



—————2025—————

ART TALKS BACK

EKPHRASTIC POETRY CONTEST





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Ekphrastic Poetry: Derived from the Greek word “ekphrasis,” meaning description or interpretation, ekphrastic poems are a unique form of artistic expression, in which the writer typically uses verbal descriptions or written responses to a work of art.

Each winter, Michigan writers are invited to write an original unpublished ekphrastic poem based on a work of art in the Muskegon Museum of Art’s permanent collection. Writers may choose between five pre-selected works of art.

It is free to enter and open to all Michigan residents’ ages 18+. High school students in Muskegon County are also eligible to submit work in their own category.

Feel inspired? Write your own ekphrastic poem about a work of art! Look for our contest announcement on social media, email, or our quarterly member journal.

Translations

Colleen Alles

*There are times the road forks before us,
you say, but all I can think is how*

Mrs. Russell forbade us to begin a sentence
with “there are,” then marked two

points off my essay for such an amateur
infraction. *We’ve hit a fork in the road*, I say,

and you look at me, frowning. We’re walking
in Paris after dinner, full of wine.

That’s what I just said, you say, *so which way
should we go?* I don’t answer. I don’t say,

*there are many windows in those towering
buildings;* I say, *open windows peep between*

*blue shutters like errant lovers well aware
they should have been home by now.* I don’t say,

the street is crowded; I say, *men grow like weeds
on these sidewalks, in these interstices.*

There are no green leaves in that branch. *Above us,
a tree reaches her fingertips to God.* There are

not gray clouds in a blue sky. *Montmartre
is a paradise. More interesting ways exist*

to bring a sentence to life, I say. You shrug.
You say, *I think you’ve had enough wine.*

We choose the fork that leads right. We walk
along, ready to wander the old streets. *There are*

no wrong turns, I tell you, *just detours
ad infinitum.* You shake your head, hold tight

my elbow. I don’t say aloud how happy I am
to be next to you, lost in my own translations.



Lois Mailou Jones (American, 1908–1998)
Vieille Rue, Montmartre
Oil on linen, 1965

Sixth Grade in Michigan Grace Heethuis

My jaw is permanently clenched
As I remember the stench
Of the barbaric breath from those
Who polluted the rich brown
Of the flesh I earned through generations of cruelty.

I covered my face with white powder
As their voices grew louder,
To match the complexion of their
Pasty, powdery, pathetic skin.
I compromised myself to survive.

I have never stopped since,
And I look back and wince.
I mourn the loss of myself through fingertips
Permanently stained with saintly sorrow
Acquired from learning shut my mouth.

I tried to shape shift and fit the mold,
To stand up straight and do what I was told.
I learned over time that
Every outward expression
Comes from an inward feeling.

They spat hatred in my face,
While mocking talks about race.
Teachers threw around the word progress,
But that didn't explain to me
Why hatred was so well known by sixth graders.

Mama always kissed me on the head
Each night as I crawled into bed.
My chocolate skin collected
Beauty and bruises from the
Stones they threw with laughter.

She dabbed the tears from my eyes
And wiped off my powdered disguise,
But it made me cry all the more.
Oh that Mama didn't understand my shame.
How tragic to be twelve and black.



Margaret Bowland (American, born 1953)
Twelve
Acrylic, charcoal, and pastel on paper on
canvas
2017

The Hanging Artifact as a Gallows in the Zone of Interest, April 1947

Linda Nemec Foster

Rudolf Hoss could not imagine art:
real Art, with a capital "A."

Like daVinci's Last Supper or Van Gogh's The Starry Night
or even Picasso's Guernica (although the black and white
depiction of war and violence might intrigue him).

Since the Commandant of Auschwitz could not imagine art,
let's imagine it for him. A gallows of the real world:

a large sewing hook strung with glass and steel memories
and a spoon to feed the soon-to-be dead. The pieces have the color
of rock, water, night sky, dawn sky, a man's skin, a woman's nail,
a child's forgotten ball. And, hanging in the dead center
of the gallows is a large tooth reflecting every color of bone.
Rust, orange, ivory, pure white, dirty white, gray, purple, ebony,
dark blood before it clots at the end.

On the gallows built just for him near the camp's brick wall,
the Commandant of Auschwitz still couldn't imagine art.

As he stood in the April air before his hanging,
he only saw the empty crematoria on the right,
his wife's large garden on the left. The roses, phlox,
sunflowers, dahlias—all dead now and reduced to colorless black.

That, that blackness at the very bottom. He could imagine.



William Morris (American,
born 1957)
Hanging Artifact
Blown Glass and steel
2023.7

Artifact
Gloria Klinger

Succumbed to a brutal knife.
How much is the killing worth?

The lives stolen, ripped, shredded,
only the bones remain,
calcified and rarified
stunned into silence, stuffed on the wall.

Blankets no longer rest in teepees.

Remains scattered, knives surrendered,
antlers, horns, bones
remnants of a spirit world
relics of the slaughter
a way of life, a people
a culture, a language.

What do we know of invasion?

On whose land do you live?



William Morris (American, born 1957)
Hanging Artifact
Blown Glass and steel
2023.7

The Final Dispatch

Samuel Vega

Paging Pollinator Tabernacle! Paging Pollinator Tabernacle!

This is Supernaut 507, captain of Research Craft 507, reporting from Planet Earth. I am atop the vast canyon wall of a place local travelers call "The Painted Desert", and I demand an immediate site extraction. Repeat I demand an immediate site extraction. This mission, to foster healing, to share both medical and agricultural advancements, has only poured an especially bitter salt into the scope of a more social type of wound.

When this mission began...

I understood that we Supernauts were to share pollinators with other planets. That we were to educate other species about the revelation of this new breed of livestock: Our livestock, whose fur was meant as a gift to foreign doctors, to use in absorbing any wound. Whose pollen was meant as a gift to farmers, to serve as the ultimate soil and fertilizer. Whose luminescence was meant as a gift to dying power grids, to act as a more life-giving, life-affirming, life-efficient source of light and power.

But these humans of planet Earth...

Are about as confusing and contrasted as a fourth sunrise is to a fifth sunset on our home planet. They champion curiosity, but only if it entails them to the entire ownership of any new discovery. They boast of a boundless beauty from trails that have the slightest chance of becoming blazed, but only if they themselves are the boldest bringers of the first sparks. They drive countless campaigns of caregiving to those they wish to assist, but only if they themselves are the undisputed captains of such "progressive" currents.

They see my blue face, and are only reminded of their frozen wastelands. They see my candied fur, and they are only consumed if sweetness comes from their own efforts. They see my seven eyes, and they believe seven is too perfect a sight for one lifeform to possess. They see my four ears, and all they can think is "why not two ears...LIKE US?"

They are angrily afraid,
because salvation came to them as a Supernaut,
who was never raised among them.

Whatever romance remains here, on this unpredictable panorama of a planet, it is either excessively hidden from newfound discovery, or utterly erased altogether.

Today, all four of my hearts have been broken,
Today, all four of my ears hang heavier than ever before.



Patio Beef Jan Wiezorek

We just finished our sandwiches
at Patio Beef, and now we're here,
standing dream-like—no bull—
lost in a *heroic, painted tale*
on the gallery wall. The girls
asked to visit, so we imagine,
tare, still tasting beef in corners
of our mouths. I see them stand
and point, sway and smile—
and I think of one who must
suffer somewhere, scorched
like a stomach in the sun.
We should raise up those who
sit without, feeling twisted
into four legs. The girls want
me to buy them a clean hide,
like a canvas to paint. I wish
more of us would hope,
not hide. Aren't we all bleached
beautifully on the inside? I see
the girls laughing like party hats,
stars, and spirits. Hard to believe,
but they've already entered a new
age of dreams, painting life real
—seeing more than beef.



Shirley Woodson (American, born 1936)
Dreams 1
Acrylic on canvas
2024.6

Fractured Stories
Teagan Petschar

where have

you who have you

when have you

come from

you with
the

bone like
blown glass
decay like
dripping steel

alabaster skin
like fragile armor
encroaching reloads
like fettered walking songs

do *you* know

the spirit

they deny

whose tooth they've bloodied

the home

they defile

whose goured dressings they've ripped

the web

they disperse

whose weave they've shorn

all to hang them
and call them
artifacts



William Morris (American,
born 1957)
Hanging Artifact
Blown Glass and steel
2023.7

Saturday Morning
Aaliyah Jordan

Mother's fingers weave between my roots
Pulling apart each individual braid

My hair cascades down my neck
As far as it can reach
As tall as it can stand

The bottom of the comb pokes my scalp
She guides it down
Slicing through them
Forcing them apart

When you're twelve
And Mom doesn't let you wear red
Or shorts when family is over

When Mom is tired of your hair
Because it looks just like her's
When she was your age

Her hand's still
She lets me take the comb
It's up to me to finish the last few

She sits behind me patiently
Watching
I comb through each braid
Pulling them apart as she did

She puffs out a sigh
Silence fills empty spaces
Working on my hair together



Margaret Bowland (American, born 1953)
Twelve
Acrylic, charcoal, and pastel on paper on
canvas
2017

Tangible Truth

Maya VandenBosch

The wheel of cruelty.
In their home they compare to heaven, they are forced to feel lonely.
The crooked doors and the painted floors,
Hidden secrets, forbidden truths
There is ancient history.

Adjacent glory,
Yet the cost of meals,
The lost ideals,
There own destination
Is gone, due to lack of education
Ageing individuals,
Shrinking roles.

A dictator,
Is the true civilization hater.
To much crime they say,
Not enough time to stay,
There only motive,
To fully live.
There stands no forgiveness,
There stands there business,
There stands there interior ,
But they must hide from the exterior.

The anger rises,
The broken glass cuts,
The broken heart beats.
Why not make a fuss and go nuts,
They're stealing lives.
There's no healing, when it is hard to survive.
How is it fair,
When they live in fear and the others live in cheer.



Lois Mailou Jones (American, 1908–1998)
Vieille Rue, Montmartre
Oil on linen, 1965

Sorrow

Julie Essenberg

Your eyes, large and deep,
dark with the weight of twelve years,
hold shadows, reflections of a world too harsh, too soon.
They look beyond this moment,
wide and expectant, but burdened with knowing.

The light catches on your brow,
as though attempting to soften the sorrow that clings there—
a pale streak of brilliance across your face,
but it cannot outshine the ache beneath.
There is more here than the unspoken grief
etched in the subtle lines of your young mouth.

Your hair, wild, tangles with the air,
each curl a rebellion,
defying neatness, defying judgment.
In the twist and pull of every strand
there is something untamed, something true—
not poverty, not neglect,
but the fullness of a soul that refuses to be hidden.

I see you—
not just the surface, the texture of your skin,
or the way your gaze seems to search beyond the frame.
I see the story that the image does not tell,
the battles fought in the space behind those eyes,
the silent resilience embedded in the softness of your lips.

You carry the weight of dreams still out of reach,
yet your presence in this moment,
on this canvas, is not of pity but of power.
For you are more than what meets the eye—
you are history and hope intertwined,
a spirit that rises even from sorrow,
waiting, always waiting,
for the justice that is your birthright.



Margaret Bowland (American,
born 1953)
Twelve
Acrylic, charcoal, and pastel on
paper on canvas
2017