

# PAYING IT FORWARD: A GIFT ECONOMY OF POETRY AND VISUAL ART IMAGES

Susan Gerofsky, Daniel T. Barney & Mira Gerard

## ABSTRACT

As our world has changed rapidly and ineluctably with the COVID-19 pandemic, many are advocating an ethos of generosity and a gift economy, based on generative, creative offerings, as an alternative or balance to the excesses of a mainstream neoliberal exchange economy. What is the gift economy, and how does it entangle us in a fabric of mutual responsibility, obligation, creative practices and love, within the human and greater-than-human world? A Pay-It-Forward New Year's gift game amongst a group of artist/ educators, ongoing since 2014, gives rise to this meditation on the gift economy, based on Mauss, Hyde, Kimmerer, Vaughan and Jordan's work and contemplation of intergenerational, inter-being webs of mutuality. Visual artwork (photography and painting), and poetry and song that inspired and arose from the Pay-It-Forward engagement are part of this piece.

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## Bios

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*Mira Gerard* received her BFA from Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana and her MFA from the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia. Her work has been exhibited at a range of venues including Knoxville Museum of Art, Torrance Art Museum, Huntsville Museum of Art, Wichita Center for Contemporary Art, Marianne Boesky Gallery, and more. Her work was selected for New American Paintings #118 (Southeast Edition, 2015)

and has been published in Poets & Artists, The Cortland Review, and Manifest Painting International. She has presented papers and performances on the intersection of art and psychoanalysis at the International Zizek Studies Conference, LACK, Psychology and the Other, and the Southeastern College Art Conference. Mira often produces her painting at artist residencies, which have included Ox-Bow School of Art, Cill Rialaig Project, The Hambidge Center, The Vermont Studio Center, and the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. She is Chair and Professor in the Department of Art & Design at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee where she has lived and worked since 2001. Contact: [GERARD@mail.etsu.edu](mailto:GERARD@mail.etsu.edu)

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## INTRODUCTION: A NEW YEAR'S GIFT

On New Year's Day six years ago, my friend Mira Gerard, a professor of painting at East Tennessee State University, posted a lovely offer on Facebook:

*Pay It Forward art-making project for 2014:*

I promise to make a small work of art for the first five people who comment on this post and say "YES, I want in". You must in turn post this as your status update and make something for the first five who comment on your status.

\* The rules are simple: it has to be your work, made by you, and the recipient must receive it before 2014 ends.

\* It can be anything art-based: a drawing or a conceptual work of art and anything in between.

Yes, you can be on each other's pay it forward lists.

I love Mira's paintings, so I didn't hesitate to respond immediately -- and I was one of the lucky five who made it onto Mira's Pay It Forward 2014 gift list.

The term 'Pay-It-Forward' encapsulates an important concept that will be discussed further in this piece. As a working definition, we can say that 'paying it forward' into the future is a way of thinking about gift-giving as something that extends kindness, generosity, even life-giving support to those who will, in future, extend similar generosity to others. It is opposite to the idea of 'payback' (Atwood, 2008) -- the idea of debt and owing, and extending to revenge or retribution, where the person who gave a gift or benefit, or an insult or harm must be 'paid back' equally in kind. Where paying back belongs to the exchange economy, paying forward is more closely related to the maternal economy (Vaughan, 2019), where mothers and other caregivers give the gifts of birth and life, milk, food, teaching and protection to babies and the young, without any possibility of 'payback' -- giving for the sake of love, sustenance and the carrying forward of future generations. Presumably, many of those babies will grow up to be adults who give the same gift, paying it forward, to future generations of children. The generosity of Paying It Forward demands no return gift to sender, but an extension of the generosity to those who will receive ongoing gifts in future. When the gifts are artistic creations, both the giver and receiver may benefit from the process of connecting and making, holding one another in mind and building relationship and community in the process.

I reciprocated in response to Mira's invitation by copying the post to my own Facebook timeline, and immediately had responses from five friends: (1) Mira (putting herself on my list in a reflexive move), (2) Dan Barney (professor of Art Education at Brigham Young University), (3) Myriam (environmentalist and baker in Kingston, Ontario), (4) Tamsin (professor of Mathematics Education at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences),

and (5) Rosie (designer and commercial artist, and a friend since high school). (Note that the gift responses for (1), (2), (3) and (4) will be shared at the end of this article; (5) is still to be completed.) Our economy and community based on gifts had begun to form.

In the weeks and months following, no matter how busy things were with work and family, my mind was working on fulfilling the happy obligation I had set for myself through this gift economy. I had accepted a commission (or given myself a mission) to write five poems, customized to the interests and character of my five friends. I wrote the poems as I rode my bike to work, when I ate lunch or took a bus, and when I was falling asleep each night. I jotted lines down on scraps of paper and on my calendar.

By the end of July, I had written the four poems below, and sent them to Mira, Dan, Myriam and Tamsin, who received them with grace and messages of appreciation:

I'm thrilled to have inspired and to have been inspired by you.

How wonderful! Please, spread these lovely words of yours as wild seeds would. I enjoyed your play on the word rise... so many meanings and such power and hopefulness in such a small word.

But the poem is wonderful. It resonates in its cadences and in its sentiments and I am so pleased to have received it. It also gives me hope that as academics there are places for creativity both of a formal and informal nature.

I had plans to write a multi-voice choral piece about herbal teas for Rosie -- since she and I share an interest in herbal remedies and gardens -- but have not yet managed to complete that piece nor send it to my friend.

The feelings of guilt and non-completion in this gift-giving stay with me, and in some ways tie me closer to Rosie because of a gift that needs to be given, an exchange that ought to happen and has not yet. Similarly, Mira has not yet sent me that small handmade thing that she planned to make for me either. Without any bad feelings, I still await that small gift that was promised, and which may someday arrive, a gift that ties us together through anticipation and a story. Whether an actual painting arrives in the mail someday or not, we are drawn together in community around these gift-obligations, these narratives of giving and friendship.

### **Theories of the gift economy: Mauss on potlatch cultures, Hyde on the artist's gifts**

The narrative and social texture/ textile/ web of the gift is reminiscent of Marcel Mauss' (1925/2011) classic of anthropological writing, *The Gift*, a study that inspired Levi-Strauss, Bourdieu, Bataille, and Hyde, among others. In this small book, Mauss compares gift-giving practices and cultures in Polynesia, Melanesia and the Pacific Northwest of North America (including Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Kwakwaka'wakw traditions), with additional references to many other classical and contemporary cultures worldwide. Much of Mauss' study focuses on cultures where potlatch is central to relationships among individuals and clans, and where the reciprocation of gift-giving is deeply important to people's sense of self and relationships to the human and greater-than-human world. Mauss writes that:

To give something is to give a part of oneself... one gives away what is in reality a part of one's nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence... The

thing given is not inert. It is alive and often personified... It retains a magical and religious hold over the recipient. (Mauss, 1925/2011, p. 10)

There is an obligation to give and to receive, and to repay gifts received plus something extra. These social and spiritual entanglements of gift-giving continue to 'pay it forward' indefinitely into the future, and connect people with the gods and ancestors, and with the spirits of the land, plants and animals that sustain the people. Gifts or sacrifices to the spirit world are part of the holistic gift economy, bringing the people into relationships of honour and respect with unseen worlds of great power.

Gifts are both things and more-than-things, beautiful and useful in themselves, and also imbued with spirit and reciprocal responsibilities. A gift is symbolic of the systems of mutual obligation and reliance that bind together beings in the human and greater-than-human world over time. To be given a gift and not be expected (or able) to reciprocate may put a person in a position of dishonour and shame, according to Mauss' study -- and this is one of the great social and moral problems of charity given from the rich to the poor, without expectation of reciprocation.

Lewis Hyde's work (Hyde, 1982/2007) takes Mauss' anthropological study of the gift into the deep meanings of folktale, and the worlds of artists and writers. He considers the idea of inborn artistic talents as gifts and the gifts we benefit from in the natural world, alongside the gifts people give one another.

Hyde differentiates between a two-party exchange, where goods and services are 'paid back' and bartered, and where commodities may be hoarded for profit, and gifts that get energy through movement among people. Gifts that are not bartered commodities involve a sense of mystery through an expanded span of time and community. Where a gift 'goes around a corner' into a mysterious, unknown place over time, there is an almost magical sense of paying it forward to those one does not know -- those that might need exactly that gift at the time it arrives. (In fact, this is a generative and fruitful way to consider the gifts we are still awaiting or that are still not completed. It may be that the time is not yet ripe for these gifts, or that they have 'gone around the corner' to someone that needed them more, and may reappear in mysterious ways later on...) The gift's energy is refreshed as it moves towards those who are most in need of it. Hyde writes:

When I give to someone from whom I do not receive (and yet I do receive elsewhere), it is as if the gift goes around a corner before it comes back. I have to give blindly. And I feel a sort of blind gratitude as well. (Hyde, 1982/2007, p. 20)

If the commodity moves to turn a profit, where does the gift move? The gift moves toward the empty place. As it turns in its circle it turns toward him who has been empty-handed the longest, and if someone appears elsewhere whose need is greater it leaves the old channel and moves toward him. Our generosity may leave us empty but our emptiness then pulls gently at the whole until the thing in motion returns to replenish us. (Hyde, 1982/2007, p. 29)

Hyde's sense of the gift having its own trajectory, energy and agency might seem ethereal or an example of magical thinking, but in these times of COVID-19, this sense of the gift that 'goes around the corner' into mystery and somehow returns (in changed form) has become a shared, solidly material experience for many people, even making it into daily news reports. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canada's public broadcaster, reported this story recently:

Bradley Harder has baked more than 200 pies for members of his community... As someone who's almost 60 living with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), among other health issues, Harder says he began to worry about the growing threat of the pandemic. He decided he wouldn't leave his house, but to pass the time, he started creating YouTube videos called Cooking without pants — tutorials for homemade meals like lasagna. In one of the videos, Harder mentioned running out of some ingredients. So, some friends watching decided they'd order groceries to his door.

"I was so moved by this that I thought, 'Well, what can I do? I mean, I'm stuck at home, I'm vulnerable ... I've got COPD, I don't want to catch the disease,'" he said. "So I thought about it and said, 'Well, I can bake.'"

He started by baking pies for the people who'd sent him food, then for some friends, then for some neighbours, and 200 pies later, Harder's still getting requests... Whereas Harder had started the project buying the ingredients himself, he's now finding flour, butter and fresh fruit at his door, along with some financial contributions...

"Do what you do, give it away for free. It'll come back to you, I swear," he says. "It's a bad business model on paper, but it works. People are good." (Simmons, May 13, 2020)

These COVID times are full of similar stories of those who offer a gift -- of music, of food, of companionship or health support -- even when they feel they might have little to offer, and where, through the circulation of the gift, without a clear explanation, gifts are returned in some way to the giver. Much of what is created as a side effect of the movement of the gift is a sense of caring and community that is the ground and infrastructure allowing for the satisfaction of giving and receiving, motion and energy amongst people:

Unlike the sale of a commodity, the giving of a gift tends to establish a relationship between the parties involved. Furthermore, when gifts circulate within a group, their commerce leaves a series of interconnected relationships in its wake, and a kind of decentralized cohesiveness emerges. (Hyde, 1982/2007, p. xx)

Speaking to artists, Hyde notes that at the best of times, there is a feeling that the artist's gifts, muses or talents flow through the person -- that the gift is in motion, and is both part and not part of the self. When artists create and share new works, these gifts are activated, not depleted:

To have painted a painting does not empty the vessel out of which the paintings come. On the contrary, it is the talent which is not in use that is lost or atrophies, and to bestow one of our creations is the surest way to invoke the next. (Hyde, 1982/2007, p. 189)

So to be invited to make a new work of art is also an invitation to invoke those gifts that flow through us as artists; the giver is gifted with inspiration and motivation in creating something of their own self that pays inspiration forward to another. Hyde quotes the poet Gary Snyder writing about the gratitude he feels in the appearance of a poem that it seems is of himself, and at the same time, a gift that is not made through his conscious control:

You get a good poem and you don't know where it came from. "Did I say that?" And so all you feel is: you feel humility and you feel gratitude. (Snyder, 1980, p. 79)

There is a sense that the gift gives energy, surprise and satisfaction to the artist in both the making and the giving, so that the gift energizes the whole community in unpredictable and unexpected ways, quite beyond its exchange value as a commodity.

### **Theories of the gift economy: Kimmerer on the gifts of the greater-than-human world**

Mauss' and Hyde's voices come from masculinist, European/ American colonial traditions of anthropology and literary theory from the 20th century; Kimmerer, Vaughan and Jordan write the theory of the gift economy from contemporary feminist, ecological, counter-colonial scholarship.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, professor of plant ecology at SUNY Syracuse and Indigenous scholar from the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, writes about experiencing the gift economy in our times, where market economy commodification has destroyed and threatened so much.

Kimmerer writes about being 'raised by strawberries' -- about the wild strawberries of her childhood as a gift of the earth:

Strawberries first shaped my view of a world full of gifts simply scattered at your feet. A gift comes to you through no action of your own, free, having moved toward you without your beckoning. It is not a reward; you cannot earn it, or call it to you, or even deserve it. And yet it appears. Your only role is to be open-eyed and present. Gifts exist in a realm of humility and mystery— as with random acts of kindness, we do not know their source. (Kimmerer, 2013, pp. 23-24)

Kimmerer writes about learning from the strawberries how to give back to the strawberries: by clearing space for their runners to take root and the plants to spread and propagate. This learning from the strawberries could only take place because there was an ongoing relationship with the strawberry plants; the berries were accepted as a gift, and through that gift, reciprocal responsibilities could and must be taken up.

The sweetgrass of Kimmerer's book title (*Hierochloë hirta*, *H. alpina* and other related species of long, satiny, fragrant grasses) is native to Canada, most of the US and many northern nations. It is "a widely used and revered sacred plant... and continues to play an important role in Indigenous cultures" (Turner, 2018). Sweetgrass may be burned as a purifying 'smudge' or incense, plaited or woven into baskets and hats, and used for ceremonial and medicinal purposes.

In a form of human gift-giving akin to the gift of the strawberries, traditional sweetgrass pickers would never buy and sell sweetgrass for money, nor would they take more sweetgrass than they needed. People who collect sweetgrass with proper respect offer back a gift to the earth, or burn a braid of sweetgrass in the fire to give thanks:

The braids are given as gifts, to honor, to say thank you, to heal and to strengthen. The sweetgrass is kept in motion. When Wally gives sweetgrass to the fire, it is a gift that has passed from hand to

hand, growing richer as it is honored in every exchange... That is the fundamental nature of gifts: they move, and their value increases with their passage. The fields made a gift of berries to us and we made a gift of them to our father. The more something is shared, the greater its value becomes. (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 26)

This sense of movement and mutuality, gratitude and reciprocation is the essence of the gift culture and its life-giving lessons of generosity and non-attachment. Kimmerer writes about the unhealthy stasis of private ownership and greed, compared to the flow and movement of a gift culture:

Wealth among traditional people is measured by having enough to give away. Hoarding the gift, we become constipated with wealth, bloated with possessions, too heavy to join the dance... In a culture of gratitude, everyone knows that gifts will follow the circle of reciprocity and flow back to you again. This time you give and next time you receive. Both the honor of giving and the humility of receiving are necessary halves of the equation. (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 382)

In traditional and contemporary ceremonies, the circulation of the gift “marries the mundane to the sacred” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 37), bringing people into a mutual relationship with the ancestors, spirits, other humans and the earth. Through ritual, gratitude, trust and generosity, we care for one another and keep the gifts moving -- creating the world we want to live in and making it a place where all can thrive.

Kimmerer has commented on the importance of awareness that we survive and thrive within a gift economy in these times of COVID-19 mutual interdependence and isolation, in a recent interview in the Guardian (Yeh, May 23, 2020):

People can't understand the world as a gift unless someone shows them how it's a gift... What's being revealed to me from readers is a really deep longing for connection with nature... It's as if people remember in some kind of early, ancestral place within them. They're remembering what it might be like to live somewhere you felt companionship with the living world, not estrangement. (Kimmerer, quoted in Yeh, May 23, 2020)

Through this crisis, we are becoming more aware of the gifts of the natural world, freely given, and of ourselves as earthly beings. Are we capable of reciprocating in meaningful ways by 'paying it forward' to future generations, of humans and of the greater-than-human world we live in and with?

[The coronavirus has reminded us that] we're biological beings, subject to the laws of nature. That alone can be a shaking. But I wonder, can we at some point turn our attention away to say the vulnerability we are experiencing right now is the vulnerability that songbirds feel every single day of their lives? Could this extend our sense of ecological compassion, to the rest of our more-than-human relatives? (Kimmerer, quoted in Yeh, May 23, 2020)

### **Theories of the gift economy: Vaughan and Jordan on the maternal gift economy**

In many ways, the gift economy structure is no more than a formalization of the processes of intergenerational care and learning that always take place with humans and other living things. As new babies are born, adults

must nurture them, and welcome them into the culture through material and more-than-material gifts of kindness and care, teaching and mentorship -- paying forward the gifts that they themselves received from earlier generations. Those mentoring also receive gifts of energy and new engagement with the culture, delight and a fresh point of view from the novices they mentor. The act of giving regenerates both givers and receivers, and the mutual bonds of responsibility of the paying-it-forward gift economy brings creative work into being that might not have been undertaken without the sweet obligation to return the gift.

Genevieve Vaughan and Nané Jordan make the strong connection between the maternal gift economy and the vital role of mothers 'paying gifts forward' with no expectation or possibility of recompense. Mothers give the gift of life in birthing, nurturing and teaching babies and children. It is every person's first experience of generosity and the gift, as we all start life as infants dependent upon our mothers (and others who fulfil mothering, caring roles). This is the work that gifts each human with our very existence, our life and ability to thrive and grow -- unacknowledged, unpaid work that is deliberately ignored by the mainstream economy.

Vaughan sees the patriarchal 'payback' exchange economy as parasitic on the more fundamental 'paying it forward' matriarchal gift economy, claiming and selling its gifts as commodities:

Our society today is based on two economies, not just one economy with 'externalities.' The domestic economy is a gift economy with mothering practices as its core. The market economy is superimposed upon the domestic economy and takes its sustenance from it while distributing scarce goods to it through monetized exchange. (Vaughan, 2019, p. 25)

She addresses Mauss' schema of gift exchange in the context of the maternal gift economy:

Marcel Mauss' three-step process of giving-receiving-giving back necessarily begins with the two-step process of giving-receiving in the life of every human, because infants cannot perform the third step of giving back. (Vaughan, 2019, p. 25)

The effects of this paying-it-forward maternal gift economy are essential to the development of each person's relationships of love and trust in the world:

Direct giving and receiving mediate the child's world; they create relations of mutuality and trust, and form the basis of attachment. (Vaughan, 2019, p. 27)

Jordan extends Vaughan's approach to a consideration of Earth as mother that gives generously and without a demand for reciprocation to all living beings. This is a way of being that resonates with Kimmerer's sense of wild strawberries as the first gift, and of a consideration of the greater-than-human world as our kin:

This early maternal gift economy does not approximate the exchange economy, where something is only given in exchange for something else. A child requires the mother's immediate and constant giving, or the child will perish. The gift is also present in the Earth's resources as a continual free stream of goods that humans need. Yet much of human life is being commodified through exchange and market economies. Work, services and the "free" goods of the Earth itself have costs in their exchange value. (Jordan, 2017, p. 148)

## Revisiting our experiences as artists paying-it-forward

To return from this holistic and all-embracing view of gift culture to our small exchange of pay-it-forward art works, our offerings to one another may seem insignificant. And yet, the story continues, and the narrative is never completed -- and we may never know where even this modest paying-forward and movement of gifts may go. There has already been a collaboration with three performer/ musician/ clown friends (Melissa Aston, Veronica Maynard and M. Pyress Flame) in a performative session for the 2015 Provoking Curriculum Conference at the University of British Columbia ("Playing it forward: Gift poems on curriculum sung with accordion, musical saw and clowning", filmed by Joe Norris, Brock University for his Playbuilding <http://www.joenorrisplaybuilding.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Provoking-Program.pdf>). Dan Barney has created a new series of artistic images, different from the original ones, in response to the gift poem written for him here -- and the reverberations from these sharings carry forward.

We will finish with the gift poems and images, and a meditation from each of the co-authors on the experience of being involved in this six-year ongoing relationship of art-making and mutual gift-giving and the way it has affected our relationships with one another, our processes of creative making and our deep emotions about the world as we experience change, creativity, joy, loss, caring and friendship together over time.

### (1) Susan Gerofsky's poem for Mira Gerard, based on Mira's paintings: Another World Within This One

How could they not pay  
attention to the fairy tales?  
How could they not learn?  
How could they set the ocean  
afire?  
How could they grow up  
without going into the  
woods?  
Into their deep dark  
How could they not  
How could they find no  
pleasure in colour?  
How could they find no  
pleasure?



How could they give up on their hands  
Their ears  
How could they not be entranced by that music?  
How could they be entranced  
In growing up, how could they not be delicious?  
Delighted in that light  
How could they hand over their mouths?  
How could they not be overcome with the melting  
beauty of it?  
How could they not taste the irony of blood?



How could we still swim in those waters?  
Strong and vulnerable in a slip of a dress, slip of a girl  
How could we not desire those depths?  
Sinking down, joyfully rehearsing oblivion  
How could we not sing our full hearts forth?  
Under the bursting moon  
How could we not be seduced by that light?  
Not be light  
Falling up into it  
The waters above the sky?



How could the shadow not race?  
How could the moment of impact...  
How could we wait for that?  
How could we picnic on the moon?  
Waiting for that nightmare to unfold  
How could we take that moment to our hearts?  
How could we live better till it arrives?



How could we roam that other world  
each night?  
How could it be so deep, so superficial?  
Symbols and rebuses  
How could the structure of the story  
come from this?  
How picaresque the plot  
How could we not know this place we  
walk so intimate?  
How could we not visit one another in  
our dreamwalks?



How was it when one first was born?  
How was it before it could be spoken?  
How were the hand and eye coupled?  
How will they tickle one another apart?  
How are we amongst the other animals?  
The cats winding us to their ways  
Crows, bees, fish dreaming us into being?  
How is it that one must be many?  
Seduced by our other selves, sylvan elves  
The forest full of vampire loves.



### **Mira writes a letter to Susan:**

When I first received your poems, I only glanced at what you wrote. I think that's because I wasn't ready to fulfill my side of the bargain. I put it off, and have done that more than once in this process. I felt bad about it, but apparently not bad enough to do anything. It's not the first time I've dropped the ball. This aspect of myself is not something I'm proud of, but somehow my friendships and relationships have remained intact, probably because my loved ones understand that I am not always punctual.

I think it was meant to be, ultimately, that I took a long time before deeply contemplating the poems. In the time between when this project was initiated and now being brought full circle, my mother was diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic neuroendocrine cancer, and suffered terribly for 10 months until her death in 2019. Much more recently, Susan lost her mother. We are bonded in this unimaginable grief. In the aftermath of the year of taking care of mom and the deep, unbelievably visceral pain of losing her that is long from subsiding, I have thought about my paintings, and how dark, fragmented, and shrouded they have so often been- my paintings, which are in many ways a cinematic ode to longing and pain, and which Susan rightfully points to in her poem-as-series-of-questions. I love how the poem visually lines up to each painting, exploring the turning away, the hopelessness, the giving up, that's embedded into all of them- all while somehow reflecting that the paintings are in and of themselves an illustration of fullness and hope and life, with their lush colors and marks and the unknown narratives of the faceless figures. I have always imagined the figures in my paintings as trapped in a space between one state of being and another. Liminality, dreams, the unconscious, and transformation are all things I have thought about.

It is only now, at this stage in my life when many of the anticipated apocalypses of loss that we all must face in various forms have indelibly struck my personal life (death, divorce, depression, menopause, and more), that I have begun to learn just how much joy and richness I have had and still do have, and have been able to face and process whatever my regrets have been, enough to see more clearly that I have been a lot more present for the good than I thought. My paintings are in a state of transition, as is everything. I imagine soil that has been hard-packed for some time, loosening enough so that there are many free-floating parts, and somehow when they come together again, some parts will wash away. Much like our world now in the pandemic that we are all bound together and apart by, it is impossible to know what will be left and what will be broken away.

While I am sorry that I didn't respond to Susan sooner, I now feel that it was meant exactly like this. I also now know what to send her, to complete my side of the "pay it forward" bargain. I look forward to doing that, very much.

On a final note, last night I had a dream about my mother. In the dream, we were hugging for a very, very long time, and I knew she was dying, so I kept telling her that I love her so much. Whispering it in her ear. Someone was saying "she's dead" and I hoped she couldn't hear them anticipating what we knew was coming. Nothing really mattered other than that hug, which I woke up directly from, still feeling the warmth of her from the dream. The last line of a stanza of Susan's poem: "How could we not visit one another in our dreamwalks?" is one of many tiny moments in the months since Mom's passing that I have wondered at the magic of patterns seen and unseen, and whether meaning is grafted onto chaos, or something more. I will take it as it came to me, because it is all I have, and it is very, very beautiful. I am grateful.

Thank you Susan for being such an incredibly kind, giving, thoughtful friend. It is fitting that we met in a virtual world online and not yet in person, yet have such a deep connection. One day I hope we can meet in real space. Until then, please send me your address again, so I can give you something special that I made!

**(2) Susan Gerofsky's poem for Dan Barney, written in response to Dan's earlier work, and Dan's new images, created in response to the poem:**

**What to wear? Song for Dan Barney**

I will not wear your scared regulations  
Bored blandness, sad hatreds  
Don't mix your patterns, no pink with red  
No white after Labour Day  
Don't show your underwear  
Don't show your roots.  
Act your age, act your rage.

But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve  
Hair wildly wound  
Colours singing  
Patterns at play

I will not wear your sad sad beige  
I will not wear your good girl shame  
But I will wear  
The brilliant colours of my joyful age.  
But I will wear my own true name

I will not wear your fear of scorn  
But I will wear  
'Glad to be born'

I will not wear  
Their hatred of my grandma's grandma  
Her nose, her hips, her hair  
But I will gladly wear  
The history of love come down the families  
To me, and she, and thee.



I will not wear  
The sposed-to-do and must-nots and beware  
The how-to-hides and flaws and cover-girls  
I will not wear the hate-my-voice and stupid-me and hide.

If I will wear invisibility  
It will be as an awesome superpower  
Ghosting observant as a theatre gal  
Picking the times to notice and be seen.

I will not wear your shame, your tame,  
Your money and fame  
Ambition, success and blame  
Your sin and your redemption and then sin again  
Your salvation  
Your temptation  
These are none of mine.

I will not wear your smug, your sure, your being right  
The thought that what is known is known  
And that the one is right, the other wrong  
And must be taught, by force if it comes to that.

But I will wear adventure clothes  
Children's wonder and surprise  
A travelling hat and cape, bundle on a stick  
With the gossamer sweater my fairy godma knit  
Stout boots, and a chunk of bread and cheese.  
I will wear the poems I know by heart  
And smidges of another language world.

I'll go forth in a humble track  
Amazed at sunsets, shivering at the wolves,  
Friend to birds and ants and sheep, and poor folk on the  
way.  
Ready to laugh and sing and build a boat and make a hut  
of reeds  
And make friends along the ways  
And in my small way save my small bit of world.



**Dan Barney writes:**

*Process: How did it feel to receive the gift and how did it feel to give? Was this a familiar medium/process or was it an exploration in a new medium/process?*

When Susan first offered her poem to me, she stated that she was responding to a 20-year old photographic series I started while I was a photography teacher at the secondary level. At that time, I was not using much digital photography but rather silver and non-silver darkroom processes. The series, titled “Appearing”, included black and white portraits and self-portraits that utilized cut outs from magazines to shift and change likenesses. The magazine images were adhered to an actual face with regular tape without any attempt to mask its artifice. The series was used to demonstrate various dodging and burning techniques for my students. The new series I created here for Susan retains the magazine cut outs as a type of temporary masking, but they are all self-portraits and are in color rather than in black and white.

*Tensions: Any unfolding or unresolved tensions between the authors?*

To be honest, I felt quite a bit of guilt and disappointment in myself for having received such a personal and powerful gift of poetry from Susan but delaying my reply to her. For me, thinking of how to respond with something of value took time to process. It took me almost 6 years to fulfill my obligation to Susan and I still have plans to offer more since the feeling of owing someone something, in this case, was generative as a type of potential doing for me. I felt disappointed and also constantly inspired. On the one hand, I enjoyed having a creative project that was continually present, alongside me, but on the other hand, I felt uneasy not knowing how to respond with a corresponding, perfectly appropriate reply. This gift exchange process was uneasy, unsettling, and humbling. For example, was I up to the challenge of returning such a thoughtful gift, and to even give “a little extra?” I thought about the time Susan put in to think about me personally through poetry, a poetic thinking and doing, in relation to work that I had originally created for my students and me. I was overwhelmed that my friend had reflected so personally to my creations that were generated from my own doings and pedagogical offerings in the past within a completely different context. Feelings of “how can I ever fulfill such a gift obligation,” especially in terms of a gift culture of returning the offer of “a little extra” was so deeply touching, and it paralyzed me at times. The responsibility to my friend was a continual connection to my friend, but with a tinge of guilt that I was not able to quickly offer her as much as she had given.

*Relationship between the authors:*

Susan was hired at the university where I was working on my PhD. I really did not understand interdisciplinarity until I had met Susan. I do not remember ever meeting a scholar who was interested in and skilled in so many areas that were previously siloed to me. Susan was a scholar in language and literature, ecology, gesture, mathematics, and music. She wrote haikus and offered them as performances, but she also wrote traditional academic papers. Susan inspired me as a student to consider all my interests and curiosities as scholarship.

**Susan Gerofsky writes:**

Mira and Dan are two very dear friends to me, both artist-scholars, who have never met one another—though

I hope we will all meet in real life before too long. Mira and I met through the online world of Second Life more than a decade ago, and have continued our friendship through other social media, but have never actually met in person. Dan and I know each other in many face-to-face contexts as university colleagues, and see one another virtually on Facebook and in person most years at education conferences.

We have a deep rapport through conversation and art, Mira and I, and Dan and I, and have shared many deep experiences over the past fifteen years. Mira and I are both entranced by the imagery of fairytales and dreams, wildness, love, grief... Dan and I find uncanny ironies in images of self as filtered through national norms and popular culture, fashion and gender, family roles and a wry sense of humour.

I returned to more intensive art-making through poetry, playwriting, music, filmmaking and fibre arts over the past fifteen years, integrated with my work as a university professor, as our own children grew up and I left the hurly-burly life of secondary school teaching. It helps me to have a social relationship and a promise to another person to make art; perhaps in identifying strongly as a mother, I care about satisfying the need of the other, or at least in telling myself that there is someone else who is waiting for this new thing to be made.

There is guilt, but not an overwhelming or paralyzing guilt... just an itchy, stimulating feeling that someone I care about might be anticipating something, and it is up to me to make it. That provocation gets me working even when I don't know I'm working, while I'm sleeping or walking or swimming. In the same way, I like to do puzzles that make me very slightly irritated or provoked, so that my half-asleep mind is working through all the possible anagrams of a set of letters for one game, or the logic of a mathematical puzzle for another. Perhaps that's why I love math, and poetry, and language, and music... they all have an element of subconscious, multisensory patterning that helps me bring my focus to something compelling and a bit tricky.

When I finally got around to writing down the poems, about seven months after promising them, the words flowed easily. I had been drafting and redrafting internally for quite a while, feeling my friends' presence, considering who we are for each other, listening to their voices through social media and looking deeply into their visual artwork. I didn't know how they would receive these gifts, and whether the poems might truly speak to them or not. But the poems arrived to me almost fully-formed, and that was how they had to be, ready or not.

I told myself that these gifts were for others, but they have been gifts for myself too. Especially in the poems for Dan and Mira, I revisited places and feelings from my childhood that I hadn't revealed to many people. It felt risky to put them forward in the poems, but in (o)uttering these stories, these feelings and images, I am able to bring them consciously into my life now. I learn something of the unchanging themes of my life as I reread these poems and am moved by my friends' art. With the pain of my mother's passing during this COVID isolation, without having the traditions of mourning to support us; with our family's emotional turmoil in these months of intensity and isolation -- now is a good time to be able to give and receive these gifts of honesty and love.

This piece concludes with the gift poems I wrote for Myriam and Tamsin. I've set Myriam's poem to music, so that it has become the lyrics of a song which may be taken up by a choir I belong to in Vancouver. Tamsin's poem also might lend itself to music, and in this way feels still unfinished. The song I have promised as a gift to Rosie is still bubbling, effervescing and percolating within me, and will no doubt emerge before too long. Each gift, as every gift, is incomplete: moving, gone off around the corner to places of mystery, hibernating, estivating, waking, returning and promising to offer something surprising. We shall see!

(3) Susan Gerofsky's poem/ song for Myriam Beaulne, baker and environmentalist: What makes you rise?

## What Makes You Rise?

Susan Gerofsky

Susan Gerofsky

$\text{♩} = 80$   
Am

Yeast in the air ev erywhere Baking soda explodes with vin e gar

3 Eggs, eggs stiff beat en egg whites What makes it rise?

5 The magic of a sour sour dough Fomentation of fer men ta tion

7 The fizz of car bon a tion - What makes it rise? Rise, rise as an - gel cake light

10 Rise rise empty as a bubble Rise, leaven that un leav ened bread that

12 Am D Light, rise, air, le - vi-ty Rise, like a fla - ky past - ry Rise, like the cheese sou ff - le

15 E Am Am Rise, fall, rise up, fall back What makes it rise? Rise, rise

18 E Am Am E Am What makes it rise? Rise, rise What makes it rise?

2014

(a) Yeast, yeast in the air everywhere  
Baking soda explodes with vinegar  
Eggs, eggs, stiff beaten egg whites  
What makes it rise?

The magic of a sour sourdough  
Fomentation of fermentation  
The fizz of carbonization  
What makes it rise?

Rise, rise light as an angel cake  
Rise, rise, empty as a bubble  
Rise, leaven that unleavened bread  
Light, rise, air, levity  
Rise, like a flaky pastry  
Rise, like the cheese soufflé  
Rise, fall, rise up, fall back  
What makes it rise?

(b) You may rise to the occasion  
You might rise to the bait  
Rise, rise up in anger  
What makes you rise?

Rise in the heat of the moment  
Rise, ah, to meet your lover  
Breath, heart, blood steaming  
What makes you rise?

Who can get a rise out of you?  
What is it raises your spirits?  
Flying high, sail on, sail on  
Sail for a sky-egg sun.

You got a rocket in your pocket?  
You found the lightness of being?  
Laughter, holy liftin'  
What makes you rise?

(c) We rise to stand together  
Rise to assert what's right  
Voices rise up singing  
What makes us rise?

Rising to oppose injustice  
Rising to create our art  
Rise, like the sun or a hurricane  
How should we rise?

Rise to defend our Mother  
Rise cause we just can't stand it  
Rise in hope and pleasure  
Rise up, rise up.

Stand on your own two feet now  
Levitating shoulder to shoulder  
Lifted by love and music  
What makes us rise?

S. Gerofsky, [photograph]. Homemade Bread for Gift Economy. 2020

(4) Susan Gerofsky's poem for Tamsin Meaney, mathematics education researcher.

**In time and over time:**

(1) Listen my young one  
I have big ideas for you  
A plan for your future life  
In a future time.

I might not make it there  
You'll go on without me  
But I have things to teach you  
That will help on your way.

I'm quite sure, though I worry  
That you may not be listening  
It will help, if you hear it  
What I need to pass on.

I'll tell you a story  
I'll sing you a ditty  
I'll give you advice  
That will help you, I'm sure.

Quite sure, quite sure  
That I know what I'm saying  
That I know what I know  
And it's all for the best.

Experience taught me  
That and my schooling  
I know what I give  
And what you must take.

Pay attention now kiddo  
Listen hard  
Write it all down  
Learn it by heart

It's all important  
It's all I can offer  
It's all that you'll need  
And it's all of it true.

(2) Listen now learners  
We have big plans for you  
Society's plan  
Where you'll each know your place.

It involves economics  
Predictions of job markets  
Riches and poverty  
Which will be yours?

We have a curriculum  
Unit plans, lesson plans  
Testing and grading  
To sort you for sure.

To sort you for certain  
The smart and the stupid  
The bullies and bullied  
The hands and the heads.

Quite certain, quite certain  
We know what we're doing  
We know what the future  
Will hold for you all.

It's based on a survey  
Of major employers  
It's quite scientific  
The numbers don't lie.

Do your homework now kiddos  
These examinations  
Determine your future  
No matter how flawed.

It's all being counted  
It's stored in your records  
It'll stay there forever  
And it's all of it true.

(3) Listen dear elders  
I have my own questions  
Regarding the future  
Which may not be yours.

Don't know if I'll make it  
Or what I'll make of it  
Or who'll be there with me  
Or if the world's doomed.

I do love your stories  
I'm listening carefully  
Some I will take to heart  
Some I reject.

I have a new project  
I have my own standards  
I often don't meet them  
I'm never quite sure.

Never sure, never sure  
But watching and listening  
Anxious and playful  
At all the same time.

I don't know what's the future  
Or what's my place in it  
I do know your old world  
Is going, has gone.

Pay attention, my teachers  
We learn in our choosing  
Forgetting, remembering  
All of your tales.

Our learning is different  
Both in time and over time  
I'd be happy to share with you  
Something that's true

## ARTWORK CREDITS

Mira Gerard paintings, in order of appearance: *Graph of Desire*; *River of Forgetting*; *Epistasis*; *Listen Carefully to the Sound of Your Loneliness*; *Conversion*; *In Rainbows*. Oil on canvas.

Dan Barney: *I Woke Up Like This -- Flawless*. Four images from new photo series.

Susan Gerofsky poems and song: *What to wear? Song for Dan Barney*; *What makes you rise? Song for Myriam Beaulne (music and lyrics)*; *In time and over time: Poem for Tamsin Meany*; *For Mira Gerard: Another world within this one*.

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