Was anything on her list within her home already? Time to re-evaluate.

Increasingly, the prosperity program grew in complexity and detail. New daily altars were required by the twenty-day plan, constructed with a variety of unattainable materials, gemstones and resins. She quickly lost track of the plan, along with her motivation, and questioned her devotion to a prosperous life channeled by a cosmic support system and a stranger on the internet. But, as time went on, she began to notice little bits of money were coming her way, seemingly from out of nowhere. She'd check her bank account and see random tiny deposits, and checks in the mail from the college she was attending, with a scholarship that she hadn't even applied for, and refunds for overpayments she wasn't aware of. She wondered if any of these were the result of her metaphysical efforts to draw prosperity in her direction, but nothing could confirm or deny the source; she had to run on faith.

Figure 22 Corrinne Farner, age 61, Florida

Figure 23 "Need" by Corrinne Farner, age 61, Florida

Figure 24 "Try" by Corrinne Farner, age 61, Florida

Figure 26 Corrinne Farner, age 61, Florida

Figure 25 Corrinne Farner, age 61, Florida

Thunderstruck Antonym

I'm equally powerful and weeping
 A sequoia with limp branches
 I could be a cedar
 And you could make a boat out of me
 Place yourself in my carved out core
 Just for you
 At least I've found my purpose
 May my buoyancy be your livelihood
 May my pointed bow be ever pointed in the right direction
 Grazed by the tip of a narwhal's cardinal gift
 But which of them can claim freedom?
 The red bird, or the unicorn of the deepest waters?

Eucalyptus windbreaks
 Spare the fields of the gales
 Flatland twisters, dirt devils and demons
 I feel the heat like you, when I stop to pump gas in Lost Hills,
 stuck in place, the hot wind whipping my hair
 I can't let go of the pump handle until the tank is full
 You can't let go, ever

Those old oaks are good for nothing but a horror show
 Dropping balls, spreading their seed
 One will take, one's *gotta* take
 But in the winter
 their arms are exposed and twisted about
 like my mother's fingers in the cold
 Winter's bones at the ends of your limbs
 They make a nice silhouette against a clear sky
 and a full moon

Those redwoods
 Forever struck by lightning
 Shook by thunder
 Carbonized from the inside out
 They keep their arms up high
 Privacy in the sky
 Inside their circles, the natives refuse to rest
 She's a woman, they're all women

How could I not identify
 With their position in life?
 Stranded muses
 Frozen in a fertile place
 She's pretty but
 She has no flowers

Figure 27 "Stranded Goddess" by Francis A. Sheridan, age 45, California

I can't wrap my head around a rose tree
 The thorns pierce my thoughts, and they begin to run
 Like hounds on a predatory chase
 If I can't catch up, they get away from me
 And begin to riot, in pursuit of the wrong target
 The field master and the huntsman, at a total loss
 To end up in a foxhole
 When you're not a soldier
 It's a high price to pay, for such a secretive flower
 The bristlecone pines

Rot prematurely in fertile soil
and sleep through every drought
But those who grew from rock and stone
Breathed the same air as Jesus
Before he did
In the East he exhaled into the thermals
and his breath carried over to their branches
Impaled on spiny needles
They caught it, and sent it on
Like holy messengers

While Joshua stood tall, arms raised in the desert
The windswept cypress was planted by the sea
Bathed in a daily fog and coastal breezes
Formed in the shape of a tempest
They all stood
Under the same moon, and the same constellations
that graced the knotted eyes
of Methuselah, Mary Magdalene, the Nephilim, Galileo
And other giants of our history

Black and White Lunch Hour

The time is 12:25, and the lunch bell just rang. The classroom doors all open simultaneously, and a fast-moving river of small children flows from each one. They are running, spring-loaded, clutching their lunch boxes, heading for the long tables by the basketball courts. Some are headed to the cafeteria for warmed-over, school-provided meals. The yard supervisors are standing around, blowing whistles and yelling, “Walk! WALK! Did you hear me? Walkiiiiing!! No running!” But their calls fall on deaf ears, those of restless and hungry children.

At 12:20, another group of supervisors take their places at their posts. The crows and seagulls have carefully, and strategically placed themselves on surrounding fence posts, telephone poles, perched on bench backs, ready for lunch far before the children are. They’re quietly eyeing each other. This is a territorial space, and it’s also a survival of the fittest.

“It’s Wednesday, loose corn and chicken nugget day in the cafeteria, nasty stuff, the kids won’t even eat it,” says one crow to another.

“The seagulls love that shit, they can have it. I have to eat an extra helping of rocks just to push it through. Anyway, I always feel strange eating poultry. I’m no chicken, but I’m certainly not a cannibal either. It just seems gross.”

“Such indiscriminate creatures, no self-

Figure 28 Damien Biasotto, age 37, Manage, Belgium

respect, no sense of dignity. I love seeing them tangle over an empty bag of chips. They think they're so gangster, it makes me ill."

"Hey, speaking of gangster, yesterday was taco Tuesday. Where were you? The Mexican kids always leave their tacos behind, wondering why and how what they were served qualifies as Mexican food."

"I don't even know how it qualifies. I also don't care. I love the tacos here, probably because I've never been to Mexico."

"Good point."

As the children dig in, the birds are paying close attention to the kids who usually take one bite of their sandwich. The crows have an excellent memory, and they have certain kids mapped out; the ones who take one bite and toss the rest. The seagulls simply hope to get lucky.

Figure 29 Damien Biasotto, age 37, Manage, Belgium

As the kids begin to wrap up their eating time and head off to play, that's when the battle begins.

One young and inexperienced crow is eyeballing Sophie's half-eaten sandwich, calculating his descent. As she zips her lunchbox up and leaves the sandwich on the table, he swoops down and grabs it, and proceeds to eat it at the table rather than relocating to a safer spot. Salami and cheese on white bread with mustard, his favorite. As he's picking through it with his indestructible beak, a seagull takes his chance on a dash and grab, and makes off with the top bread slice, the one with the mustard, which really tied the sandwich together.

"Hey! What the fuck was that?" screams crow. "Who do you think you are, you goddamn filthy animal!"

Seagull takes off and lands about 50 feet away, and inhales the bread in a split second, laughing through his escape flight.

"You snooze, you lose big boy! What an idiot!"

Crow feels his anger rising, and quickly resorts to young and irrational thought. He screams, "White boy, you think you can pick on me because I'm black? Because my color and reputation as a thief is something I can't escape? This is white collar crime! You'll pay for this!"

"I can't believe you're playing the race card here. Pathetic! Go home and cry to your mom, maybe she'll wipe your butt for you too."

You fucking amateur, thinks seagull.

The other birds never pause to witness the conflict. They already know in this environment, you keep your eye on the prize, or you go home hungry. And, a truly

Figure 30 Damien Biasotto, age 37, Manage, Belgium

dignified crow knows, you never waste your time or energy fighting with a dirty seagull, and still demand respect from your own species.

After Sophie's lunch has been successfully and completely demolished, they move on to the next kid who never disappoints them: a first grader named Ryan.

Ryan's mom packs the best lunches, and thankfully she still uses disposable sandwich bags, because the zero-waste movement with the reusable airtight containers has really cramped the scavenger lifestyle. Ryan is rarely interested in eating, and would rather be chasing kids around than sitting down. He also has ADHD, which means he often forgets to eat, and his prescribed medications leave him with no appetite. If there is no adult sitting next to him, forcing him to focus on eating, he won't eat at all. He is a perfect candidate for a swoop when he's distracted.

He leaves his lunch box wide open and runs off, the yard supervisors screaming and blowing whistles, demanding that he come back. While they're chasing him around in circles, another crow who had premeditated this particular mission shoots down, wings tucked like a black bullet, and lands right next to the box. The other kids are laughing as he tears through the bags with desperate enthusiasm.

"Dear God, I love Ryan," says the crow through a beak full of food and plastic bag. "I love his mom. These grapes, so clean and green, so organic, and the cut apples are so convenient. No core! And this ham and cheese sandwich, almost more than I can stand. I'll be following this one through high school. He's mine!"

He motions with a tip of his head for his cousin to come join him, and they destroy Ryan's lunch in less than a minute. They don't fight, they share the wealth. That is, until another seagull bombs the party straight from the sky, and lands right in between them. He grabs the string cheese, and takes off to the top of another utility pole.

"He's such an asshole. Why didn't we see that coming?"

"It doesn't matter, string cheese is impossible to open. Fuck that guy, just look at him."

The gull is clearly struggling with the cheese 50 feet in the air, and drops it where it's intercepted in mid-air by another seagull, who has waited patiently for this mistake. Unintelligible screaming and fighting takes place between the two on the ground as they play tug of war with the rubberized, vacuum-sealed cheese.

A crow shakes his head and says to the others, "Total chaos over such a worthless item, no class. String cheese sucks anyway, they start a war over trash. It's hard to watch."

Figure 31 Kacy Kay, age 44, California

Falling With a Purpose

Winter was finally coming to an end, and signs of life were beginning to find their way out of the snow, and into the light. Everything that survived the especially harsh, extended deep freeze was buzzing with excitement at the chance to reconnect with their neighbors and surroundings. Greeting new members was also especially exciting as the circle of friends expanded for the coming year. Some were repeat visitors, usually in the form of drops of rain from the sky, or flakes of snow who were recycled and came back every year, intricately designed as they fell. One flake in particular loved the new buds on the trees, who would soon become leaves. Once he reached the icy ground from the sky, he looked up at the nearest branch enthusiastically to see who he could talk to. He spotted a fresh, new leaf bud pointed in his direction.

“Hello up there! I see you’ve come out to join the party. When did you make it through the skin of the old branch?”

The bud replied, “I was born this morning, three days after the last snow, three days in the sun.”

“Congratulations, and welcome! What is your first memory?” he inquired.

The little bud thought for a minute, “Breaking through the bark, into my own little stub on the branch. It was a lot of pressure, and very uncomfortable.”

“Did it hurt?” asked the flake.

“The skin on the tree was thick, frozen and difficult to pierce, but I have nothing to compare it to,” replied the little bud.

“I think I saw you that day, I was a late snowflake and drifted right past you on my way down.”

“I didn’t see you, my eyes hadn’t adjusted to the light. Was there a breeze? I’ve been told that it makes it easier to wave at passers-by. I’ve learned some things from a few old-timers who refused to fall off this tree last autumn. Some decided to cling to the branch for a long miserable winter. They have wisdom, a little pride and a lot of humility.”

The flake replied, “The ancestors I’ve joined on this bed of ice have been here for millions of years. They never surrendered to the sun. They froze themselves in time, and used the high elevation as an excuse to become part of the glacier. New snow helps slow down the recession, and I provide a slight but important extra layer.”

The little bud shrugged, “Well, I’m not sure now, about some of these that came before me, our history is buried further down each year, stored in the roots.”

Figure 32 Jane Sheridan, age 57, Birmingham, UK

“Sometimes it’s better to leave your history alone, focus on the light of today,” suggested the flake.

“But now I have questions,” said the bud. When the spring breezes pick up, the wind will carry my thoughts to the older leaves. The next time we talk, I might have some answers.

How long will you be on the ground?”

The flake was reassuring. “Again, I fell late in the season, with the hopes of reaching you. I doubt I’ll have time to freeze in place with the others. My story is far from tragic, I fall with a purpose. If I stay frozen to the ice, we’ll have conversations every day. If the sun calls me back to the sky, I’ll time my autumn descent around the time you let go of this tree. We’ll flow down the river together! I’ll tell you about what I saw as I traveled the world in a cloud. You can tell me what you’ve discovered about your roots.”

The little bud looked concerned, “I hope you’re on time, us leaves only fall once. But, we drift back and forth on our way down, they say it softens the blow.”

Night Life

A rat bolts across the road, smart enough to wait until headlights have passed
Challenged by a buck in season, walking past the passive doe
She doesn't move, but she stares with eyes as big and empty as saucers without a cup
Yet, all the deer limp around here

The raccoons are out like bandits in the night
Sometimes we're engaged in a stare down
Like we are frozen in the moment
They always win, because I pass them by without a challenge
Some run for their lives
A black cat crosses in front of me and I have no reaction
Another runs away and I laugh

Some nights I take my earbuds out to hear
Two Great Horned owls calling out, "Who's awake? Who's awake?"
I've almost missed out on a choir of coyotes
Their short yelps and long howls
A kaleidoscope of wild canine communication
A cappella, unrehearsed
and proudly broadcast across the vacant airwaves of the night
The people grow worried
And cautiously open their doors to call out for their cats

Figure 33 Andie O, age 53, California

A lady in passing asks me, "Aren't you afraid?"

I shake my head, "no."

That's all she needs to know

Wet pavement in the rainy season

Garbage night in the summer

These are familiar smells

The summer nights prompt the laundry scents mixed with the blast of the sun baked jasmine
in a state of relief

The 10pm coffee from the house on the corner of Meerna and Hillside

Must be a night shifter

Cigarettes and cannabis clouds stain the air

long after the smoker has gone

The incense burners, the barbecues

The smells that make it to the street, but the smoke doesn't

I know who has trash night on Wednesdays

Who has company this week

If I had a nickel for every car's dome light left on...

I also know who will greet tomorrow morning with a dead car battery

And a call to AAA for road service

But I can't knock on every door

The music, and the yelling, and the smoke from the bars

I see who sits by the window every night

Blank faces lit by the glowing screen of the computer

Violent flashing of television screens light up the living rooms

Dog walkers with headlamps on for poop patrol

They look up, startled when they hear my footsteps

my shoes scraping the pavement

I just raise my hand in passing, to say hello

Because I can't hear them

And I don't want to talk to anyone

I can not walk in silence, the music is loud in my ears, and my head
Playing the theme for the night no one else can hear
Noise cancelling, I walk fast to escape the sounds of life
The thoughts that race in my head like stock cars, in circles, impossibly loud,
getting nowhere extremely fast must be pushed out!
For fear of insanity is always near
And the occasional sadness that must be sorted through and accepted
This too shall pass
Feeling vulnerable
Trying to forget him
Aware of what's best, knowing what's right
Walking through another night
Stopping and stooping
Only to rescue abandoned, battered coins
“Free stuff” on the curb looks like trash to me,
and it multiplies, as if it were a sad life of its own
The Lansdale Hill, the steady clip, the breathlessness, the motivation

Sometimes the American flags are up before and past the Fourth
Signs of patriotism in Marin County
Breaking a sweat, my jacket sticks to my arms
Like a true soldier, I will continue to march forth
Watching constellations shift, and tip, and cradle the moon

Figure 34 Hannah Evans, California

Star spangled banners in the sky

Planets crossing paths, making the news, causing commotions

A comet soars when I need it the most

God's reassurance from the cosmos

I crack a hidden smile

The moon and stars, forever competing with the street lamps

I can block them with one hand revealing a thousand more stars

And the Big Dipper, always present, always there in my time of need

for some sense of permanence, stability, antiquity

Three stars for the handle, four for the cup

Where the sky opens up, the trees are always the same

Their roots win the battle of nature vs concrete

As they push up their way up and through

The sidewalks must be avoided lest I should trip and fall while I'm trying to move... forward...

I haven't hit the ground yet

But I've come close

Night life is safer in the middle of the street,

in the dark, where I can see the headlights coming, far before they reach me

High beams coming from the front and behind,

as my body hugs the side of the road for safety's sake

I must want to live

These lights cast a temporary ten foot human shadow in front of myself

I thought shadows were meant to live behind

My shadow is a mystery, but it lives because I do

Doing the right thing is so hard in the throes of deprivation

Want and need battle for first in front of me

Competing for the void

To consume and fill the hole in my spirit

Self-restraint chooses the victor

And the fallout is the product of the night

These things make the wind blow, creating resistance

Wild, invisible pressure from the sky
Sometimes the leaves and the branches touch the ground
And my back bends like the trees
as life sways in the wind

Figure 35 C. Evans, California

I'm open to all the God-given power of the full moon
Some nights I show great signs of improvement
Other nights I'm neutral, thoughts be still

The River's Passenger

The drive to Fort Ross is always the same, mostly because the majority of the trees that line the roads are evergreens. The hints of season are typically displayed in the leaves of the grapevines, which succumb to the repetitive nature of the four-seasoned year. Nature guides the roots and the vines through the motions from bare to budding, to green and lush bearing clustered fruit for wine, to the beauty of October rust. Then the tendency toward longing for autumn apples is greater than the grapes, and the air bears the hint of a chill. Besides the evergreens, and the bent and twisted oaks, the other thing you can depend on is driving alongside the river.

In summer, when the road leads to a bridge across the river here and there, you'll know the season by the smell of fire, whether it's the smoke from a barbecue, or the smoke from the fires that warm the cabins of the permanent residents during the colder months. These river holdouts live in the area once inhabited by the Pomo Indians. They tend to settle in the outskirts of the treadmill of freeway living, but close enough to town to get what they need, and hurry back home again. They're rarely seen during the day, unless you spot them walking on the side of the road, and they're always prepared to head for higher ground should the river rise.

Figure 36 Paul Makuh, age 67, California

The summer atmosphere also includes the neon-colored floating rafts, and black inner tubes that cradle the bodies of the swimmers as they float down and around the shallow river waters, splashing and yelling, distorted music blaring from cheap speakers. The swimmers are often accompanied by enthusiastic canine companions. They wait, standing at the shoreline, barking anxiously, eager for their return. Some dogs even go out for a swim, and all you can see is the tops of their heads.

After passing through the last town with a Safeway and a dime store that has everything you need for comfortable camping, the roads become quiet again. Still, they are

twisting and winding, and take on an element of both peace and tension as the driver fights the temptation to relax their gaze on the trees, but must stay keenly focused on the road. There is no room for error.

I know this road is scenic, I've traveled it one hundred times since I was a kid, usually in Volkswagen buses, when I'd visit my dad out here some weekends. I know it would be more scenic if, for once, I could be the passenger again. I could see it through eyes that have grown. I yearn to look out the side windows, not at the simple, yet critical, double yellow line that divides and protects us from a fatal collision. My adult accounts of this route are reported to you by a series of glances and sneak peeks that have become a series of photographic memories I rely on to tell the story.

When my eyes are occupied by the two lane road, my other senses are free to hone in on whatever they want. They get to be the passenger for me, and gather the elements of the journey that are compiled into one big memory. I know the *smells* of the drive, because I don't need my sense of smell to navigate the road. I know what the air *feels* like from driving with the window open, unless the sun burns my driving arm, the rain soaks my sleeve, or the cold hurts my bones. In the summer, the drive *tastes* like a cherry Slurpee, and in the winter, it tastes like hot coffee. It *sounds* like the rumble of the engine and the shifting of gears, or the music on the

radio, and the *whoosh* of the cars coming from the opposite direction. I must sound the same to them, if they're listening.

I can tell more about the seasons, as the car takes me alongside the river. The different signals the river communicates with are dependent on the depths it has reached during the previous rainy season. If the winter was dry, the water groans its way to the sea as it struggles to keep its own momentum while crossing over and around the rocks and fallen trees. If last year's rains came in relative and reasonable abundance, the river rolls on in a jovial and satisfied state. If the river flooded one year, it travels as though it has drowned itself in overindulgence and is eager for that level of satiation to resolve itself quickly.

Nature creates obstacles for river waters that have one goal, to meet the sea. Still, the river presses on toward it without question or hesitation. By the time every drop has reached the waves, it has witnessed the birth of the steelhead, and the return and death of the mother. Sea lions at the mouth of the river have lacerated the narrow strip of aquatic highway with their massive bodies as they chase their prey at top speed, leaving a wake in their path that is immediately mended by the split water coming back together, healing and resuming its course. They've also birthed their young on the banks of that same river, and taught them to trust its accessibility and sustainability for survival. It has carried the weight of birds who have rested

their hollow-boned, buoyant bodies on the surface for either food or for a rest, their webbed feet dangling and paddling, used as oars and rudders beneath the surface. It has also graced the legs and feet of so many children, but never watched them grow from summer to summer like a lake would, because the river water is just passing through. The trees and larger rocks, however, will stand or lie in wait, as the seasons always change, and bring the weather with them.

Adolescent boys and girls with their fishing rods, set with steel Eagle Claw bait hooks fixed with a pink salmon egg or a glittered marshmallow, are randomly cast across the water in the name of strategy, good luck, and high hopes. Their lines pierce the water's surface, and are dragged downstream by the current. The children wait, as the water passes by. A young, curious fish circles and pecks at the bait. The water, in passing, whispers an utterance of warning, "Don't take it..."

From the rubber boots of the fly fisherman and their man-made bugs, to the skipping of flat-surfaced rocks that sink to the bottom of the river, it's not such a long way down. The crashing and piercing talons of osprey and eagles that snatch the fish right from under the surface carry them writhing, through the air, to the nests high in the trees, to feed their hungry babies in the world above the surface. The leaves from those same trees are now passengers that have

gently fallen into the water, depending not on the wind for travel, but reliance on this one-way current.

The trees cast shadows, and the sun evaporates much of these passive drops of water along the way, pulling some back to Heaven before they fall back down to the earth in a different form and location. Upon return, maybe one of them will come back intricately frozen as a drifting snowflake, and find itself part of the face of a snowman. Maybe it will freeze with its brothers into a pebble of hail. Maybe it'll reach us in a typhoon in the Philippines, or a mid-west hurricane. Maybe in the past, that same drop kept a dying woman alive, was a gifted response to a Native American rain dance, or drowned an unfortunate seafarer in a shipwreck. Whatever path it's traveled, I bet it was scenic, especially as a passenger.

Figure 37 Sarah Martinez, age 42, Lafayette, California

Flight #KL605

International arrivals, San Francisco International Airport. His flight was due to arrive at 11:45. She was there to pick him up early but still felt rushed, mostly due to the anticipation that had been building over the course of the last six months. She pulled into the multi-level parking lot, and was pleased to find a spot close to the elevator. She turned off the engine, shut off the music, sat back and took a deep breath. She knew everything was going to be fine, unless of course she had a hair out of place, or a flaw in her makeup. So, she took one more look in the mirror before getting out of the car with her keys, phone, and wallet in hand.

As she entered the vast hallway leading to the main terminal, the “horizontal escalator” moving walkway was already crowded by little kids running back and forth, either happy to be off a long flight or eager to get on one. She walked parallel to the kids at a steady clip and looked straight ahead. Seeking the direction that overhead signs had to offer, she found his flight number on the digital screens which indicated that his flight was delayed by twenty minutes. She didn’t mind, that was twenty minutes she had to decompress and find some strange sense of comfort in her current surroundings. She found a vacant seat in a long row of connected black chairs, planted herself there and proceeded to people-watch.

It brought her a lot of joy to see the people watching, and waiting, and finally reuniting with their loved ones. It was an international display of greetings filled with tears, hugs and smiles, which she decided was the polar opposite of the departures gate where the tears and hugs were driven by sadness. Grandparents seeing their grandchildren for the first time was especially heart warming. It was also sad, as the confused toddler, who had been on a plane for hours, shied away behind mother’s legs in fear of the stranger who wanted to wrap that small child up in their arms. Their living legacy, so far only seen in photos, was finally standing in front of them. She

found herself emotionally caught up in the family dynamics of complete strangers, and almost forgot why she was sitting there waiting in the first place. She decided to snap out of it and refocus.

Checking the board again, she noticed that his flight status had been updated to “arrived.” She gasped a little under the realization that he was actually on American soil and just on the other side of the building. She stood up and walked over to join the small crowd that was forming around the screens that gave a preview as to who was walking through the corridor and toward the large open mouth of the arrival gate. They didn’t know they were being filmed and watched, as the ones in wait looked for clues that their cherished arrival was only seconds away.

She stood there for quite a long time. She was nervous, fidgety, anxious and excited, and stared at those two screens without blinking until a tinge of worry began to set in. Each person who walked through was anyone and everyone but him. She brushed it off, what did she have to worry about? Had he changed his mind? Got cold feet? Ran into trouble at Customs? Would she even know who he was by sight? Were the photos exchanged over the six-month span of time enough to identify him in person?

The worries began to circle her mind like tiny flies, and she tried to brush them off one by one, using rational thought rather than ridiculousness. Suddenly, her phone vibrated in her hand, and the screen lit up. He was messaging her from the Customs line. He sent a picture of himself in line, and explained that it was an exceptionally long wait. Although he was closer than he’d ever been to her, it was going to be quite some time until it was his turn to spill out of the arrivals gate and into her line of sight. She sighed internally and switched back into waiting mode.

Once again, she sat down in the row of connected black chairs and watched people come and go, and come and go. People with mountains of luggage, scruffy people with beards and backpacks and big hiking boots with thick socks, who were most likely hopping continents; explorers. No family greetings. Teams of athletes emerged in matching sweatpants and jackets; no family, just a coach. Some looked Japanese, and some looked Italian, all very clean-cut. Chinese businessmen walked through the gate; no family, no expression, just searching for a man holding a paper sign with a few handwritten Chinese characters.

Her energy level was starting to wane, her enthusiasm had all but completely disappeared. He was so close, but so far. She began to envy the hundreds of people who *had* met their connection, who had the joy and reward of a hug and eye contact. It was becoming increasingly harder to find joy vicariously through who and what she witnessed.

Another hour went by, and she felt low energy disguised as discouragement making its way into her spirit. She knew it was unreasonable, but she had entered that building feeling wild with anticipation, then surrendered to patience and time, and back up to wild excitement and back down so many times, she started to feel like she was emotionally flat-lining at the very time when she should be at the highest peak. She looked at the flowers in the refrigerated vending machine as if they offered her something to do, should she buy some for herself if not him? She looked at the currency converter and wondered if it would be useful to him, since his English pounds would not buy him a cold beer in San Francisco.

Feeling desperate, she went to the Starbucks stand, hoping caffeine would fill the void. As she approached the counter, she saw her reflection in the glass pastry case. Her makeup was failing, and her hair had fallen out of place. She looked and felt like a flower deprived of water, limp and tired.

People were everywhere, the scene grew old, and the crowds now seemed like chaos. The beauty of reunited families took on a generic, and somewhat annoying tone, and she couldn't tune it out. More and more old folks relied on airport staff to push them in wheelchairs, hunched over with luggage and purses in their laps, pushing through the crowds. At first it was just the old wives in wheelchairs, then it became old husbands and wives in separate wheelchairs, and she wondered exactly what it took to get to the point in life where they came to need or expect that level of personal service, old age entitlement? She scolded herself for thinking that way, and reassured herself that one day she would probably take advantage of those opportunities too.

Animals that were checked baggage were transported out from the cargo area in beige plastic portable crates, waking up from their tranquilizers, confused and irritable. Some were barking, and everything seemed so out of place, for them and for her.

Just when she considered going back to the car and waiting there instead, her phone vibrated, and lit up again. He reported that he'd finally passed through Customs, and was on his way. She got up slowly this time, and wearily joined the crowd at the same two screens that gave a preview as to who was walking through the corridor, and toward the large open mouth of the arrival gate. He didn't know he was being filmed and watched, as the one in wait looked for clues that her cherished arrival was only seconds away.

Blackstar Rising: A Tribute to David Bowie

Blackstar, how can you be illuminated and extinguished at the same time? That's how I feel, this is what is happening. I'm dying, and at the same time being reborn.

Figure 39 Iris Coleen, age 34, Morongo Valley, California

As my body is wearing down, I've never felt more alive in spirit. Sometimes the vine sacrifices itself for the sake of the final flower. The diagnosis is grim, but I feel like I'm nearing the time in my life where I will burst from this shell and take on the form of a supernova, or a black star. My body trembles not from illness, but from the contained anticipation of exiting this expired version of myself. I will not become a black hole, I was never that sinister.

Very few people know I'm ill, how close I am to leaving. Iman and Lexi know, we could cut the grief with a knife here in this home. Not all is lost, I'll leave the people with something, parting gifts for the masses, a gift for the people. This is the gift of my last visible signs on stage in Lazarus. One of the few times Jesus wept in the Bible was when Lazarus died. The perfect way to exit the world's stage, but I won't be resurrected.

I am music. I have poured the remnants of my soul into each song on the album I am leaving in my place. Do you want to hear what this all feels like? Do you want to know what death sounds like in my head? I've also left the music videos, for the people like me, who thrive on visual performance. It is what facing death looks like. It's not pretty, and I hope you are disturbed by what you see, so that you can make peace with it, the way I was forced to.

Here's what the album sounds like, my message from the grave. Let the critics critique, I'll weigh nothing by the time they do. Because I'm gone, there's a chance that their conscience will weigh more than their opinion:

Steady beats matching the tempo of my heart that continues to drum, obscure and slightly out of tune, like life. Strings, keys, the feeling of being grounded while in the midst of chaos, when the world around you is winding up, but the world within is winding down. I hear, subtle flowing choirs of angels, blowing saxophones, one, two, three at a time... These songs sound like the dream I am living in, my voice trembles but I'm still singing for you and for me. I'll meet you all there with my voice,

Nothing inspired me to write more than facing my own mortality. I'll light another cigarette and let my thoughts float out through the moonlit window. In the reflection of the glass I see the transparent reflection of my head, no longer the seat of the slick and styled blond crown, immaculately crafted. I'm still me, I remember faintly the beautiful, red, flaming mullet of fire and the painted lightning bolt across my chiseled face so many people wore as a Halloween costume. For one day out of the year, they could be Ziggy Stardust too. They could become a spaceman, or freak out on a moonage daydream, pondering life and spiders on Mars, seeking a

connection with a liberated soul who happened to be a superstar. These things don't matter anymore. It was all bullshit: wonderful, unapologetic, liberating bullshit. I wouldn't change a thing.

Didn't anyone question the lyrics to China Girl? I never thought I'd hear that overhead in the dentist's chair. No one thinks or questions anymore.

My legs feel frail and unsteady, like my bones are stilts that could snap in half under my weight.

Life was fun. Hard, dirty, disturbing, painful, and fun.

Death and Disease will not rob me of my memories, I'll relish what little bit of control I have left of my existence. My head spins from different drugs now, these drugs the doctors give me are absolute shit. My eyes won't be open for much longer, so although they are so heavy, I keep them open now and reminisce about the days of life with Freddie, and Mick and Iggy, living fast and free. They call us visionaries, what a load of crap. We were just being ourselves and the world was our stage. The world will always be suffering from identity issues, what a shame. I'm still afraid of Americans.

I tip my head back and rest it on the back of the chair, and close my eyes for just a second, but the train of thoughts will not stop coming. I have become keenly aware of the amount of time I spend reflecting on certain memories. Regrets have no place in my mind now, they're a waste of space. Everything I was, that's *what* I was, that's *who* I was, and the world soaked it up like a sponge.

I notice birds now and approach them with a sense of weightless envy.

My 69th birthday is in two days, let's celebrate.

The Blackstar album will also be released in two days, which is a good thing since breathing is getting to be a real chore. This album is my last breath, my exhalation into space, into the cosmos, and it will land on Earth at just the right time.

The days are long and yet extremely short at the same time.

I'm clinging to time like a child desperate for its mother, wanting less of it and also wanting more. Hope is a fatal tease, it's been with me up until this day.

I'll leave this realm in a burst of sparks, a divine bolt of lightning will be my executioner.

I'll leave a trail of stardust across the sky no one expected to see.

Figure 40 "Blackstar" by James Pickell, age 47, Riverside, California

"Something happened on the day he died

Spirit rose a metre then stepped aside

Somebody else took his place, and bravely cried

(I'm a blackstar, I'm a blackstar, I'm a blackstar)"

"Blackstar" by David Bowie

Major Glaciers

Figure 41 Brighid Fitzgibbon, California

Trying to cover up future tracks of regret

We are building history every day

In the interest of moving forward

Hoodwinked and sucker punched

Go fast, never look back

I could write about you, among the dead

among the living

but you know

you could write about me too

Riding the energetic coattails of the big dogs who preceded you

Stale light, for theirs went out

Our wicks are only so long

It's the tail of a comet

It's a visible memory

Everyone's clocks are ticking

Figure 42 Jess E Hendricks, Fort Stockton, Texas

Living with uncertainty

Is living with certainty

It's in the stars

The Weather

There's a 50% chance it's going to rain
But when I walk outside
All I can feel is
The 50% chance that it's not
The sky is trembling overhead
Threatening my comfort with
A quick gust of wind
Reminding me that any second
The 50% chance of rain will win

Figure 43 Avalon Pearl Makuh, age 19, California

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