

Palimpsest

Poem by Debra Marquart, Professor of English, Iowa State University, Ames

Let Y be your destination, the unnamed place beyond the flickering fluorescence of corridors, the terrazzo floors worn smooth from the shoes of the dead. Let X be your present location, the uncharted space between pencil and chalk marks, the keypad's incessant clatter. Listen, you are here, a blip on a screen, transfixed between home and away. It is possible to create a life, doors opening to other doors, the fresh breeze of tomorrow rushing in to make the world new each day. The canvas remembers its maker, inside the hairline grooves under the brushstrokes live the barest traces - whispered thoughts, words spoken, mundane as groceries, bills and gasoline. The fingerprints of the dead are everywhere, the tiny whorls like plots to cities where one could spend a life. Best to find your own path, chart the roadmap etched under your skin, sit down, get to know the wantings of your feet.

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Footnotes on the poem – it was selected because it seemed so right for the MU project - speaking about students finding their way. We did not know until Lynette Pohlman, head of University Museums, told us that it had been commissioned by them, one of a series of poems commissioned from local poets about public art pieces on campus. Debra's poem, Palimpsest, was written for the Doug Shelton mural in Parks Library. In speaking with Debra about using her words in the Union art project, she told us that when she was first approached by Lynette, she did not think that she had a poem in her about the subject of the library mural. But one day, she was in the Union, coming up the steps from the Food Court, and placed her foot in the well-worn spot on the bottom step. A vision came to her of all the other student travelers that had gone before, and she called Lynette back to say she thought she did have a poem after all. She said, "You know, the poem is really about the Union...." (Sometimes serendipity is so sweet!)