

Ekphrastic Conversations: Writing Poems as Dialogues with Works of Art

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Any form of writing can be a means of discovery, but poetry in particular allows us the freedom to use words, sounds, lines, and their arrangements on the page to shape thoughts and discover what hidden mysteries lie beneath the surface of consciousness. Prose may explain what the writer is thinking about but poetry invokes it.

Often my own impulse to write poetry comes from a desire to answer questions that cannot be answered by a search for facts. What did the Neolithic people talk about, and what did that sound like? How did they build those stone circles and what did they really do there?

What is the coyote thinking as she stops halfway across my yard and stares at me?

What do colors that exist beyond our spectrum of visible light look like?

Sometimes these speculative wonderings become conversations in “the dark cathedral of my skull” (Lux, 1997) with the dead, the distant, or the fictional. The answers to unanswerable questions have to be imagined and my imagination expresses itself through poetry. I am aware that I am not alone in this.

Allen Ginsberg, in “A Supermarket in California” imagines wandering the aisles with Walt Whitman “eyeing the grocery boys.” He sees himself as Whitman’s heir so it seems natural that Ginsberg would write a poem in which he speaks directly to his mentor.

Poems can enter into the realm of storytelling, creating multiple perspectives on ancient myths. Muriel Rukeyser invents Icarus’ lover waiting on the beach who “would have liked to have tried those wings” herself (Rukeyser, 1978). She writes in the voice of the lover whom she imagines into this ancient story, entering the circle of those who have told and retold versions of it countless times down through history. Such poems are, strictly speaking, ekphrastic in the sense that *The Iliad* is ekphrastic because it describes the events that comprise a story. According to White (2017), citing Heffernan (1993), Ekphrasis is a “speaking out or telling in full” (p. 55) so an ekphrastic poem might be in response to an artifact such as a painting, sculpture, or photograph, or it might spring straight from the story.

The modern meaning of Ekphrasis is understood as a poem written in response to a work of art, although a painting done in response to a poem might also be considered ekphrastic.

Ekphrastic poems have the potential to do much more than describe a work of art or retell the stories they depict. Often the subject of an ekphrastic poem is not the work of art itself, but the encounter with the work of art that transforms the poet.

Ekphrastic poetry “locate(s) the act of viewing visual art in a particular place and time, giving it a personal and perhaps even an historical context. The result is then not merely a verbal “photocopy” of the original painting, sculpture, or photograph, but instead a grounded *instance* of seeing, shaped by forces outside the artwork” (Corn, 2008). Writing ekphrastic poems can be an exploratory process of trying to understand what sears a particular work of art into memory. The poems are inevitably as much about the poet as they are about their apparent subject. The desire to create a context for an object or an image and to imagine the circumstances under which it was created is the kind of thing that fires the poetic imagination.

Art and artifacts sometimes leave behind mysteries and writing a poem can be a way of working out those mysteries.

Ekphrastic poetry is a vehicle that allows the writer to enter into an imagined conversation with the artist. When Ekphrasis is practiced as a dialogue with the work of art this may lead to a process of discovery in which the poet explores some essential question of his or her own life through the lens of that work of art and an inquiry into the experience of making it. Embedded in these interpretations is the idea that any artist in any era might address certain timeless aspects of the human experience—birth, growth, maturation, love, loss, jealousy, grief, joy—each expressed in the vernacular of its moment of origin.

In a certain sense, writing ekphrastic poetry is about responding to those essential themes as they are voiced by artists and writers in endless possible versions. When we respond to art with poetry, we enter a conversation that has been taking place across human history.

It is natural for works of art to speak to each other. Take again, for example, the multitude of retellings of the story of Icarus and Daedalus. Ovid lays out the story in agonizing detail, Daedalus anxiously toiling while Icarus chases feathers. Brueghel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* contains every minute and specific detail named by Ovid, but the foreground of the painting is occupied with bucolic life while Icarus plunges into the sea in an obscure corner of the canvas. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pieter_Bruegel_de_Oude_-_De_val_van_Icarus.jpg

Many poets have taken up this tale. The Brueghel painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* has been used in many classrooms to teach ekphrastic poetry.

W.H. Auden and William Carlos Williams both explore the themes in Brueghel's painting of the myth, reminding us that our private tragedies do not stop the world from going on. And what could be a better theme for a poem than to contemplate our own mortality against the backdrop of a perpetual cycle of life?

The story of Icarus and Daedalus is rich in themes in its many retellings. What seems to have captured poets like WH Auden and William Carlos Williams is both the poignancy and the rightness of the notion that the world keeps turning and life keeps swirling around us even as we watch helplessly while someone we love plunges from the sky. Auden writes:

In Breughel's Icarus
for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster
the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry
But for him it was not an important failure.

William Carlos Williams even invents a word to convey just how devoid of significance the drowning of Icarus was to the other figures in the painting:

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was
a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning.

The notion of the world going on despite our personal tragedies evoked a memory of the day my mother died. “The World Goes on In Spite of Everything” may or may not strictly qualify as an ekphrastic poem because it does not actually mention a specific work of art. Nevertheless, this poem would not exist were it not for *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. It is not strictly speaking so much about Brueghel’s painting or Ovid’s poem as it is about the memory that arose in my own encounter with this particular painting.

The World Goes on in Spite of Everything

My mother always told me
wire hangers multiply in the closet
while we sleep.
Losses are like that too.

On my twenty-fourth birthday
Outside the hospital I’m
holding a plastic bag,
mom’s slippers and glasses.
Shade my eyes against brilliant sky.
Walk through the street fair,
sock and sausage vendors
unaware that I’m freshly motherless.

Now that you are my family,
what if the world comes apart
again and I can’t find you?
What if the ladder slips beneath your
feet, the wood tick plunges you
into fever dreams, the interstate’s
locked in a killing glaze?
What if the nighttime rise and
 fall of your breath gives out?
What if telephones fail
Traffic turns to stone
Subway’s extinguished
Emergency kit’s empty
Water is dry
Passport’s expired
Batteries dead and

I Can’t Find You

What if we’re stumbling,
sodden and dumbstruck,
shoe leather worn to the quick?

I’ll meet you at the bridge.
We will carry each other home.

After writing that poem, I felt that I was not done with the phrase “the world goes on.” It repeated in my head like a stuck song lyric, until it came to rest in a poem about a work of art I’ve been fascinated by since childhood; a small, intricately carved boxwood rosary bead housed in the permanent collection of the Cloisters branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/E464449>

Rosary Bead, South Netherlandish, Early 16th Century

To carve a world in a nutshell...
a dream is something
like this—a thing to
pin you to your seat, impel you
forward—whatever the movement to
match the task. Tonight the
friar bends in dim light, ink
thickens on the quill.
Singular devotion yields a
boxwood rosary bead a
revelation to fit your
palm, unfolding the whole
story etched in a hinged orb
alleluia. Believe
me, in a museum atop Manhattan
Island surrounded by unicorns a
macular miracle how the thing was made
candles flicker in the dark,
passing the night in stone walls
damp with December pressing in.
With mercy toward the mouse
who’d tucked into a beeswax feast,
he brought broken hosts after
Vespers to save his
wax for much needed illumination,
light of the world two and one
quarter inches in diameter
Adam and Eve cast from the garden,
Gabriel visiting Mary,
farewells in Gethsemane, torment on
Calvary, rolling away the stone,
crowned on heavenly throne, a
dark stain where blade
opened Monk’s thumb, a wound
to mark the Matins page before
weak winter sun leaks through
leaded panes and
still the world goes on.

In the process of telling the story as I imagined it—a monk in his cell absorbed in the task of carving this wooden rosary bead, ignoring the cold, neglecting his calligraphy and his prayers, committing the small sacrilege of paying off the mouse with bits of sacramental wafer to save his candle wax; I found myself writing in an incantatory rhythm, mimicking the sound of liturgical writing as it fell on my profane ears.

As a child raised in a completely secular household, I somehow fell in love with early Medieval art and Gregorian chants at the age of about ten. I used to take the subway from the Bronx to the Cloisters, a museum in upper Manhattan. It wasn't just a museum to me. It was a portal. A fully transported and reassembled European medieval monastery and garden which held such treasures as the Unicorn Tapestries and this intricately carved rosary bead. I would stand and stare at these objects for hours. Decades later when I met the woman I would eventually marry, I learned that she had also been fascinated by the same rosary bead. This seemed significant to me. In a city that is as large and jam-packed with people and things as New York, distraction is the norm. There is almost constant sensory overload. Yet in the midst of the din and glare, we had each fallen in love with this singular artifact long before we'd met. It is one of those small but powerful objects hiding in plain sight in this massive, hard-edged teeming city.

Every time I looked at that rosary bead I would try to imagine the entirety of the moment in which it was made—the person, what the air felt like around them, the sound of the blade cutting into the wood. This poem is an homage to the person who created this magnificent object, whomever that might have been. My imagination conjured a monk obsessed with a vision of this rosary bead and absolutely focused on creating an object that matched his vision. He is in a moment of what we would now call “flow,” which Csikszentmihalyi defines as moments when “a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (1990, p. 3).

These flights of fancy inspired by works of art make for a very particular kind of response, in which the subject of the poem is really just a jumping off point for what is inevitably either a more personal or a more imaginative poem rather than a descriptive one.

This next poem might be considered ekphrastic auto ethnography in the sense that the process of writing the poem was an imaginative inquiry into my own history. The impetus was a photograph of my grandparents, found on my father’s desk after he died in 2018. The poem is not a response to a “work of art” in any conventional sense. Unlike the fully imaginary monk carving the rosary bead, this poem is faithfully descriptive of its subject, and yet there are still details that are filled in by way of imagination.



Henech and Lena Contemplate Eternity

Behind winter bleak branches
across a narrow stretch of the Hudson River,
the low rise of the Taconic mountains looks down on Poughkeepsie,
which is where we are on this day in November, 1950.
Has there ever been a day that looked more November?
Looming in the foreground, this freshly engraved stone:

KLEIN

HENECH LENA

space for dates underneath each name.

Henech's left hand rests on their gravestone
loosely draped as on a comrade's shoulder.

My father was their son-in-law and
faithful keeper of paper for all of the family ghosts.
I will never be able to ask him why
he would not let go of these documents
securing a place for the long-buried.
There they were, yellowed edges and age-blurred ink
in a tidy stack on dad's work table
when he died, as if they represented
unfinished business in his unspooling memory.

I scooped them into a plastic bag and now here they are,
A small avalanche on my desk.
A tattered envelope marked “Cemetery” holds all records of the
transaction, and photographs to mark the day. In this one

Henech’s right hand loosely holds the brim of his
fedora which he might absent-mindedly let go to the wind
if his besotted gaze is any indication.
He smiles open-mouthed at Lena.
There is only Lena and their future eternal home.

Lena, in her fine plumed hat
rests fingertips on the stone’s rougher edge,
her gaze fixed on the distance.
She leans slightly forward as if to steady herself.

Having had the fortitude to emigrate
from Lodz after the Pogroms,
the good fortune to get out
before the Nazis,
she has made a home in America—
in the workaday Bronx for now, but
here in the valley of these unassuming mountains,
just far enough from the city for a cool evening breeze,
Henech and Lena’s hands touch the waiting stone.
Follow her gaze to the place
she goes
when she leaves her body.

I meet her there in dreams.

In this photograph, my maternal grandmother stands beside her second husband—not my actual grandfather but the man I always knew as “grandpa”—behind the gravestone carved with their two names. The photograph stopped me in my tracks. The more I looked at it, the more it spoke to me and demanded that I listen to what it might have to say about my own history.

After the initial shock of seeing my grandparents posing with their gravestone, I was struck by their expressions: my grandmother gazing off into the middle distance and Henech beaming at her.

There is such contrast between how much joy appears to be emanating from Henech at the site of his own grave, and the pensive look on my grandmother’s face, and the tentative way she touched the stone. That narrative tension, caught in their faces and their hands, became the impetus for this poem. She looked like she was somewhere else, while her husband looked thoroughly grounded in that moment.

The difference in the source of the poetic voice is that in an ekphrastic poem written in response to an intentionally created work of art, I am speaking to—or at least acknowledging—the artist. In the case of this snapshot, I am speaking both to and about the subject of the image. It might be that I am projecting my own thoughts about mortality onto my grandmother, but I

recognize that detached gaze. I imagine the photographer telling her to touch her own gravestone, and she not being able to comply without leaving her body.

The line that surprised me (as one can sometimes be surprised by one's own writing) was meeting her in dreams in the place she went to when she left her body. As I wrestled with the final stanza, the image came to me of a di Chirico-esque landscape, gray and dreamlike, and I imagined seeing my grandmother across its bleak expanse. What this suggests is my own need to go beyond description of an image, to locate some insight within my imaginative response to the work. The surprise gift from my unconscious came with the impression that my grandmother's gaze suggested to me that she was "out of her body," a phrase often used to describe someone disassociating in relation to trauma. It did not surprise me to think that coming in contact with your own gravestone might be somewhat traumatic. It was my identification with her distant gaze that created the visual of the dreamscape, and jarred some unconsciously held memory of a dream encounter with my grandmother. The visual image of the photograph triggered an imaginary scene in which I was reaching out for my grandmother across a gray, windswept plaza. This dream scene had to be translated into words in order for me to fully understand the story this dream was trying to tell me. The photograph showed me an image that demanded a narrative. I needed to tell the story in order to remember what I do not quite yet understand.

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