

MORE WAYS OF (WRITING ABOUT) SEEING: EKPHRASIS

—Written by Cristina Correa, Cornell University MFA and lecturer in the Department of English

Ekphrasis is one of the most ancient forms of descriptive writing known in literature. It has been used as a craft tool by poets, fiction writers, dramatists, and essayists, among others, since the days of Homer's *Iliad*.

Then first he form'd the immense and solid shield;
Rich various artifice emblaz'd the field;
Its utmost verge a threefold circle bound;
A silver chain suspends the massy round;
Five ample plates the broad expanse compose,
And godlike labours on the surface rose.
There shone the image of the master-mind:
There earth, there heaven, there ocean he design'd;
The unwearied sun, the moon completely round;
The starry lights that heaven's high convex crown'd;
The Pleiads, Hyads, with the northern team;
And great Orion's more refulgent beam;
To which, around the axle of the sky,
The Bear, revolving, points his golden eye,
Still shines exalted on the ethereal plain,
Nor bathes his blazing forehead in the main.

— Homer, from *The Iliad*

Unlike visual analysis, ekphrasis is interested in evoking or representing an image for its reader from outside of the framework, or limitations, of a visual structure's presupposed integrity. Simply put, ekphrasis offers a writer a way to use words to uniquely, and unusually, depict an image as they see it, ultimately offering their reader yet another unique visual to hold in their own mind. The image inspiring the written description may be an actual piece of art viewed by the writer (as in Auden's interpretation of Bruegel's *Icarus*), or it could be an image that is imagined by the writer (as in the case of Achilles' shield in *The Iliad*, or even Muriel Rukeyser's take on *Icarus* that stretches beyond the frame of the painting itself).

He said was going into the world and the sky
He said all the buckles were very firm
He said the wax was the best wax
He said Wait for me here on the beach
He said Just don't cry
I remember the gulls and the waves
I remember the islands going dark on the sea

— Muriel Rukeyser, from *Waiting for Icarus*

Ekphrastic writing takes its inspiration and source material from an image; then, it responds to or reconceives it through a written meditation. How do writing and meditation work together? This is up to the writer, and ultimately signifies the need for self-trust while navigating new and abstract materials and practices. Students should be encouraged to tap into a place that is quiet and still as they observe and listen to their own internal responses. This is not as hard as it may seem once a writer decides to cross the threshold from reaction to response. There is no wrong answer in this practice.

Ekphrasis (also spelled “ecphrasis”) is a direct transcription from the Greek *ek*, “out of,” and *phrasis*, “speech” or “expression.” It’s often been translated simply as “description,” and seems originally to have been used as a rhetorical term designating a passage in prose or poetry that describes something.

— Alfred Corn

Source materials for ekphrastic writing may include a variety of less traditionally sourced images such as family photographs, or in the case of Solmaz Sharif’s poetry collection *LOOK*, even the absence of a photo. When we broaden the parameters of what we are describing with ekphrasis, we are also broadening our capacity for understanding complex images, imagined and real. Sharif’s poems offer a speaker’s response to photos that the reader doesn’t get to see but is invited to read captions for, experiencing something like loss, alongside the speaker who grieves in the aftermath of war.

my father says say whatever you want over the phone • my father says don't let them scare you that's what they want • my mother has a hard time believing anything's bugged • my father and I always talk like the world listens • my father is still on the bus with contraband papers under his seat as uniforms storm down the aisle • it was my job to put a cross on each home with dead for clearing • it was my job to dig graves into the soccer field • I wrote red tracksuit • I wrote Shahida, headless, found beside Saad Mosque • buried in the same grave as the above • I wrote unidentified fingers • found inside Oldsmobile car • I wrote their epitaphs in chalk

— Solmaz Sharif, from *LOOK*

Other ways to engage the ekphrastic lens might include responses to musical composition — what do you imagine, for example, upon hearing a favorite tune from beginning to end? Perhaps it has to do with a memory of where you were when you first heard it, or you have associated it with a place you have never even seen in person, maybe an entire series of scenes unfolds for you upon replaying its melody. These are all examples of responses that can be culled into ekphrastic writing.

Anything we see or sense, down to our very environments, can become stimulus for ekphrastic response. One of my first-year writing students’ favorite assignments is to take a walk around Beebe Lake while slowly and deliberately forming a piece of writing (perhaps a line of poetry, or ten) in their minds. As they silently move through the natural pathways outside, they encounter stimuli that usually remains ignored in their daily movements. This, too, is a way of imagining outside of the usual frame, yet still regarding closely what is most important to the curious and imaginative eye. The writer may look at the visual image (of an actual artwork, or the mind) and engage it in a conversation via the act of crafting a piece of writing (poem, paragraph, or speech) that is aimed at understanding and expressing what the visual has shown the writer, and perhaps the reader too, about the context in which it emerges.

BRIEF EXERCISE

While viewing an art object, try to imagine your eye as the roving lens of a camera, recording all that it sees. Take note of the first thing you focus on. Perhaps it is a vivid color, a distinct figure, the use of light or shadow, or how a particular shape repeats itself in different ways. Scan the image naturally—don’t think too much about what it’s doing—panning out and zooming in with ease. What details are you able to detect? In what order are you observing them? How many elements of the image can you distinguish? While this kind of analysis does not necessarily involve contextualization, it is always important to pay attention to the ways in which you are seeing. After you have fully regarded your visual material, turn away from it and begin writing whatever comes to mind. Don’t worry about forming full sentences, spelling correctly, or even making sense. You may review your writing after you’ve come to a resting point, and notice any patterns or surprises in what you were able to see.

SOME SUGGESTED MODELS + INSPIRATION

Muriel Rukeyser, "Waiting for Icarus"

<http://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Waiting-for-Icarus.pdf>

WH Auden, "Musee des Beaux Arts"

<http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/auden.html>

Solmaz Sharif, *LOOK*

<https://www.graywolfpress.org/books/look>

Ladan Osman, "Boat Journey"

<https://poets.org/poem/boat-journey>

Gregory Pardlo, "ZoSo"

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58175/zoso>

Anthony Walton, "Dissidence"

<http://www.fishhousepoems.org/dissidence/>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Gregory Pardlo, "Framing Our Ground: Ekphrastic Poetry in the Workshop"

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/451102/pdf>

bell hooks, "Earthbound on Solid Ground"

https://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/engl504_404jj/hooks.doc.pdf

An article with definitive terms

<https://www.thoughtco.com/ekphrastic-poetry-definition-examples-4174699>

Vieve Francis, "BEYOND DESCRIPTION: Ekphrasis and the Expanding Lens"

https://www.jstor.org/stable/41243148?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Francisco Aragon, "Introduction: On PINTURA : PALABRA, a project in ekphrasis"

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/70311/introduction-56d24a17925ca>

SAMPLE EXERCISES

- "An Ekphrastic Experiment: Reaching for the Moon"
- "Ways of Seeing at the Johnson Museum"

To schedule a session for your course, email **Leah Sweet**,
Lynch Curatorial Coordinator for Academic Programs, at lgs82@cornell.edu
and allow **three weeks' notice** to arrange a visit.



JOHNSON MUSEUM OF ART

Always free admission | Open Tuesdays–Sundays, 10AM–5PM
museum.cornell.edu | @HFJMuseum   

An Ekphrastic Experiment: Reaching for the Moon

Using the ekphrastic process outlined below, try to write a poem that attempts to see the moon in an entirely new way. —Cristina Correa

Step 1: Go to the Johnson Museum and visit the Moon exhibition (Floor 2L).

Take at least 20 minutes to experience the full cycle of Sarah Breyer's luminescent painting, which is in the very back of the exhibition space. Then find a quiet space in the museum to write, and let your imagination run free for at least 10 minutes.

Step 2: Listen to the songs linked on your Blackboard page.

Each song is an iteration, or translation, of the old standard, "Moon River." After an initial listen, noting differences in approach to the same song, expand your original writing. Perhaps you write better with the music quietly in the background, perhaps not. Do what is best for you, but do for 10 more minutes without stopping.

Step 3: Get curious.

What is *your* moon like? How big is it? What happens on, or inside of it? Where is it? What color? What sounds does it make? Smells? If you tasted your moon, what might the sensation be like? Continue writing by exploring the details of your moon for at least 10 minutes.

Step 4: Trim the fat.

Now that you have a substantial block of text, it's time to cut it down to size. Circle every instance of the word 'moon' in your poem. Find other words that you repeat more than twice, circle those. Circle questions, prepositions, and conjunctions, and trim them *all* away. What are you left with? How can you rework this into a stronger poem?

Step 5: Find the music.

Choose one of the two song versions to listen to on repeat as you create line breaks in your poem. Don't make yourself crazy, but do try for at least three consecutive listens. Even if you already have line breaks in your poem, let the song guide you to changing them or adding new ones. Follow the music and let it take you someplace unexpected. This process might feel unclear, illogical, challenging in a way that seems useless... but, believe it or not, that's the joy of writing. Let yourself puzzle over how music exists within your work. Let yourself play.

Step 6: Submit

When you have surrendered to the process and developed a poem you feel good about,
[PROVIDE INSTRUCTIONS FOR SUBMISSION]

WAYS OF SEEING AT THE JOHNSON MUSEUM

Use the following prompts to guide your **group & individual viewings** of the Johnson Museum's permanent collection. Be sure to note the titles and artist names of each piece referenced in your responses. And don't forget to enjoy the process of looking and listening deeply — it's why we're here!

GROUP WORK

1. Locate an artwork. With your group, select an image that you collectively think would be interesting to talk about in class or research independently.

2. Look at your artwork. Look carefully and silently at your chosen piece for no more than 5 minutes. Use the space below to take notes that capture your initial thoughts and observations:

3. Look closer. Each group member will choose one of the five senses (excluding sight) to continue responding to the image. Do not overlap senses with another group member, and do not state the sense in writing. For example, if you choose taste, *iron tracks taste like the pits of rotten peaches* might become *iron tracks stuck to my tongue like rotten peach pits*. Below, write ten lines arising from your focused meditation:

4. Discuss together. Share your favorite lines with your group. Each group member is responsible for sharing at least two lines, and offering their group members one compliment and one suggestion for improvement (which can occur in the form of a question). Take stock of what sounds interesting, surprising, unique, and strange. Take notes in the space below:

5. Select and synthesize. After every group member has shared, rewrite two of your lines using the feedback you have just received:

As a group, combine your new lines into one clear, cohesive poem. Think of the ways that prose writers use the senses to get the reader closer to their narratives. How can we emulate these skills in poetry using the line? Allow yourself to be challenged and surprised.

INDEPENDENT WORK

1. Locate an artwork. Choose a completely new piece that you find interesting.

2. Look at your artwork closely. Look carefully at your chosen artwork, again, noting every initial thought and observation below. But this time, while focusing on one of the following elements: light/shadow, the line, shapes, color, or space. Take note of how the element you've chosen operates in the image and take detailed notes below:

3. Reflect and meditate. Using your reflections, begin to construct a poem by completing the following lines:

There is not

There is no

There isn't

There is only

There was

There still is

There may be

There could have been