



# ITERATING GRACE

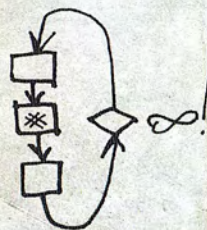
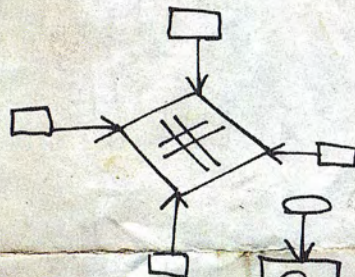
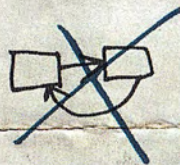
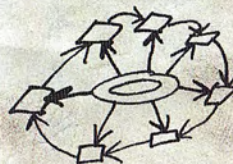
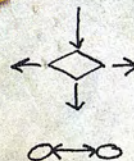
Heartfelt Wisdom & Disruptive Truths from  
Silicon Valley's Top Venture Capitalists

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BY KOONS CROOKS WITH A FOREWORD BY ANONYMOUS

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**10**

of 140





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## FOREWORD

### UP THE MOUNTAIN, DEEP INSIDE: THE ECSTATIC EXPLORATIONS OF KOONS CROOKS

You don't need to know my name. What's important is that I recently got a phone call from a young man outside Florence named Luca Albanese. (That's not his name either.) Luca and I hadn't communicated in ten or eleven years; he had lived with my family in Houston as an exchange student during high school. On the phone, he told me he'd just finished veterinary school—a poignant swerve, it seemed, from his father's expectation that he take over the family butcher shop—but it was immediately clear that he had no interest in small talk. He'd had an extraordinary experience, he said, and was in possession of “some unusual materials” that he thought I should see.



Luca and his brother had been trekking around South America and, while mountain biking on a Bolivian volcano called Uturuncu, discovered a dead body: an apparent hermit, laying outside a yurt. The scene and circumstances were peculiar—we'll get to that—but what first struck them was that the man was clearly not a local. He was white, relatively young and completely naked, though there were some clothes folded neatly beside him: a pair of Neoprene cargo pants and a tattered fleece vest that said "Pixelon" on the left breast. There wasn't much in the yurt, but Luca furtively gathered some books and papers before descending and alerting the authorities. His mediocre English kept him from deciphering what he'd found, and comprehending this man's story fully, but he'd gleaned enough to decide that, because I teach poetry writing and live in San Francisco, I was—at least, in Luca's mind—the obvious person to put on the case.

Luca's package arrived a week later. Here is what I learned.

\* \* \*

Koons Crooks was an inexhaustible foot soldier of the first dot-com boom, working steadily as a programmer at a string of forgotten startups in the late nineties: Naka, InfoSmudge, BITKIT, Popcairn. He was tall and muscular, with a square jaw, olive complexion and thick, wavy hair just long enough to tie back in a ponytail—and yet, several friends told me, he still always managed to look distressingly unhealthy. He was, as one acquaintance put it, "fully post-meal," inserting pieces of food into his mouth at regular intervals while he worked. A co-worker remembered Crooks moving through an entire bag of frozen shrimp gyoza in a single morning, raising and lowering his left hand hypnotically, and gumming each dumpling until it softened enough to be chewed and digested. Occasionally, he could be heard saying, very quietly, a single word: "Yum."

People called him "Pepper," a nickname he carried from company to company until no one could remember exactly how it had originated. (One programmer told me: "I always thought it was, like: 'This guy spices things up!'") He had few real friends but was close with his Bernese mountain dog, Smoot, at whom he was known to shout commands in Unix.

When the bubble burst, Crooks left Smoot with an uncle in Danville and started driving around the west by himself, visiting national parks and Waffle Houses. It was a period of intense reflection. Gradually, he seemed to work up a metaphysical perspective on the dot-com collapse. In an email to a former co-worker, he wrote:

*"We were like an army of ants! Think [of] the way they build and carry. We were busy building and carrying. We were building and carrying nothingness. I was never happier."*

Another friend remembered Crooks calling in the middle of the night from a Waffle House near Denver, in early 2003, to share his ecstatic realization that, as he put it, the dot-com economy had been "one big mandala," referring to the Buddhist tradition of creating art out of sand and then wiping the artwork away.

In Silicon Valley, so many people had collaborated to create so much, only to watch it crumble and wonder how real it had ever been. For a lot of tech workers, this only led to despondency and debt. But Crooks seemed to find the dot-com economy's impermanence electrifying. Start-ups, he realized, were a kind of spiritual exercise. He wanted to live

that experience again, but in its purest possible form. He wanted "to touch THE ESSENCE without gloves," as he put it in the summer of 2003, in an email to his uncle.



After that, he disappeared.

\*\*\*


Crooks' life in the Bolivian highlands remains mostly inscrutable. It's unclear when he began living on the volcano, and how often he came and went.

He seems to have resurfaced periodically back in California, though these sightings are hard to confirm. For example, while reporting from a tech party in San Francisco in February 2014, Re/code reporter Nellie Bowles noticed a man kneeling quietly next to a mechanical bull, stroking the fake animal's flank with his eyes closed; when Bowles introduced herself, the man gave his name as "Koons" but he declined to be interviewed for her story. Bowles—who I reached out to—could not say for sure whether the man communing with the mechanical bull fit Crooks' physical description.






If you try  
to outlaw  
the future  
it will just  
happen  
Somewhere  
Else.



- Paul Graham



Meanwhile, the venture investor Chris Sacca recalls a man named Koons approaching him on a ski slope in Truckee in either 2011 or 2012, asking for a meeting. The man had no skis on, or even boots. When Sacca asked for his contact information, as a way to politely wiggle out of the confrontation, the man pulled a tattered business card out of his wallet, used a Sharpie to cross out the name and details of the Palo Alto-based podiatrist on it, then paper-clipped a small, dried wildflower to the blank side, put the card in Sacca's hand, and wandered off into the snow.

Beyond food and camping gear, Crooks had very few personal items with him in the yurt: one change of clothes, a solar-powered laptop and satellite wi-fi hotspot that he seems to have built himself, an iPod shuffle with exactly one song ("Even Flow"), a photograph of Vannevar Bush and a small, utterly inexplicable selection of hardback books: four volumes about deep-sea exploration (including one by a former roommate, James Nestor) and a copy of *Chez Panisse Vegetables*.

These books are what Luca recovered and sent me. They are astonishing artifacts: Crooks annotated their pages with unrelenting ferocity, filling virtually all the white space with emphatic phil-



osophical treatises or disjointed bursts of observation; it was as though he were reading, and responding to, other books entirely. In fact, he had crossed out the titles on their covers and scrawled the same new one on each: "Iterating Grace."

Other diary-like entries in the margins describe Crooks' pared down, monastic lifestyle. He took walks. He foraged. He dried wildflowers and grasses. He collected interesting rocks, and numbered each one sequentially with a Sharpie. He devoted much of his time to contemplating ecology, which he called "the ultimate operating system." And with increasing frequency, it seems, he checked Twitter.

Crooks' family recently deleted his account, but he seems to have followed a long list of founders, venture capitalists and angel investors. He began to see, in their tweets, hints of some elusive, but irrefutable wisdom: a string of logic that underwrote the universe like code. For him, the tossed-off musings and business maxims of these men (they were almost all men) shimmered with a certain numinous luster. He contemplated individual tweets for days, sometimes weeks, expounding on them at length in the margins of his books about the sea, meditating on them as though they were

Experience + Curiosity  
= Powerful.

Experience - Curiosity  
= liability

The world is dynamic.  
- Bill Gurley.



Good  
Stories

always beat

Good  
Spreadsheets

- Chris Sarac

koans. The answers he'd been searching for had been there, in the Bay Area's innovation economy, all along—articulated, unwittingly, by an elite class of entrepreneurial high priest. Crooks could see that now, from his new vantage point, 5,300 miles away from Silicon Valley and 12,000 feet in the sky. "Angel investor = herald, messenger. Message = Hello, World!" he scrawled beneath an illustration of beets in *Chez Panisse Vegetables*.

Slowly, he began to write out the tweets himself in various, half-formed styles of improvised calligraphy. (He apparently became interested in the artform after reading that Steve Jobs was a practitioner.) For months, Koons Crooks transcribed tweets, alone on his volcano. He worked on large sheets of paper, then pinned the papers around the yurt, where Luca eventually discovered them. They are here with me now, as I write this: all these aphorisms, spread on the floor of my office—a patch of fertile ground from which one man's spirit slowly sprouted and flowered.

Crooks himself never tweeted. He never retweeted. But he had developed his own, impassioned way of favoriting.

\* \* \*



Maybe you've heard the gossip around the Valley and think you know how this story ends. But, I discovered, there are a lot of misconceptions about the llamas.

First of all, they weren't technically llamas, but vicuñas: a gangly, small-headed camelid of the genus *Vicugna*. Vicuñas are reclusive by nature, but scattershot entries in the margins of Crooks' books describe the animals becoming increasingly acclimated to him. I've since read that it's not unheard of for wild animals, like mountain goats, to approach hikers and lick them; they're attracted to the salt of their sweat, like a salt lick. Crooks' relationship with the vicuñas started with a similar phenomenon, except that the animals were drawn in by the salt of his tears.

They were tears of joy, it seems: the longer Crooks was isolated, the more deeply, and eccentrically, his contemplation of the tweets became, and the closer he felt he was coming to a variety of enlightenment. He describes sitting outside his yurt for hours at a time, weeping—his soul swirling inside some kind of uncontrollable ecstasy. And when the vicuñas began to lick him, he writes, his weeping turned to laughter.

*I am not a bot!*



*I am a human being!*



*I am a man!*



*buff.ly/1DPbnd3*

*-Jeff Nolan*

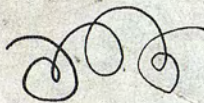




Reminder to Self:

not happy with game?  
change the game.

-Brad Feld



You may have heard that he was trampled by the llamas in a freakish accident. This, too, is inaccurate—and I say this based on Crooks' writings before the event and also on photographs of the scene which Luca sent me and which, owing to their brutality and rawness, he now regrets taking. (Luca feels strongly that I mention he's since pleaded with me to destroy the photos; I have refused.)

Yes, there were many deep, hoof-sized contusions on the head, face and chest; broken ribs and a fractured skull. And yes there were vast swarms of bites and abrasions—presumably from the animals' wiry-haired muzzles. But there was no sign of any kind of struggle or resistance: in fact, Crooks' body was positioned on its back, with its arms and legs out at perfect angles, like Da Vinci's drawing of Vitruvian Man; he seemed to have simply undressed and lay down. Then, beyond that: the many open, empty cans; the traces of the cat food he'd apparently smeared all over himself.

People who knew Crooks are, of course, devastated. He seems to have acted from a place of supreme happiness and clarity, and yet his action has only caused sorrow and confusion for the people he left behind.



Happiness? Clarity? Are we sure this was his mindset? I think we can be. Because there is one other detail: a small, badge-like piece of paper, which Crooks had crudely laminated with plastic wrap, then tied around his neck with a lanyard, as though he'd just registered at his final conference. By the time Luca found him, vultures or other scavengers had taken one of Crooks' eyes and most of an ear. Elsewhere, maggots were doing their work.

Luca reports that Crooks' body had already started to decompose to such a degree that, in certain places, the boundary between it and the soil beneath it had blurred. Koons Crooks—"Pepper"—was becoming granular: converting into dust and earth and nutrients, just as he apparently intended. His broken mouth was still smiling, and on that little sign around his neck, he'd written:

THE SHARING ECONOMY ;)

*I never met my  
greatest mentor.  
I wanted so much  
to be like him.  
But his message  
was the opposite.  
Be yourself,  
with  
Passionate  
intensity.*

*-Naval Ravikant*





it's hard to  
overstate  
<sup>how</sup>  
valuable it is  
to keep your personal  
burn rate low.

it probably

10x's  
interesting opportunities  
available to  
you?

~ Sam Altman

old:

all software expands  
until it includes  
messaging

new:

all messaging expands  
until it includes  
software

~ Benedict Evans



EE

More Startups Die  
of Indigestion  
than Starvation.

Focus Wins.  
Doing too many things  
fails.

- Bill Gurley

bad news:  
no WIFI  
on this flight

∞

good news:  
no WIFI  
on this flight

- Seth Levine





People who spend money  
on things I don't value  
are just showing off.

People who don't pay  
for things I value  
have no taste.

- Benedict Evans

**EDITORS NOTE:** At first, I was confused by the conspicuous shallowness of this tweet. Its perspective seems limited, even petty, while the others are expansive. Was Crooks--a man without a shred of cynicism--mocking Evans? I can only assume he read this as wryly self-aware: Evans laughing at both his own judgmental impulses and the narcissistic limitations of all human consciousness.

VCs:

"too many angels!"

Angels:

"too many incubators!"

Incubators:

"too many companies!"

Entrepreneurs

"too little of Everything."

~ Naval Ravikant







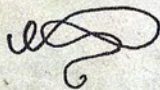
Happy Passover to all!

message still resonates:  
count your blessings,  
appreciate what you've got,  
stop wandering &  
go build something great.

-Jeff Bussgang

the funny thing  
about principle-agent  
problems  
is how generally happy  
the principles are.

~ Marc Andreessen








It's crazy how each  
iteration of product is a  
ton of work,  
but makes @grasswire  
more simple,  
not more complex.

- Austen Alfred



Reminded again  
this morningss  
that there's  
more to life  
than Rushing.

Blue Bottle  
offers <sup>us</sup> all  
a previous reminder  
to Slow Downsss

- Tony Conrad





the decentralization  
of  
everything

[tumblr.co/Z9mGaylE47F28](https://tumblr.co/Z9mGaylE47F28)

- Andrew Parker



llama : vicuna : animal : free.