



Perceive Together

You are laying in your bed and it's three in the morning, but you can't seem to fall asleep. You take the opportunity to plug in your headphones, blocking out the sound of your dad snoring in the room nearby. You step outside and you feel the breeze from the ocean, as the sand feels cold under your feet. It's a beautiful feeling, as you listen to that song that reminds you of the campfire of summer camp you return to every year.¹ That song has tasted like roasted marshmallows and chocolate, each time you replay it. Music has been your best friend for as long as you can remember, and has pulled you through many, many emotional pitfalls.

Music is a hand that pulls you in a whirl, spins your whole world around. It can make you happy in one minute, and nostalgic in the other. It can make you experience a sense through another.²

For everyone, music is a unique experience. Each note, each cluster of melodies, bore into your brain like a soft, gentle drill. Music is emotion, it is fear and anger, it is sadness, it is love. You have always wondered how music is perceived in others' minds. Maybe it's connected to the memory of kissing your first love for your time or saying goodbye for the last time to a friend.

There are children who grow up, and they experience music differently than most others do. They hold out their hands and can feel the notes on their fingers. They can smell them in the air, or see the explosion of color that follows each crescendo. And for a long time, they do not know that they are different.

¹Cage the Elephant, "Cigarette Daydreams," by Dan Auerbach, recorded August 26, track 10 on Melophobia, 2014, vinyl LP. This song makes me feel as if I have synesthesia sometimes, because of the warm colors and wonderful smells I perceive when listening to this song.

² Nelson, Angela. "Synesthesia: When One Sense Comes through as Another." WebMD. WebMD. Accessed December 9, 2021.

<https://www.webmd.com/brain/what-is-synesthesia#091e9c5e819233a5-3-7>.

And then something changes. Perhaps they mention to a friend how they don't like the song on the radio because it is brown. Or they groan at the smell of a violin solo, refuse to listen to rock music because it all tastes like Listerine soap and linoleum.

Synesthesia³ is a neurological condition that affects about three to five percent of people. Women, for whatever reason, are more likely to develop it than men are. Perhaps it is genetic, a little twist in the DNA hidden on that second X chromosome. Maybe it's your primary visual cortex lighting up in your brain.⁴ Or, even at the beginning of creation, a goddess smiled and decided existence was far too mundane. Who knows?

Whichever one it was, whichever small twist of fate made it happen, there are people in the world who can see, physically see, the color of each little tonal change. Music, for most of us, is a physical experience purely in the most poetic of terms. The little chill you get down your spine when a singer hits the right note. A song that reminds you of someone you lost, digging in deep and making you cry. The wailing of an instrument you wish you knew how to play.

But for a person who has synesthesia, they don't have to try. For some, they cannot escape. If a song tastes like garbage, like rotting corpses and spoiled milk, and they play it on loop in the local mall, what is one to do except try and finish grocery shopping?

But generally, though it can be alienating, people with synesthesia get to experience a part of existence that is closed off to the rest of us. And there is something special in that, the curtains pulled back for a select few when it seems as though we were never meant to experience them at all.

³(A sensation produced in one modality when a stimulus is applied to another modality.) "Synesthesia Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster. Accessed December 9, 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/synesthesia>. I find it interesting how there has never been any treatment done for synesthesia, because no one has ever really found anything bad about having it.

⁴ Watson, Kathryn. "Synesthesia: Definition, Examples, Causes, Symptoms, and Treatment." Healthline. Healthline Media, October 24, 2018. <https://www.healthline.com/health/synesthesia#causes>.

And we try, we try to replicate it. Through exercises, trying to figure out what color a song reminds us of even though we cannot see it. Because humanity searches, every day, for a way to make life more colorful.

We created music to come together, and we will continue, for the rest of existence, to find more interesting ways to experience it. Maybe synesthesia will come into play somehow, some way. Some day.



Annotated Bibliography

Nelson, Angela. "Synesthesia: When One Sense Comes through as Another." *WebMD*

WebMD organizations give a synopsis of what exactly Synesthesia is and its possible causes and effects. This website gives information on examples of what people experience with synesthesia, including seeing a shape and then tasting a certain food, or hearing sounds and seeing shapes or patterns as well.

It also describes the roots behind the word. In Greek, it translates to "perceive together." I think this is a wonderful description of what synesthesia really is, it's perceiving one emotion through another. It isn't a disease or a disorder, it doesn't harm your health, and it's not a mental illness. It's a beautiful thing, and people with it are lucky enough to have blessed senses. I used the explanation of synesthesia provided by this website, as well as the different causes of it in my lyrical essay.

Carpenter, Siri. "Everyday Fantasia: The World of Synesthesia." *Monitor on Psychology*, American Psychological Association, Mar. 2001,

The American Psychological Association describes synesthesia as an everyday fantasia. It gives an example of Carol Crane, a woman with synesthesia, who sees months of the year as the cars on a Ferris wheel, with July at the top, December at the bottom. Many synesthetes fear embracing their condition, but it's a beautiful thing to have it, and its oddity makes it special and unique.

Watson, Kathryn. "Synesthesia: Definition, Examples, Causes, Symptoms, and Treatment."
Healthline, Healthline Media, 24 Oct. 2018.

Healthline gives more detail about synesthesia. It explains that there is no treatment for it. However, many people seem to enjoy perceiving the world in a different way than others anyways. Some people with this condition believe that their condition is isolated them from others. Finding communities online helps ease this feeling, however. With synesthesia, you may find that both sides of your brain work together to harmonize what you are passionate about.

Intention Statement

"Perceive Together" is a lyrical essay about the condition called synesthesia. I chose to write this lyrical essay in the third person because I wanted the reader to be able to experience what the condition feels like to people who have it. In the first section, I use imagery and metaphors in order to create a scene for the reader, and for them to experience it firsthand. Growing up, one of my best friends had this condition of synesthesia, and it was always mind-boggling to hear what kinds of colors she thought numbers were, or what music tasted like to her. I decided to research more about this topic, and look further into what causes it and how synesthetes react to having it. When the metaphor changes from depicting the beach scene to descriptions of how different people may experience music and how it affects the way their other emotions work, the writing becomes more of a tale about how these people are unique because of the way their senses work, and how it can affect their emotions. Ultimately, the pattern of descriptive language and imagery in this lyrical essay shows the impact of having synesthesia, and how it makes the world a little bit more colorful, just because of the importance in the way we perceive everything around us.

My research sources were particularly helpful in finding the causes of synesthesia and finding examples of different perspectives from people with the condition. I represented the beauty of a “mistake,” like a mutation on a gene, which can cause the synesthesia, and how sometimes mistakes aren’t always bad. I arranged my text using mostly white space, however, I used some images to represent synesthesia. During peer review, my readers mostly enjoyed my use of poetic language and my word choices which made my writing sound beautiful. As well, as the use of the third person to put the reader into the shoes of a person with synesthesia. The most helpful feedback I received focused on creating a more direct experience based on synesthesia and going more in-depth about what it truly feels like. I was particularly inspired by Claudia Rankine’s Citizen because of the use of the third-person perspective, and its ability to portray an experience creatively and effectively. I tried to emulate this technique of third-person to truly engage the reader in this essay.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-xG19wbOmwCnCRCOvEn0iY94oYEN9X8b4OLHdnG9Vk0/edit>