

## ON THE CUTTING EDGE: 4

### *What was Said at the Reunion of Deathbed Images*



*A Tiny Movie for the Eyes and Ears - Rich Ferguson*  
YouTube 2025

By Marc Zegans

Rich Ferguson—poet, spoken word artist, past California Beat Poet laureate, progenitor of beatnotbeat,<sup>1</sup> and editor of the Moon Tide Press anthology bearing that name—has range. Performance is central to Ferguson’s poetic persona. He has shared the stage with luminaries ranging from Patti Smith to Bob Holman and is a featured performer in the film *What About Me?* He has also made a cluster of spoken word videos that extend beyond performance capture into polypoetic videoart.

Though Enzo Minarelli’s foundational manifesto restricted polypoetry to live shows employing theatrical elements including dance, music, imagery, and technical intervention, the primacy polypoetry accords to sound and its notion that a “polypoet” inserts oneself as “critic, translator, curator, and journalist, into a lively network of artists and promoters,”<sup>2</sup> jibe well with Ferguson’s approach to his craft.

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<sup>1</sup> Though I don’t know Rich, I do have a slight Beat Not Beat connection, Beat not Beat Wave having published my poem [Whitneyville](#) in December of 2023.

<sup>2</sup> *Polypoetry 30 Years 1987-2017*, Enzo Minarelli, Frederico Fernandez, eds., p.9, Eduel International, 2018.

Ferguson's video-poems take direct aim at his viewer's hearts, strive to inject spirit and compassion into our bleak and increasingly dystopian world, are marked by varied and inventive construction of the worlds that his spoken word personae inhabit, and exhibit a commanding capacity to establish mood through sound, movement, costume, set design, and dynamic tableau.

The imaginative conceits, formal conception, and modes of assemblage that characterize productions such as [The Human Condition](#) (2011) and [Wound Collector](#) (2021) mark Ferguson's films as a coherently evolving series of socially conscious exercises in polypoiesis. His recently released [What Was Said at the Reunion of Deathbed Wishes](#), the subject of this essay, is a provocative, highly stylized, extension of his body of work.

### **Deathbed Wishes and the Nature of Reunion**

If we are lucky, words uttered in our final moments are heard by loving ears, absorbed by caring souls whose presence gives us peace and reminds us that our lives in the material realm have mattered. If we are alone, our words and final utterances disperse in air, perhaps reverberating for a moment before drifting on. Each thought uttered, each image expressed, is the consequence of a unique life path arriving at its point of debarkation. What is said will differ from person to person and their wishes will periodically conflict.

I see the deathbed wishes in Ferguson's latest film as a kind of offering. Conversely, one might see such wishes as pleas, yearnings to receive, or prayers for corrective action. There is something prospectively possessive about a wish because it begins, whether silently or in full throat, with the phrase, "I want." Stronger, though, than *the impulse to have* embedded in these words is *a desire to bring about*, to be a creative cause. In this more potent sense, a wish—reaching beyond its issuer's corporeal reality to carry hope and perhaps catalyze action among those who bear witness to its voicing and subsequent retelling—is an offering of possibility and the transmission of hope for its realization from one generation to the next.

The expression deathbed wishes, as portrayed in this film, can, I believe, fairly be read as a proxy for the larger class of monologic conveyances that we might call deathbed utterances. Such utterances often arise from, are constituted in, and evoke images. A deathbed wish carries no compulsion to be a declarative statement of desire. It may be more diffuse, suggestive, metaphoric, or symbolic, and it may be communicated by touch, by a glance, by an exhale or a gasp, a gesture, a vision, or reference to a color. It is not restricted to linguistic expression and may be more potent and enduring when it is not.

The images that give rise to, that shape, and that are invoked by deathbed utterances are intimate and, conventionally, we presume, ephemeral. But what if, once incarnated, such

images persist? What if they endure as living entities that can unite and reunite? What might we experience and what might we learn when these are brought together?

Ferguson's idea that diverse deathbed wishes might assemble is novel. The notion that they might join in a reunion the more so. The distinction he draws in the film's title between a simple gathering of deathbed wishes and their arrival at a reunion matters.

Were the film a portrait of a simple gathering, one might imagine a confluence of images released from a plethora of deathbeds as a painting, as a murmur of diverse voices, or, if delivered sequentially, channeled through a funnel into single voice that acts as their instrument. Such a convergence neither assumes nor requires prior connection between the dying and the images they respectively invoke. In the latter case, it can simply take the form of a system of random arrivals and steady departures analogous to the activity at a bus terminal, a customs gate, or a toll station.

The essence of reunion, by contrast, is prior connection. If deathbed wishes are to be reunited, they must have shared a common past. Perhaps, like archetypes, there are shared images that rise from the collective unconscious and pass into the material world via the liminal space between life and death. Perhaps people who attend to the dying and serve as their witness will come to know these images and visually unite them. Perhaps encounter with the voicing of such images activates and brings to the fore deep held memories, our experience of their vocalization effecting a living reunion. Perhaps deathbed images are called from source, transmitted through time and space and returned to the timeless, the reunion arriving only when the transmission has ceased. Perhaps the visual elements in Ferguson's film—along with its vocalizations, movement, fixed poses, and music—constitute the reunion. My interpretation tends toward this latter view.

### **On Film and In the Body**

The film opens on Ferguson's character in bandana and blue plaid campesino shirt, leather and silver bracelets on his wrist. The camera cuts to a blurred image of a bleached white leafless tree in the desert, back to Ferguson rising slowly, rubbing his eyes, then to his character, back straight, straw hat on head, a radio microphone in hand. A mournful bowed bass sounds. We return to the man seated, reaching for his hat. Time has skipped backward. We see him at a distance, back to camera, arm crooked over his head. He stands now, a scarecrow, in a field of dead stalks. Perhaps this figure locked in a death spasm is the first thing said at the reunion, perhaps it is an annunciation.

An empty swing dangles above water glazed mud facing a distant horizon. Though the location is not given, it rings of the dying Salton Sea. Ferguson as scarecrow walks quickly and disjointedly past a weathered wide-boarded picket fence adjacent to a decaying

shack. He enters a blurry bodega, “lost,” the first word to enter the film, is vertically spray-painted on a white wooden doorjamb. He exits, then, seated before the bleached tree, speaking into the radio microphone, asks, “What was said at the reunion of deathbed wishes?”

Swiftly, urgently, he proclaims, “I want to seek out tomorrows that drink optimism straight no chaser.” The line evokes Thelonius Monk. Internally, I hear Monk’s halting introduction to “Locomotive,” reminiscent to me of Ferguson’s earlier herky-jerky movements across the desert floor. My inner ear now skips to Charlie Rouse’s saxophone solo on “Straight No Chaser,” the title piece from the same 1967 album.<sup>3</sup> There’s hope abundant in Monk’s recording. It’s the straight truth, here, now, unadulterated. It need not be washed away.

In memory, I travel to New Haven Connecticut. I am twelve years old. I am sitting in Anthony Tommasini’s apartment. Back then, he was a graduate student in the Yale Music School, and everyone called him Tony. Now, a highly regarded music critic, he is Anthony.<sup>4</sup> My mind drifts to a piano recital of Tony’s at Wesleyan’s beautiful concert hall in the early 1980s. He is playing short pieces by Virgil Thompson. He takes great joy in their performance. It is all gift to his wide-eared audience. Back in New Haven, now we’re listening to Mingus. “Eat that Chicken”<sup>5</sup> comes on. We laugh at its raucous jubilation, pure church completely devoid of cerebral impulse. An upstairs neighbor comes down bangs on the door and asks, “Has the kid heard Monk?”

“You should listen to Monk,” the neighbor says looking at me.” Tony pulls “Straight No Chaser” from his album rack and puts it on the turntable. I’m transfixed. It’s a world made of sound, idiosyncratic, haltingly structured, and sublime. I’m captivated by the space it holds for its soloists—space in which each succeeding note unlocks bright possibility for what might happen next. This is the call for optimistic tomorrows that I hear in Ferguson’s opening words.

As the animate scarecrow now strides across the desert, the litany of deathbed wishes unfolds as a fantasia of desires:

I want to remove all billboards from the overcrowded highways of our minds.

I want to prove that white noise loves black jazz.

That Mr. Rogers was a CIA operative

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<sup>3</sup> Thelonius Monk, “Straight No Chaser,” Columbia Records, 1967.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Tommasini was the chief music critic for the New York Times from 2000 to 2021. Long before that he was my beloved piano teacher.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Mingus, “Mingus, Oh Yeah,” Atlantic Records, 1962.

hired to test the limits of human kindness.

...

I want to create underground libraries for bookworms.

Create bright playgrounds in the cloudy eyes of the dying.

As he casts the image of bright playgrounds in cloudy eyes, the now more human speaker enters an abandoned room, perhaps a portal that takes him suddenly to a recording studio where he stands facing a pop screen fronting a modern microphone. The litany of desire takes a normative tilt, unleashing string of burning yearnings – “[to] expose all false idols for being truly idle...recycle old lies into lions” – that continues until the poem’s final vocal offering, “I want to change lives with a stranger to see how others experience life.” The music softens, words cease, and the image travels from studio to soft fading desert light, where microphone in hand Ferguson slowly reassumes the scarecrow’s awkward fixity.

### **Record of Witness as Incantation**

The wishes expressed in *What Was Said at the Reunion* do not accord with each other, nor does the film resolve the contradictions between them. Ferguson’s strange and charismatic character’s animated conveyance of reunited wishes, carrying the tacit implication that they are his own, introduces an unsettling incongruity between the speaker’s full-throated monologue and the conventional meaning of reunion. This dissonance is increased because one wants to read Ferguson’s character as protagonist but cannot. The character functions simply as chorus, a through-pass of wishes from beyond.

There is no central conflict in the film and nothing in its narrative arc articulates and fulfils a narrative premise, therefore it cannot be read as story. This presents its viewer with an interpretive challenge—one that is not a defect. True to its title, *What Was Said at the Reunion of Deathbed Wishes* is a record of witness, perhaps dramatic stenography or perhaps the product of scribal selectivity, in which the conditions of a hitherto unconceived reunion are collapsed into a singular realization.

This testimony of testaments, operating (save smell) on all senses, including one’s perception of the passage of time, incarnates an altered state. To enter it fully, we must ingest this video-poem as we would a ritual hallucinogen, and allow ourselves to be guided, perhaps by Mescalito<sup>6</sup>, into the spirit realm. There, our puzzlement dissolves as we encounter the film’s rattle of divergent hopes as a poly-poetic

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<sup>6</sup> Carlos Casteneda accords to Mescalito, the spirit inhabiting all peyote plants, the role of guide, functioning in this capacity both as teacher and protector over the course of one’s ritual mescaline induced journey. *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, Chapter 4, pp. 38-46, 1968, University of California Press.

affidavit that awakens us to a murmuration of deathbed voices whose offerings we might yet choose to take up, and whose wishes we may yet strive to redeem.