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Manuscripts, Illuminated: A Collection of Ekphrastic Poems

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Manuscripts, Illuminated: A Collection of Ekphrastic Poems

by

Jacquelyn Vienna Goates

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**HONORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES
WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS**

in

**English
in the Department of Creative Writing**

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Abstract

This thesis is a unique integration of creative writing and research of a specific literary tradition. As a student of art history and literature, and a creative writer, I am interested in fusing my interests by writing about art and studying the relationships between text and image. I have written a collection of ekphrastic poems, poems which are based on works of art. After reading extensively in this genre of poetry and researching its origins and evolution throughout literary history, I have come to a greater appreciation for those who write ekphrasis and what it can accomplish in the craft of writing. These poems and their introduction showcase the work I have completed both researching and writing in the genre.

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Introduction

Early in my undergraduate career, I decided to pursue two majors, one in English and one in art history. I loved them both, but always felt a little as though my brain and my heart were being pulled in two directions. One semester I was convinced that I needed to focus entirely on art history, the next I felt the pull to write poetry instead. I was in agony that I couldn't do both. Luckily, my academic path revealed to me that my studies could conjoin in the topic of how the language arts correlate to the visual arts. The study of this relationship was the inspiration for this thesis, and the poems within.

As a student of both painting and poetry, I'm interested in how the two relate and how they might cross over into each other's realms. In my early studies I was aware of poetry that dealt with the visual arts. I encountered poems like John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and as an art history student they captured my particular notice. In later creative writing classes, when students were encouraged to write about what they know, I thought, "I know art, maybe I can write about that." I thought I could follow the models of the few art-related poems I'd read and incorporate art allusions into my poetry.

What I did not know at this early stage of my undergraduate career is that writing about art comprises an entire genre, one that dates back to antiquity. The word used to describe this kind of writing is "ekphrasis," which is defined as a verbal or written artwork that describes and/or responds to a visual artwork. It is a Greek word that directly translated means "description." The term's meaning has evolved to focus specifically on descriptions of works of art but originally included a broader range of objects. In antiquity, ekphrasis could include descriptions of many various objects, not just artworks. Any in-depth description of something visual— buildings, clothing, finely-crafted objects—fit the definition of ekphrasis. Ancient

writers practiced this type of writing, among them Homer in his *Iliad*. In fact, his famous (and lengthy) ekphrastic description of the scenes on Achilles' shield is one of the earliest examples of ekphrasis. Later, Virgil writes ekphrastically in the *Aeneid*, describing sculptures in a temple of Juno and Aeneas's reactions to these artworks (McGregor 25). Because interest in these classic writings continued, and particularly flourished during the Renaissance, ekphrasis survived as a poetic tradition.

What motivations inspired the birth and popularity of ekphrasis? Why might early writers have made the comparison between art and literature? During the Renaissance, an idea that originated in antiquity became popular again among artists and thinkers: "painting is mute poetry and poetry speaking picture" (Hollander 6). This concept is captured in the Latin phrase *ut pictura poesis*, which translates "as is painting, so is poetry." Horace, in his *Ars Poetica*, was the first to use the phrase, but the concept itself wasn't of his own invention (Harvey). He likely drew it from the writings of Plutarch, who discusses the concept of painting as mute poetry and poetry speaking picture. These early philosophies about the relationship between poetry and painting serve as the framework for the genre of writing that this thesis concerns.

In her essay on *ut pictura poesis*, Judith Harvey claims that Plutarch expressed admiration for writers "who wrote such imagistic prose that readers could 'see' the moments they were reading." I believe this is the key to the purpose of ekphrasis. Literature and visual art are linked by their attempt to appeal to multiple human senses. It is difficult to know for sure why Homer might have lingered on the description of a shield, but most likely Homer was trying to create a vivid image with his words. This idea is particularly potent when we consider that Homer did not present his poetry in writing, but orally. An early audience would not have read the words of the *Iliad*; they would have gathered to hear an orator speak the story. The poem

speaks, and in the description of the shield, a picture is created. The listener is able to envision a specific, vivid image; thus the poet paints with his words. Perhaps at its conception, ekphrasis was fulfilling the need to evoke powerful images in the minds of audiences steeped in the oral tradition. Poetry was a performance, but instead of creating a visual experience through movement and the elements of theatre, poets relied on their words to illustrate their narratives.

A later example of how poets used ekphrasis in their epic tales occurs in Dante's writings in the early 14th century. Dante was particularly inspired by Virgil, who wrote ekphrasis himself, and Dante not only writes ekphrastically to emulate the poet he so admired, but he actually makes Virgil a character in the *Comedy*, as the Pilgrim's guide through Hell and Purgatory (McGregor 25). Additionally, Dante's ekphrasis in the *Divine Comedy* describes artworks he encounters on his journey.

Dante was writing before the height of the Italian Renaissance, a period where ekphrasis would become particularly important. During the Renaissance there was a great debate about which artistic form was of higher value. Leonardo da Vinci recognized the fact that poetry and painting were related, but claimed that painting was without a doubt the higher art form. Renaissance minds viewed sight as the most important of the senses, so many agreed with da Vinci's views (Harvey). While visual arts created in the Renaissance perhaps took precedence over poetry written at that time, without the ekphrasis of antiquity, the Renaissance would have lost some of its potency. Ekphrastic descriptions of ancient artworks served as inspirations to Renaissance artists and gave Renaissance culture a more accurate sense of the art of the Classical period that they so admired.

There are multiple types of ekphrasis, including "actual" ekphrasis and "notional" ekphrasis. John Hollander discusses these two types in the introduction to his book, *The Gazer's*

Spirit. In summary, the former refers to ekphrastic writing that has its basis on an actual, existing artwork. If I were to write describing the *Mona Lisa*, that would be actual ekphrasis. On the other hand, notional ekphrasis is writing about art objects that don't exist. The difference between the two is comparable to fiction writing versus nonfiction; in notional ekphrasis the artwork exists only in the writer's mind, as in a fictional novel; whereas a writer of actual ekphrasis must compose in relation to an actual artwork, as a biographer must compose the story of someone's life according to existing facts. Actual ekphrasis from antiquity has been quite useful over the ages, as Renaissance artists were able to read ekphrastic writings about lost original artworks and then envision these works based on their descriptions to create copies (Hollander 34). Both branches of ekphrasis were used by writers in antiquity, and both have continued.

Notional ekphrasis was used by poets in the eighteenth century, such as Alexander Pope and Andrew Marvell (Hollander 30). This kind of poetry is useful to a writer in that one is able to write completely freely without being restricted by the reality of an existing artwork. Writers can create artworks in their mind imaginatively and use them as metaphors to illustrate greater themes. Robert Browning uses notional ekphrasis in his poem "My Last Duchess." In this poem, the speaker shows a painting of his deceased wife to an ambassador of a potential new bride. The painting is completely invented by Browning; he describes it and names a fictitious painter. This imaginary painting serves a central purpose in the poem. As the speaker (the Duke) describes his wife's image, the envoy and the reader learn disturbing details about a jealous husband, an innocent wife, and her suspicious death. While I write mostly actual ekphrasis, I believe both types are valuable aspects of the ekphrastic tradition.

I had previously thought that the few examples I knew of ekphrastic poetry were rare occurrences, but ekphrasis abounds in poetry of the last two centuries. While I may not have been familiar with ekphrasis and its origins three years ago, I did have a sense that writing about art was important. I believe that ekphrasis is a result of the human need to respond to what we experience visually. John Hollander, poet and critic, writes that “the presence of a gazer, reporting what he or she sees, variously describing what is there to be seen, is framing a moment of experience” (32). Artwork inspires this gazer, stirs emotions and provokes thoughts. Such experiences often require some kind of outlet. Many times I have looked at Claude Monet’s paintings and wished that I could create as he did. I have seen the paint on a Van Gogh canvas, layered so thickly, and wanted to squeeze paint from tubes and slather it onto my own canvases. This desire to create burns in my heart and brain and the tips of my fingers, but, as I am not blessed by the Muses in the visual arts, I turn to writing. As I’ve continued to study ekphrastic writing, I’ve learned that many writers feel this same drive, to create as a result of witnessing creation, or to make sense of what they see in a work of art.

When I speak of the written product which responds to visual art I typically think of poetry, of *ut pictura poesis*, and obviously that is the genre I have chosen for this ekphrastic collection of writing. Ekphrasis itself is not limited to any particular genre. Examples of ekphrasis are found in novels and nonfiction, and of course even art criticism is technically ekphrastic. I have read several ekphrastic prose works, novels and short stories by Susan Vreeland and Michael Frayne, and a memoir by Mark Doty. I find that the writing in these works is lovely, informative, and interpretive. I think it would be a rewarding challenge to someday write a larger piece of ekphrastic prose like what I’ve seen in fiction and memoir. The intensive research into a specific subject would be fascinating. As a young writer, I think that

poetry is the right genre in which to practice ekphrasis. Poems are smaller individual works that allow me to explore many different subjects, lending variety to my writing. In my opinion, the form of the poem is best suited to embody ekphrastic writing. Poetry is highly imagistic; imagery and figurative language are fundamental elements of good poetry.

Ekphrasis, on a basic level, is description. The writer works almost as a translator, converting images into language, putting what they see into words. Even ekphrasis as straightforward as this can be beautiful and lyrical when writers treat the images they see with sensory and imaginative language. The writer can also choose to delve deeper into the image they are describing, which is where ekphrasis extends to include interpretation, and ekphrastic works become “personal interventions and meditations, creative inquiries, acts of inheritance” (Hirsch 9). I particularly like this type of ekphrasis, and the idea that we, as viewers and then writers, inquire deeply into the piece, return with a product of that reflection, and as a result of that experience, inherit something of the piece into our lives. With ekphrastic writing, a third level of translation is also created—the reader becomes the third party, experiencing not only the artwork vicariously through the writer, but also the writer’s interpretation of the art.

Since my discovery that poems about art are in greater abundance than I’d previously thought, I’ve been doing a lot of reading, acting as that third party level of translation. The focus of my study has mainly been poetry of the twentieth century, because it’s important to see how the genre has evolved and what its value is now. Poets use artworks as vehicles to explore various subjects: war, sickness, beauty, the meaning of life. All of these subjects, important in poetry in general, can be explored using artwork as a filter. Ekphrasis has been working this way since its conception. I believe that while poets are still writing ekphrasis to create symbols for

bigger themes, modern and contemporary poets seem to more frequently write about art for art's sake. Many of the contemporary poems I've read approach artworks not with the purpose of dissecting them to withdraw something else, but to experience them on a personal level.

One of the poets who does this beautifully is Billy Collins. His particular style—the witty, clever poems that use humor to draw out the profound—has great appeal to me. Two of the poems from the collection *Questions About Angels* are ekphrastic poems. I was unaware previously that Collins wrote any ekphrastic poetry, but being familiar with his poetry in a general sense made studying these particular poems interesting. I found that Collins in his ekphrasis achieves the same wit and subtle humor, and seems to create a quiet profoundness that is exquisite.

The second poem in the book is called “Candle Hat,” and when I read that title I was intrigued, but not confused. From my art history studies I was aware that some artists, including Vincent Van Gogh, rigged strange headgear with candles so they could paint when it was too dark to see well. This poem is not about Van Gogh, as I'd expected, but about Francisco Goya, a much earlier artist. Collins begins his poem speaking of self-portraits in general, listing off a few examples: Cézanne, Van Gogh, Rembrandt. Then he begins to describe a specific self-portrait by Goya. His descriptions are straightforward and objective for about a stanza, and then he begins to introduce his own suppositions, which is where ekphrasis gets particularly interesting.

Stanza three of the poem reads as follows:

He appears to be smiling out at us as if he knew
we would be amused by the extraordinary hat on his head
which is fitted around the brim with candle holders,
a device that allowed him to work into the night (pg 11).

The parts of the poem previous to this are excellent, full of great poetic language and description. But this is where Collins lets the real brilliance in. The speaker supposes the feelings of the

artist, based on the study of his facial expression. It's such a whimsical suggestion, but immediately after, he gives us more solid, credible description of what the strange contraption looks like and what it was used for. His poetic musings are grounded in visual and art historical fact.

Collins continues:

You can only wonder what it would be like
to be wearing such a chandelier on your head
as if you were a walking dining room or concert hall (11).

Here Collins writes with his signature humor, and, of course, he does it well. The poem's next two lines introduce a quixotic contradiction: "But once you see this hat there is no need to read / any biography of Goya or to memorize his dates." The speaker is telling readers that they need not do any research, that they no longer need the facts. This is ironic, because obviously the poet has done at least minimal research on Goya; he's already presented us with factual evidence. The speaker qualifies his advice in the next lines: "To understand Goya you only have to imagine him / lighting his candles one by one, then placing / the hat on his head, ready for a night of work." He's giving readers the permission to experience Goya the artist in their own imaginations. Collins' claim is bold; he states that to gain an understanding of Goya's work, we need not read volumes of critical documentation on the artist, but instead, envision this quiet scene that Collins himself has created. His ekphrasis is concrete, but he's moving outside the bounds of academic study of paintings by making the artist a character in his literary work. This is the way Collins makes this ekphrasis personal. He's mediating on the nature of Goya, as an artist, and also as a man.

The speaker of Collins' poem further invites readers to create Goya for themselves:

"Imagine him surprising his wife with his new invention, / then laughing like a birthday cake

when she saw the glow.” This is simply beautiful poetry. It’s funny, like Collins often is, but it’s deeply poignant too. He’s taken an academic subject, the great Spanish painter Francisco Goya, and made him a living, breathing, “laughing” human being. Collins is describing a literal self-portrait painting of Goya, while creating a poetic portrait of Goya the artist and Goya the person. By doing so, he gives the literal artwork, the inspiration for the poem, a greater and more poignant meaning. In “Candle Hat,” Collins as a master of ekphrasis enchants me and I strive to emulate his strategies in my own poetry by making personal connections to the works on which I write.

The poem that precedes “Candle Hat” in the collection is called “Student of Clouds,” and here Collins’ writing is less humorous, but equally exquisite. This poem discusses John Constable, British landscape painter of the nineteenth century. Here Collins is not writing ekphrasis of a specific painting, he is focusing more on Constable’s treatment of clouds in general. Collins is also interested in the overall character of Constable, much like in “Candle Hat.”

Outdoors, he must have looked up thousands of times,
his pencil trying to keep pace with their high voyaging
and the silent commotion of their eddying and flow.
Clouds would move beyond the outlines he would draw
as they moved within themselves, tumbling into their
centers
and swirling off a the burning edges of vapors
to dissipate into the universal blue of the sky (9).

Though this language isn’t describing an actual drawing or painting, it imagines and describes how Constable might have studied his subject and what it might have been like to draw the clouds. Next the speaker discusses photographs of clouds that are used for scientific and objective purposes; he’s contrasting the factual qualities of clouds with the emotional that Constable captures.

The final stanza of the poem makes a move that I tend to use in my own ekphrastic poetry. Collins' speaker explicitly enters the poem, and possibly even a painting:

High on the soft blue canvases of Constable
they are stuck in pigment but his clouds appear
to be moving still in the wind of his brush,
inching out of England and the nineteenth century
and sailing over these meadows where I am walking,
bareheaded beneath this cupola of motion,
my thoughts arranged like paint on a high blue ceiling (10).

Here Collins creates personal implications for the speaker. Constable's clouds come to him literally in the poem, symbolizing the personal elements the viewer takes from experiencing artwork. It's as though the speaker has entered a specific painting, his thoughts taking shape in the paint, or as though the painting has entered the speaker's life, a painted sky moving across a landscape in the natural world. That the end of the poem can be read in either or both of these ways is a wonderful move on the part of Collins.

These two Billy Collins' poems explore ekphrasis beautifully, and rely on different techniques that inspire my own writing. In "Candle Hat," Collins muses about who Goya was, not just as an artist, but as a thinker, and as a human being. I like to think of artists that way when I study them, and also when I write about them. In "Student of Clouds," Collins makes innovative moves exploring the speaker's role both in the painting and in the poem. I like to make similar moves in my own poetry because I think that the level of intimacy Collins creates is especially effective, not limited to ekphrasis, but in poetry in general.

Another ekphrastic poet I've been studying is Andrea Hollander Budy. Unlike with Collins, before I began studying ekphrasis specifically for this thesis, I was not familiar with her work at all. She makes choices different from Collins in how she approaches artworks in her poems, and for that reason I chose to study her and incorporate some of her methods into my

own work. With Collins, I found myself already writing in his ekphrastic style, just not always quite as effectively. Budy handles ekphrasis differently than I naturally do, so in order to broaden my perspective as a poet, I strove to examine her work and to emulate the things I particularly liked. Her collection *Woman in the Painting* contains several ekphrastic poems. Like Collins, she too approaches ekphrasis from multiple angles.

The first Budy poem I want to look at is “Woman Holding a Letter,” based on a Vermeer painting. In this work, a young woman stands near a window in a blue dress, holding a letter up to her face to read. I have found that Vermeer is a common subject for writers. I believe this is because Vermeer’s paintings are often depictions of quiet, interior moments, which lend themselves beautifully to the interiority of poetry. Budy’s own writing is particularly suited to Vermeer’s paintings because she is so skillful at creating intimacy with her language.

“Woman Holding a Letter” focuses on a young woman, the only figure in the painting. She stands facing a window, reading a letter. Budy describes this literal image, but she goes a step further into the world of the painting. She enters the woman’s head as she describes her:

She unfolds the milk-white paper, it’s blue
words in their familiar script
and she knows
(before letting the voice of the words enter her
the way they entered her the night this all began)
that she will always know
the scrape of the postman’s boot on the slate step
and his diminishing shape as he heads up the walk (7)

Some of the scenario Budy has created is fictional; we do not see a postman in the painting, nor are we privy to the content of the letter. In the opening lines, Budy even describes views out the window that are not present in the picture. Yet even though Budy fleshes out the scene, she too remains vague. She never reveals any specific content of the letter, or any concrete details about this woman’s life, though by her faint suppositions, she suggests that there is more beneath the

surface of the quiet depiction of a young woman. At the end of the poem, Budy gives the reader a bit more of her imagined details of this situation:

...and when she folds the letter
back against itself, pressing its harsh white edges
together between her fingers, the way
the child inside her twists
as if he were a knot tightening (7).

Though the woman in the painting appears to be pregnant, we are not certain of the validity of this impression. In fact, scholarly views suggest that Dutch fashion at this time favored this particular billowy dress, and that pregnant women were not ever painted.

The fact that the woman in the painting probably isn't pregnant doesn't, however, matter in Budy's poem because she is in control of the world she's created within the setting of the poem. Budy is in a sense doing what many viewers do when they look at art. She thinks about light and color and what is present in the painting, but she's also asking questions and then answering them. I think this type of ekphrasis is creative and powerful; it gives us the beauty of the artwork but takes us to another level with questions about the things we don't see, such as the motives and emotions of persons depicted in the paintings.

Budy's other poem, entitled "Still Life with Jonquils," also captures quiet interiority. There is no artist attributed in the poem, and it is unclear if the painting she describes is an actual work. She writes as if the painting is real, but its attribution doesn't matter in the poem. It begins with a description of a vase of jonquils not yet bloomed. She compares the unopened buds to butterflies, "...translucent cocoons, / their wet and yellow wings / stirring against the thinning threads / of gray, about to give way," suggesting they are on the brink of blooming.

The middle of the poem contains an extended metaphor in which the buds of the jonquils are compared to a woman's response to a man's touch, her wrist "lightly touched beneath / the

starched tablecloth...she begins to feel / the invisible tug on the knot / fixed at the body's center / wating / to be undone..." This approach is different from the one used in "Woman Holding a Letter." Budy is bringing outside speculation, yes, but this time in the form of a metaphor which points to a romantic situation that appears neither in the painting nor the poem. Instead of filling in what we don't see to give the scene a possible greater meaning, she's comparing this painted vase of flowers to something completely different, giving the art relevance with real life. Up to this point in the poem, the metaphor overshadows the ekphrastic description in the opening, but Budy brings things full circle in the end:

The painter knows
what not to execute, knows we bring
our own heat to the canvas,

knowing exactly how
these jonquils would look
if open.

But not letting them (3).

The finish of this poem is lovely. It ties the beginning description and the metaphor together and reveals something fundamental about the experience of viewing a painting: the notion of "bringing our own heat to the canvas." The speaker has given us her experience with the painting, the metaphor, and then explains how the painter's deliberate move to not let the jonquils appear opened creates certain feelings of expectation in the viewer.

I think the value of Budy's ekphrasis is her exploration of what the viewer doesn't see. This concept of the unseen is so intriguing, and it's a fundamental aspect of experiencing a work of art. Each viewer comes to a work with a unique set of experiences and thoughts that help create these unseen aspects of the artwork. This is the dimension of experiencing art that interests

Budy, and me as well. Though she stays true to what is on the canvas, she breaks beyond the edges of the frame to create individual meaning and depth in her poetry.

In my own poetry, I use some of the elements I admire in these poems. I find that writing ekphrastic poetry is a very in-depth process, because the writer not only undergoes the complex experience of writing a poem, but also has to answer to the art about which he or she is writing. It's not difficult for me to write about art as far as choosing subject matter goes, especially as I tend to choose artists and works that I feel particularly connected with. The difficulty lies in the choice of approach, choices that Collins and Budy make and execute well.

My poem "In the Wings" relates to "Woman Holding a Letter" in a way, mostly in the choice of subject and the manner of description. This poem is based on a drawing by Edgar Degas, one of his famous ballerina dancers. Like the solitary woman in Vermeer's painting that Budy writes about, my subject here is this young girl. I begin the poem with a careful description, so that the reader might see the dancer as she appears in the drawing:

Standing still, she cranes her neck
downward, down to a dusty floor
and her slippered toes pointing
outward. Silvery slippers
with silver ribbons that lace and cradle
sturdy ankles and strong straight legs.
Layers of white float out from her waist
cinched in tight with a French blue sash.
She is ribbon and tulle.

I continue the poem with more description of the girl, but I push the description a little further with metaphor, comparing her to a bird: "She is / a white heron." By using this metaphor in the second stanza, I am imitating Budy in "Still Life with Jonquils," though my metaphor remains located in the drawing. This is where I depart from Budy's technique: instead

of examining what is not in the painting, in this poem I'm fascinated by what *is* there, and more specifically, the fact that this is an art object in the first place, how the form reflects the medium, and the greater significance of this relationship.

The final stanza reads as follows:

She is lines and angles.
Quick strokes of white enliven
her skin and limbs.
The white dances throughout her skirt
and glows at its ends
like a horizon.
Though she silent and still,
she is a girl of soft forms
and translucent hues,
and if an irreverent hand
brushed hard enough, s
he would be smudged away,
traces of rough fingers stronger
than her faint remains.
Stamped out
before she had the chance
to dance.

Here I describe the ballerina for what she is: a drawing. Because it was done in pastels, charcoal, and paper, which I indicate in the poem's epigram, the image of the girl has an ephemeral nature. These media are easily smudged and damaged, and so literally the image is at risk of being blotted out, but I think that Degas' style of representation portrays this concept of impermanence. He creates this soft, light image of a young girl, but her form is almost transparent. The color palette is limited to mostly whites, grays, blues and bits of black; nothing about the figure is fleshed out or solidified. Degas is creating a fleeting image, and this is the concept I'm trying to capture in my poem.

Budy too tries to imagine the artist's intention in "Still Life with Jonquils," how he (or she, it never specifies) doesn't let the jonquils open on the canvas. In this poem, she

acknowledges the painting in her poem as a painting, whereas in “Woman Holding a Letter,” she doesn’t. Instead she creates a world based on the painting, but the fact that it is a painting is not particularly important to her poem. This is where my approach is different; the fact that the ballerina is a drawing is where the meaning of the poem is found.

In my poem, “For Vincent Van Gogh,” I take a more Collins-like approach to ekphrasis. This poem is not based on a specific painting necessarily, though it does make reference to specific and recognizable characteristics in the paintings of Van Gogh. Here I am much more concerned with the artist himself, the way Collins is concerned with Goya and Constable. I’m particularly interested in Van Gogh’s humanity. In fact, this poem is almost more about his humanity than his paintings, which I think is one of Collins’ points in “Candle Hat.” In “For Vincent Van Gogh,” I’m exploring Van Gogh as a person and more than just an artist because of experiences I’ve had while studying his work over the years.

In my high school art history class, I had a wonderful teacher named Mrs. Smith. She was a delightful person, warm and kind, but also very quirky and eccentric. She wore colorful, crazy clothes: flowy, puffy dress shirts drenched in ruffles and flounces, a pair of high-waisted pants with ancient-Roman monuments all over them, shoes with cherubs, and the list goes on. Her wardrobe was insane, but she owned it, and I thought she always looked magnificent. One day she came to class wearing an oversized orange sweatshirt with Vincent Van Gogh’s self-portrait painted on it. We were studying Van Gogh that day, so she wore it in his honor. She’d painted it herself, she told us.

Mrs. Smith passed out a sheet of paper to each of us. It was covered in her own handwriting, beautiful, spidery script. “These are quotes by Vincent Van Gogh,” she said. “They’re from letters he wrote to his brother Theo. I think they tell a lot about him, about the

kind of person he was. I wanted you to know that person, instead of just the crazy everybody always says he was.”

We had our massive art history textbooks open to the pages concerning Van Gogh. His paintings sat before us, so familiar. I’d always loved Van Gogh. I don’t think anyone can avoid his paintings, and I’d even argue that most people like his work. Because I loved him as much as I did, I’d get upset when people joked about how nuts he was for cutting off his ear. I thought it took away from the beauty of his paintings.

In class Mrs. Smith began reading the quotes from the letters. “The way to know life is to love many things.” “I am still far from being what I want to be, but with God’s help I shall succeed.” There were several others, most about compassion, kindness, and the best traits of humanity. She told us that he’d been a preacher but that the suffering of others had been too much for him to bear. He’d given people the clothes off his back, quite literally, and he was too poor and too sensitive to the plight of the poor to continue. So he’d turned to painting. Most people know that story. He hadn’t been successful, only selling one painting during his lifetime. Of course there was ugliness in his life, as in all lives. He’d cut off his ear, he’d quarreled with Gauguin (an artist I’ve always hated), lived in an asylum, and finally, he’d shot himself, taking his own life.

Mrs. Smith said, “People always say he was crazy, but I can’t believe that it was as simple as that. I think he just felt too deeply to be a part of this world.” I’ve never looked at a Van Gogh painting the same since that day. I always think of him, his feelings escaping out onto his canvases, and how he felt too deeply, and so I wanted to write a poem about it.

Writing about Van Gogh was tricky because he’s such a universal figure, and I was worried my writing would be cliché. This is part of the reason why I didn’t focus on any one

work in particular. I just don't think I could have done justice to "Starry Night." I tried to write a poem about the painting "Vincent's Chair with Pipe," which is one of my favorite Van Gogh paintings. I wanted to try to figure out through ekphrasis what it is I love so much about the painting, its simplicity, and the wonderful color, but instead the story Mrs. Smith told was the one that wanted to be written. My poem about Van Gogh became more about him than about any one painting, and specifically about how feeling things "too deeply" inspired his art.

Like Collins does in "Student of Clouds," I inserted myself both into the poem and into a Van Gogh painting:

And me. Once I just liked
the paintings. Beautiful things.
Until I stood in front of a yellow
house where he lived and felt
the paint that must have trailed
him as he walked through the streets.
I felt the paint, mostly yellow,
like the house, seep up through my feet
into my bloodstream. Until
it was part of me. Too deeply.

When I was in Southern France I was able to visit La Maison Jaune, where Van Gogh had lived in Arles. So in the poem, I'm literally standing in front of this house. But also I insert myself into his painting, trying to imagine what it must feel like to be caught up in the paint and the whirl of feeling that move together to create his images.

As Collins does in "Candle Hat," I'm trying to give the reader an idea of how Van Gogh the person becomes Van Gogh the artist. Just as Collins creates a whimsical image of Goya in his candle hat, looking bemused in a self-portrait, I give the reader an image of a Van Gogh burnt from the inside out by his feelings, which manifest themselves in the form of wild, unearthly stars in his paintings.

This interest in the fusion between the artist's human self and artist self is a central theme of my ekphrastic poetry in general. I like to approach ekphrasis as Budy does, with quiet internalization, but I am also fascinated by who these people were, the artists that create the works I study and love. The genre of ekphrasis feels natural to me as a writer, because I'm driven to write from what Hollander calls "the gazer's spirit."

I agree with the philosophy that a painting is a poem, and a poem can (and should) be a picture, and that they can both speak in their respective modes. I also believe that they can speak together. Visual art is literal image, which plays into poetry because an image is exactly what the poet is trying to create with their words. And while the poet endeavors to create language that projects vision, the painter seeks to create images that speak. Each has something the other aims for, and together they complete a beautiful whole. In the poems contained in this collection, I've tried to celebrate these works of art by embracing the gazer's spirit. Through ekphrasis I am able to explore the artwork that I study and love through the medium of poetry, a craft that I also study and love. I love that ekphrastic poetry gives us both the picture and the story—an illuminated manuscript.

To be in the Wake of Big Things and Feel Small

I wish I could be
the girl in a Sargent canvas
dressed in white oil paints
and humming notes from Picasso's blue guitar.

I ache to breathe
the mist of the Aegean Sea
and see with the dark eyes
of a Byzantine icon.

And I want to walk
through Poets' Corner,
letting antique genius seep
from the grey stone
into my fingers.

I have sat, though, at a window
overlooking Vincent's Night Café
and heard the yellow glimmering of starlight
on plates and French voices.

And I rolled up my jeans
to wade on the bank of a river
that used to be ruled
by the Romans. I felt
an empire flowing in the current.

Henri Matisse's "Femme au Chapeau" in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

I turned around the corner
and met Matisse's wife.
Mme. Amelie,
in her grand flowered hat,
resting her fair lady fan
against her sunset-colored neck
that shadows the cool blue
of her rather elegant jaw line.
A striking stripe of aquamarine
slides down her French nose.
Her eyes are blue and sweet—I hope
they are true to life and
her hair was this feisty red
underneath that big old hat.

I hope that he loved her.
I think he must have,
to paint her this way.
She sings color
and seems like a dance,
even though she sits
still and even
though she is no alabaster-
grand-manner portrait,
she is lovely. And I must believe
he thought so too.

I look from her face
down to my old blue argyle shoes,
familiar as the scarf of silver gray
that clutches itself into a knot
around my neck. I've walked here
to see her, so I raise my chin,
not blue or sunset-colored,
but hopefully somewhat elegant
and meet those blue eyes
with my green-grayish-gold ones.
She seems to be the only one
who hears me
when I wish
on every eyelash
I will ever catch
that someone will love me

enough to see
that my green eyes
have lights of grayish-gold in them.
And that my blue argyle shoes, too
seem to dance.

In the Wings

*Dancer, Edgar Degas
Pastel, Charcoal, and Chalk on Paper*

Standing still, she cranes her neck
downward, down to a dusty floor
and her slippered toes pointing
outward. Silvery slippers
with silver ribbons that lace and cradle
sturdy ankles and strong straight legs.
Layers of white float out from her waist
cinched in tight with a French blue sash.
She is ribbon and tulle.

Her shoulders round down
melted into soft blades.
Her elbows point like her toes
and her hands fold, palms together
into an upside-down prayer.
She is a white heron.
Black ribbon, tied in a bow
at the nape of her bowed neck
trails down her spine,
hangs between her bent arms
that look like wings
above white tulle plumage.

She is lines and angles.
Quick strokes of white enliven
her skin and limbs.
The white dances throughout her skirt
and glows at its ends
like a horizon.
Though she silent and still,
she is a girl of soft forms
and translucent hues,
and if an irreverent hand
brushed hard enough, s
he would be smudged away,
traces of rough fingers stronger
than her faint remains.
Stamped out
before she had the chance
to dance.

Looking at Honoré Daumier's Paintings of Don Quixote

All you do is read in the dark
sitting slouched, cross-legged,
absorbed in some other life
with your black eyes
sliding over your hawk nose
down to the pages
that make you what you are.
Do they make you?
Do they force and coerce you
to become this mad prank?
Or did you decide
to leave your dark room
and step into brighter colors
of a world you fashioned yourself?
Are you deciding right now
in this moment painted here
with me as the witness,
along with the others present in the scene?
None of us know
since we can't see into your head
because your eyes have been painted
as dark as the room.

I don't like the looks of them, those two
lurking in your background,
unseen and unsuspected,
except by me and the painter
who seems too afraid
of what they'll do to you
to grant them any more presence
than as shadowy figures.
I wish I could intrude in your room
but only just to warn you
that they will try to trap you
and catch you in a cage
for your own good
because this sad game is your fault.
These friends of yours
see it as a duty
to keep you in the dark
and fasten you
to less-colorful surroundings.

Their motives, like their faces,
remain in the dark.
You ignore the whole world full of them
because life is better in your head,
so you force yourself
outside this initial canvas
and fuse your head with this better world,
a new image, a violent collision
that splatters paint on a blue plane
and makes you lose face.
Your sunken, old face just fades
into the red void of your countenance,
quixotically rendered
in the smudge of a painter's stroke.

In this new study you charge forth
on your poor tired horse,
a trail of colored strokes behind you
as you chase windmills
in the hazy horizon,
pursuits that cock your basin-helmet askew.
But he didn't paint your basin-helmet,
an oversight I know you'd find an outrage,
if in fact you were aware of anything
other than the yellow dust
of your golden age
that covers the floor at your feet
as you ride through earth and sky and landscape
towards some unseen ideal.

I am not the sage author you spoke of,
but something tells me
you anticipated me just the same.
And these paintings of you exist
because you said they would someday,
something the world would hold on to
and recognize your familiar figure
at first sight,
in spite of your shady eyes
or loss of face.

I see you mounted on your feeble horse,
your heroic stance electrified
by shivers of white paint
down your limbs
and I wonder at you,

your eyes ambiguous,
you can't see the painter
who captures you just so.
Then tell me how you knew he would?
And how with your eyes at once
so possessed by your poisonous books
and then not present at all
in your red faceless head,
did you see me?
Since something about you
seems so convinced
that I am sitting in my own dark room,
slumped over the pages of your adventures,
my own black eyes
unable to look away
from the life that you've made.

And since I can't seem to shut your book
though I've finished weeks ago
I also don't want to end
this conversation, so I'm talking to you
but I don't think you can hear me
through the thick paint in your ears.
I know that you know
that I'm here.
And you and I cannot deny
the existence of the other.
And I don't want to say goodbye
or take down the pictures of you
I've been living with
because I can't help but wish
for some of your gold dust
to get in my eyes
and take away the dark.
Maybe then the world will be
less rueful
for the both of us.

In the Musée d'Orsay

I was seventeen
and I loved Claude Monet.
Never having traveled
far from home before
I wandered through the galleries.
The halls were large and airy,
the place seemed designed
with no other purpose
than to house light.
The Impressionists
whose work lines the walls
would be happy with this
luminous arrangement.

I turned a corner—things
always seem to change
after one has turned a corner—
and faced a painting of a bedroom:
violent red coverlet, surreal blue walls,
thickly textured floors.
I could almost feel uneven wood
beneath my feet.
I knew it
from pictures in books
“Bedroom at Arles,”
a Vincent Van Gogh.

I couldn't look fast enough:
Van Goghs, Degases, Renoirs
and many Monets.
I finally just stood
in a corner before
a familiar lily pond
submerged in purple
and blue paint
but I'd never breathed better.
The pond in the canvas
washed me clean, like light
filtering through the museum
the light Claude Monet loved
to paint.

Luminosity

I saw a book on the table—
my favorite table
in the basement of the library—
with just that word
sunken in old letters
on a dusty green cover.
“Luminosity.”
What a word. Full of sound,
moving beautifully
when spoken aloud,
as I found when I whispered it—
“luminosity”—to myself
in the library.

I pictured candles,
casting a saintly glow
across a dark scriptorium.
Unfinished pages of a Psalter
lying on a writing table,
parchment lit, the wet script
shimmering, with luminosity.

I’ve always been a girl
for words
loving best ones
with character, good sound,
and of course
profound meaning. I cling
to good words, hoping
that a word like “luminosity”
might light me up
with its letters
and make me like a library
a sanctuary for words.

“Luminosity,” a word
to light me up and make me
braver. Like St. George,
I’d charge on a white horse
out of a red sky,
vanquish the dragon
at my feet.

I'd take his sword
to cut out the bad parts
of my brain, all
the ugly words.
From the whiteness
of his horse I'd make
empty pages with room
for me to write
"luminosity" and
other beautiful words
in careful script.
I'd harness the light
from his halo
into lanterns to brighten
the Renaissance in my head,
sentinels against new bad
coming in—"sentinel," *good word*—
those former dark corners
would light right up
and I'd become
something lovely.
A Manuscript,
Illuminated.

Thunderbird

Maynard Dixon's canvas
is all sky, save for a red rock
horizon, low and subtle,
underneath a vast canopy
of blue and white.

This Western sky
was once new, luminous
thunderhead clouds
living crisp in the blue—
a cloud world.

This is sky, as if seen
by the eyes of a thunderbird
tearing through air and cloud
just to take it all in
and to own it, leaving his mark
like an artist
signs his paintings.

For Vincent Van Gogh

Sometimes we feel things
too deeply. Until they burrow
through our hearts and leave scars.
Until they reside in our minds
replacing our thoughts
with burnings, searing.

By “we” I mean people.
People in general. But mostly
I mean him. And me. I see
his paintings and I know
that the thickness of paint
and the sharp, too deep colors
are things he felt
trying to get out.

And me. Once I just liked
the paintings. Beautiful things.
Until I stood in front
of a yellow house
where he lived and I wept
weeping as I felt the paint
that must have trailed him
as he walked through the streets.
I felt the paint, mostly yellow,
like the house, seep up through my feet
into my bloodstream.
Until it was part of me. Too deeply.

I know with my reasonable head
that he was mad.
Something wasn't right. He couldn't
keep it together, under the pressure
of what he felt, feared, failed, loved.
But I don't take it well
when people say he was crazy.
And the ear.
People fixate
on the wrongness of the ear.

Why can't we (and by we,
I mean they, and us, me)
just look at his paintings and feel

for awhile. Deeply,
like he did when he made them.
And when our eyes
burn with the yellow
of the stars in his skies
we might know what it was like
to feel stars like that, wild
burning him from the inside out.

Things a Caryatid Might Say

I have a spine
strong enough
to support rooftops
through the ages.

My ancient brain
holds its own
under pressure.

I am a pillar
of a woman. My
stony dress won't flutter
when the wind blows
on the Acropolis.

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Author's Autobiography

Jacquelyn Vienna (Boyd) Goates grew up in Sandy, Utah. In 2006, she graduated from Jordan High School and entered Utah State University in the fall as a Presidential Scholar and with the Robert C. Byrd Scholarship. She began her studies in the English department, choosing an emphasis in creative writing. Eventually she would add a second major in art history. As an undergraduate, Vienna worked as the peer advisor for the English department, meeting with students, attending recruitment events, and advising students at freshman orientation. She was also a Rhetoric Associate, a position which allowed her to work with students on improving their writing. In her four years, Vienna read many wonderful books, wrote hundreds of pages of papers and writings, researched for many hours in the library, and learned many important things.

After she graduates in the spring of 2010, Vienna plans to gain some professional experience while taking some time off before graduate school. She is a woman of many interests, and needs some time to decide which of many possible paths she wants to take. Above all else, she hopes for good things, whatever they may be.