

The Bus Stop

On a weathered bus stop bench
an urban blackboard of graffiti
and pen knife poetry
I encountered an old man,
his story defined
by the odor of abandoned clothes.
We sat in nervous silence,
the wall between us fortified
by the pixels flowing across my phone.
His thin voice startled me
as passengers descended from a bus.

“She’s a nurse.
Yesterday she carried morphine
and bad news
through swinging doors.

That one’s a secretary fighting breast cancer.
She always knows
which voice on the telephone
needs kindness first.

There's the machinist,
One glass eye,
a man of steel
working with tolerances
thinner than a strand of hair.

He nodded toward a stout man.

“Here we have the retired policeman
who rides the bus
with his partners ghost sitting shotgun.

Ah, the son
who answers
his mother's 2 a.m. phone calls
from the nursing home
and always says
“I'm coming.”

And now, the bodega owner
who extends credit
one more week
because
“Hunger doesn't travel

with a calendar.

Finally,

the single mother

with four children

well fed

well behaved

and a fifth name

she still whispers

in her nightly prayers.

Stunned, I asked the old man

How he knew such details

of these small lives.

He admonished me.

“There are no small lives.

Only small ways

of measuring them.”

When my bus arrived

he invited me to return

for answers to my questions.

As the door folded shut,

his final advice:

“Leave your phone at home.”