

## Ekphrastic Poem

Poems written about art that stay true to the imagistic impulse are rare. Almost always there are the same tired tropes: similes, weak adjectives and other impulses Charles Olson warned about in Projective Verse:

*And when the line has... a deadness, is it not a heart which has gone lazy, is it not... slow things, similes... adjectives... we are bored by?... Simile is only one bird who comes down, too easily. The descriptive functions generally have to be watched... because of their easiness, and... drain on the [poem's] energy.*

and Human Universe, when he warns of the “dodges of discourse.”

You'll find MANY examples of ekphrastic poems in *Transforming Vision: Writers on Art* edited by Edward Hirsch. But you'll also find *her creamy chest* and *true pallor like skim milk* and *swarthy angels* and other such cringe-worthiness. To make a poem that's a “high-energy construct” worthy of the painting, sculpture, song, or other piece of art which it lauds is difficult. The book's introduction gives us a wonderful background of the ekphrastic impulse:

...there is always something transgressive in writing about the visual arts... A border is crossed, a boundary breached as the writer enters into the spatial realm, traducing an abyss, violating the silent integrity of the pictorial... Yet as [Paul] Valéry... acknowledged... “each work of art demands a response...” There is also an intricate history of reciprocity and sibling rivalry between the arts, especially “the sister arts,” poetry and painting.

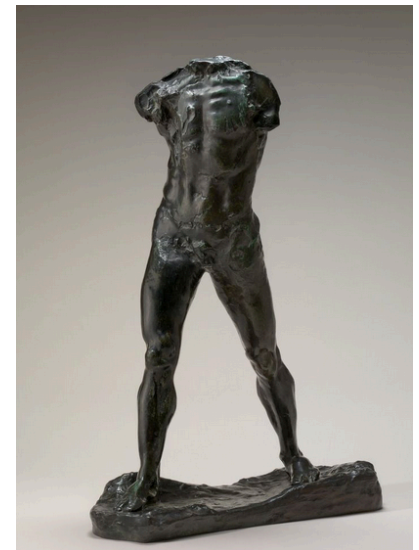
He notes the “more or less unbroken line from Homer and Theocritus to Keats and Shelley, Baudelaire and Gautier... to William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore...” and others. Carl Sandburg, Wallace Stevens, Rita Dove, Joyce Carol Oates and Mark Strand are among the poets represented, but the best piece in the book may be Guy Davenport's on Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, but is prose. One example:

Carl Sandburg, on Auguste Rodin, *The Walking Man*, c. 1900

### **The Walking Man of Rodin (1916)**

Legs hold a torso away from the earth.  
And a regular high poem of legs is here.  
Powers of bone and cord raise a belly and lungs  
Out of ooze and over the loam where eyes look and ears hear  
And arms have a chance to hammer and shoot and run motors.  
    You make us  
    Proud of out legs, old man.

And you left off the head here,



The skull found always crumbling neighbor of the ankles.

How to get the energy of a work of art into a poem? Here's where the projective method can come in handy, but also strays from the realm of tone lock, a phrase I first heard from Sharon Thesen and which also describes the conundrum of poets who bring a myriad-mindedness (and its seemingly random associative nature) to the composition of any poem which itself is an occasion of experience and not the *record* of an event. An effort that avoids creating another layer of distance away from the subject. Such efforts are less likely to be anthologized, as the "stay-in-your-lane" notion is dominant in "official verse culture." Of course one starts with the object of art. I have found music quite inspiring and Carla Bley inspired a "prose sonnet" a form I worked with for a period in 2019-2020. The poem is also inspired by a Spotify playlist I made for my memorial service which has grown to include many songs which for me foster an emotional reaction.

### Sonetos De Cascadia 11-Jan-2020

"I took a little of the blue color."

- Bernadette Mayer (Incident Report Sonnet #6)

"i have broken and entered poetry's house."

- Wanda Coleman (Intruder)

### Last Kiss Sonnet

Hear Carla Bley's *Life Goes On: Life Goes On* again & again & immediately it is a Not Technically Blues spotify playlist tune & Carla goes on and on & Andy Sheppard goes on & on and Steve Swallow too, on & on & this (ostensibly) a memorial playlist sends a message *something* goes on & on were there to be an altar foto like Koko maybe or like Abuelita would've been 103 this year on Richard Nixon's birthday how we can't choose who shares that one day a year of ours, ask Joan Jett or Scott Baio or Michael Faraday about September 22 but this is not about me, only about my hereafter which is now in a way as Steve Swallow walks up that electric bass as few post-Jaco can. *Life Goes On: Life Goes On* but it doesn't really as the days to sample Born saké, limited. The madly-rainy January new-decade days when eagles hunt coots, limited. Days to make popping sounds with your lips in bed & get a midnight soul-mate kiss, limited, but noting them here might make the one last night linger a little longer if it IS the last.

8:13am - 1.11.2020

Of course there are the inevitable sidebars of associative thinking about the ancestors, the bloodline, the days we might honor like the Catholics do saints days (Grandmother's birthday but not the awful people with whom we/they sometimes share birthdays!) Such poems are likely not to be anthologized, but could be important sources for the poet whose goal is to find something that fosters a moment in their own *carmen perpetuum*.