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*Ekphrasis*

*haibun*

*Steven Carter*

*8*

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*Ekphrasis is a rhetorical device in which one medium of art attempts to relate to another medium by defining and describing its essence and form. A descriptive work of prose or poetry may thus highlight through its rhetorical vividness what is happening, or what is shown, in any of the visual arts. In doing so it may enhance the original painting or sculpture, and take on a life of its own.*

—Wikipedia

## AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE READER

“Art doesn’t improve”: Thus T.S. Eliot, nearly a century ago. Of course art changes, but that’s not what the Old Possum meant. He meant that what I call the art in art, or the art of art, never gets better. Who can claim that a Lascaux cave painting is superior to a Picasso, or vice versa? One may say that Durer, say, was more skilled at what he did than John Singer Sargent; but that’s not the same thing as art in art.

Like the poor, poor artists are always with us. After a point, however (the “point” being admittedly mysterious: all we can say is that it exists) comparative value judgments become odious. The French have this in mind when they speak of *le frisson esthétique*—the esthetic shiver.

Put a different way: save for the role played by technology (as in photography), art doesn’t evolve. Can Mondrian beat Fra Angelico in depicting line and figure? Of course not! Does the modern era Mondrian was born into demand that he—or Jackson Pollock or Roy Lichtenstein—do so? No.

All this is to explain the rough-hewn chronology of what follows. I begin with Edward Hopper, who gives way to Matisse, Michelangelo, Giorgione, etc. Whatever it is, the truth of beauty transcends time and questions of influence—even of downright theft

(notice the figure sprawled on the steps of Raphael's *School of Athens*. Look familiar? You'll find him on the Sistine ceiling.)

As for the “essence” of the truth of beauty, let's remember John Keats' admonition that here on earth it's all we know and all we need to know. Keats: whose “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is the greatest single example of ekphrasis in English.

The Bower

Swan Lake, Montana

## INTRODUCTION

### *ART AND LIFE*

In 1934 the Ghent Altarpiece, one of the treasures of western art, was stolen; to this day no one knows where it ended up. (The chief suspect, one Arsene Goedertier, never brought to justice, said on his deathbed, “Only I know where the Altarpiece is.”)

The same night the Altarpiece went missing, a large wheel of cheese was also stolen in the city of Ghent. Almost exclusively, the Belgian authorities devoted their efforts to recovering the cheese, not the Altarpiece.

Eight decades later, of course we find this strange. But as Jan de Kesel, latest in a long line of police detectives searching for the Altarpiece, recently told a BBC commentator, “Yes, I know this broke the hearts of patrons of the arts. But in those years my country was in the throes of a terrible economic depression. People were hungry—some on the brink of starvation. The cheese had priority.”

## PROLOGUE

### *A FABLE FROM CITY OF SHADED LIGHT*

Late one chilly May morning, two butterflies, Alain and Alphonse, fly through an open window on the second story of the Louvre. For two hours they flutter up and down the great halls, pausing before masterpieces such as “L’école d’appel” by Jean Brocisi; “Head of an old woman wearing a bonnet” by Balthasar Denner; “Boy with a club foot” by Jusepa de Ribera; “Pandemonium” by John Martin; “Portrait of Francis I as John the Baptist” by Jean Clouet; “Portrait of the duc d’Orléans” by Ingres; “Interior Scene” by Jean-Jacques de Boisseau; “Poor man wearing a hat” by Francisco Sasso; “The Countess del Carpio” by Goya; “The Lacemaker” by Vermeer; “The virgin of Chancellor Rolin” by van Eyck; “The Coronation of the Virgin” by Fra Angelico; and, of course “The Mona Lisa.”

Finally they rest on the brass rail before Poussin’s “Ruth and Boaz.”

“It’s all so beautiful,” sighs Alphonse.

“Yes,” Alain agrees. “But it isn’t enough.”

“What do you mean?”

Without replying Alain rises into the air and guides Alphonse out through the open window they’d entered. And as they fly into the bright May sunlight over I.M. Pei’s Louvre Pyramid in the Cour Napoleon, a little girl holding her mother’s hand happens to look up and see them disappear in a canvas of sky and clouds.

HAIBUN

EDWARD HOPPER'S *NIGHTHAWKS AT THE DINER*

Westward (or eastward, what does it matter?): the misbegotten shriek of a train—unheard within the glass confines of the diner.

Nanoseconds away by light-speed, a pretty adolescent girl—almost as pretty as the girl one hopes to meet in the diner—wakes up to roosters crowing. It's time to begin egg candling, the first of her farm chores.

Before that, however, still in the friendly confines of her bed she scribbles in a "Him Book": *I know I'll find him. Not here, no, not here; but in the city—I know that's where he is. And that's where I will go.*

summer stars  
somewhere a siren—  
windows gaze at windows



## MATISSE'S *PORTRAIT OF MME. MATISSE*

Green stripe bisecting her face! Purple coiffure! No wonder they called him a Fauve—wild beast. Years earlier, when the *Salon des Refusés* opened its doors in Paris, Impressionists were accused of “throwing a paint-pot in the public’s face” (John Ruskin accused Whistler of the same thing).

Ah, but this woman—

Fast-forward half a century, to when color TV was introduced in America. The picture quality of the first color sets was atrocious, and it was quite common to enjoy sit-com characters with—guess what?—green faces and purple hair! The public quickly became used to it, of course, settling back on their living room couches to watch *I Love Lucy*—which debuted the year Matisse died.

black-and-white moon  
dreams of green horses  
golden hooves

## BRUEGHEL'S *ICARUS*

The world is oval-shaped under a lemon-yellow rind of sky. Sprouting wings, he leaps off the Eiffel Tower, only to bump his head against a brick wall of curved space, returning him to Point A—and a wan epiphany:

Travel, v. *To learn to stay put by going and coming the long way around in an effort to put distance between you and your shortcomings.*

—Or no (*he turns in his sleep*): the incandescent white moon sings his wings, plummeting him into a dark green sea replete with 19th-century sailing ships. As in the Brueghel painting, they go on doing what they do, oblivious to a pair of legs disappearing beneath the waves.

He does like to walk (banishing from his thoughts the notion of “traveling about the city”!). Today’s waking hours find him in the beautiful Pere Lachaise Cemetery, Paris’ largest. Located on the exquisitely-named Rue de Repos, its luminaries include Chopin, Oscar Wilde, Delacroix, Jim Morrison, and, most famously, Heloise and Abelard, whose tomb—to his mind anyway—rivals that of Napoleon in beauty and elegance. The area surrounding the little temple is always strewn with white and red chrysanthemums tossed over the white stone fence—900 years after the

lovers walked the moonlit vineyards of a fledgling Paris.

As he pauses in a patch of lush grass before Jim Morrison's grave, he thinks again of the poor lost boy who traveled too high, the object of a few moments' attention before—like the ships—visitors to the Museum des Beaux Arts pass on.

on soft grass  
softness of dandelions—  
heart's needle

*DETAIL OF A STAINED-GLASS WINDOW IN BRUGES\**  
*CATHEDRAL*

Jesus looks wistful—with a touch of anger in His eyes (the kinder, gentler Jesus of 14th century statuary hadn't arrived yet). Still, the expression brings to my mind not a savior but a jilted lover, turning His head as the inamorata walks off having whispered her good-byes. Of course when skies are cloudy the secular effect is more pronounced.

...Now He's alone, with no one—not even Mary Magdalene—to render comfort. An eternal captive of beautiful glass, He represents every bereft male and female, orphans of the heart booking passage to an asteroid christened Eros.

*Kyrie—*  
a cello's sour note  
*From the beginning, please*

*[\*also known as the medieval music capital of Europe.]*

GIOVANNI BELLINI'S *ST. FRANCIS IN ECSTASY*

*Brother fire, sister wind. . .*

On his deathbed, the great man apologized to "Brother Donkey, my body," for the austerities he'd visited upon it. No word whether Brother Donkey accepted the apology.

In Bellini's late 15th century painting Francis looks upward, his writing desk behind him—the obligatory skull perched on top. His palms are extended, as if inviting crucifixion—the one outrage poor Donkey was spared!

After his death, a handful of followers weren't so lucky. Holy Mother Church had recently joined the international banking system and, finding the Franciscan monks' (*Fiorelli*, they were called) cult of poverty an embarrassment, burned several at the stake.

Once upon a summer day, so the legend goes, citizens of Gubbio, a hill town near Francis' monastery, came to the saint requesting his assistance: a wolf was terrorizing the populace who were afraid they would become prisoners within their own walls.

St. Francis found the wolf and brokered a deal: three squares a day in exchange for keeping his paws

off the town. The wolf agreed. To seal the deal, Francis commanded, "Give me your paw." And the wolf gave him his paw.

*Sister water  
she is very humble  
and precious, and pure—*

[haiku adapted from Canticum of the Sun, by St. Francis]



MICHELANGELO'S *THE FALL OF MAN AND THE  
EXPULSION FROM EDEN*

*Honey of generation. . .*

—On the right, Adam and Eve seem in a hurry to get the hell out of the Garden (Eve, bless her heart, is rather dumpy, with love handles to boot! Michelangelo was less interested in women than in men.)

In my dreams: white chrysanthemums—no, fallen angels, dog-eared copies of *Paradise Lost* clutched in their hot hands. Grinning, they sing in off-key harmony: “We have three words for you, Bub: *The Fortunate Fall*.”

Before they float off into a blue empyrean, this tidbit from the last cherub—

“Btw, did you know that Milton made a measly ten pounds off *Paradise Lost*? How’s *that* for the wages of sin!”

warm to the touch  
a rosary  
. . .blossom-storm

. . . Still dreaming, I hop out of bed, go to the bookshelf and pull down my own *The New Devil’s*

*Dictionary*, published in Italy not far, as it happens, from Michelangelo’s birthplace. I turn to the P’s:

Paradise, n. *God’s lost and found, where what is not worth losing is never lost and what is not worth finding is never found.*

Cythera’s safe haven—  
one kiss—  
lost ocean of stars

ANDREA CASTAGNO'S *DAVID*

Goliath doesn't look happy. Neither would you, if your severed head rested on the ground at the feet of a 98-pound weakling who took you down.

Legs apart and gazing to the right of the picture plane, David holds up his left hand, palm open, as if to stop an oncoming vehicle. To my postmodern eye all he needs is a plastic helmet and a Montana highway department fluorescent vest—

fast-moving storm  
the flagman's world  
SLOW and STOP

Clouds in the painting could develop into a storm, though David doesn't seem to mind... Now, look more closely. Without David and Goliath, Castagno's background brushstrokes constitute an abstract!

Four centuries pass before Paul Gauguin would refer to abstract backgrounds in his work as *music*. Castagno's tone-poems of death—the clouds, the dark trees and leaves (if that's what they are)—had, like David, beaten him to the punch.

path of ancient cedars—  
shape-shifting  
ruddy moon of Gath

AGNOLO BRONZINO'S *ELEANORA OF TOLEDO*

Check out that fat little Medici kid! He looks like an eight-year-old whose football was taken from him by bullies. Of course he'll grow up trying to compensate—

The mother: gorgeous, resembling a young Grace Kelly—including the exquisite slender fingers, almost Mannerist in length. You just know her marriage to Cosmo de Medici isn't a happy one. She reminds me of a young woman whose conversation I overheard at the Swan Bar:

"Well, I did my duty again last night."

And the other:

"Do you ever laugh in your husband's face after sex? I do."

Then:

"I wish I could go back—"

"Not to childhood!"

"No, no—I'd like to live in a different century. . ."

"What would you do in a different century?"

“I’d be—what were they called?—a courtesan.”

entombed in moonlight—  
butterfly  
in a glass case

## EDGAR DEGAS’ *THE GLASS OF ABSINTHE*

Forget “life”: If this isn’t a slice of eternity I don’t know what is. First thing catching the eye: the front-lit shadows of Degas’ two drinkers: spattered like ink on the wall behind them.

The composition—very Impressionist: two people pushed to the far right, the guy almost cut off as if he’s about to fall out of the universe.

Everything is in the expressions. First: the guy, bearing an absurd resemblance to the clown Emmett Kelly of our time. Staring into space, clearly what we would call a scumbag. And the girl, or woman, eyes turned from the object of his gaze, meeting someone else’s gaze—perhaps.

averted glances  
meeting averted  
glances meeting—

On his face—utter resignation. Clearly the glass of absinthe before him is not, nor will ever be, quenched by his parched being. But the look on her face! She’s within whispering distance of what Sartre called the far side of despair. Her glass is full, suggesting that, like Eurydice, she’s putting off—if only for a moment—the return journey down the slippery slope to hell.



morning after—  
    mourning  
        before—

LUCA DELLA ROBBIA'S *SINGING ANGELS*

Yes, yes, they're charming, their adorable open mouths caroling eternity. But are they angels? What's Luca up to?

Check out the one on the far right: bored, sleepy, cheek resting on his palm: a typical kid condemned to choir practice, wishing he could be outside breathing Tuscan fresh air and playing bocce ball with his mates.

The feet: askew, undisciplined, bringing to the modern mind a group portrait of Spanky and our gang.

And the kicker—beyond precious! The one in the middle, left hand clenching his toga just below the waist, in a gesture centuries of schoolteachers would instantly recognize.

He has to go to the bathroom.

moonlight on the carpet—  
    laughing over spilt milk—  
        twin grandkids

GIORGIONE'S *THE TEMPEST*

No, it's not proto-surrealism—the symbolism is too “fixed” for that—but what is the symbolism? What's going on here? Begin with the mother, wary as a deer, sitting on the ground suckling her child, looking us smack in the eye—

And who's the guy on the left, pike resting on his shoulder? What's he gazing at as he stands rigidly at a chaste distance from the mother?

Still, a fearful harmony between foreground and background: skinny twigs of vegetation picking up the skinny single bolt of lightning a mile or two away.

The mother has disrobed—except for the cloth draped over her left shoulder not quite concealing the breast suckled by her child. A 16th century striptease.

But this isn't the 16th century. Like plumes of green smoke, the trees rise to greet the storm which threatens to engulf a pagan world.

skin of mother-of-pearl—  
how shadows  
interpret shadows

ANTONIO DEL POLLAIUOLO'S *BATTLE OF TEN NAKED MEN*

This appears to be the flip-side of Henri Matisse's *Joie de Vivre* executed four centuries later. A battle, rather than a celebration: a tumult of male bodies, rather than naughty female rhythms. A—but we get the picture.

Or do we? Antonio may have been the first artist—even before Leonardo—to study anatomy in dissection labs. And yet, beyond the accuracy of these depictions and the horrific violence, I can't dismiss the notion that, like the Matisse, this is a ballet. An ecstatic dance of death, it complements not opposes the joy of life which is, I'm tempted to say, its twin.

“Why do men go to war?” someone asked T.E. Lawrence, who replied, “Because the women are watching.”

nettles  
from the garden  
tender words

### LEONARDO'S *THE VIRGIN OF THE ROCKS*

Forgive me: I want to call her the virgin on the rocks. So beautiful in a modern way, very much resembling the girlfriend I shared my first drink with eons ago.

. . . The wonderful sfumato—radiance emanating from Leonardo's background of soft glazes—reminds me too of soft light filtered like green talc through eucalyptus leaves in the Berkeley hills. It was there we drank a toast to a future I secretly and shamefully knew we'd never spend together.

pale green star  
words in the darkness—  
*Making love is prayer*

### MUNCH'S *THE SCREAM*

Ripped off in 2003 from Oslo's National Museum—then returned, probably because it made such a racket from its place of concealment.

The homunculus has no ears—a brilliant touch!

(A recent sci-fi movie come-on begins: *In space no one can hear you scream.*) Translation: We inhabit the voids of modern life where, for some folks, everyday existence is a protracted scream we're so used to that it fades to—what?—aural black, like elevator music.

Echoing a human scream, Munch's waviness also recalls police sirens. Flip on an oscilloscope and you'll see what I mean.

If not: Think of Sirens, dashing ships and virgins on the rocks.

far shore  
greetings—  
silence of islands



### MICHELANGELO'S *REBELLIOUS SLAVE*

I think of this sculpture when, gazing on Swan Lake in the evening I see, or imagine I see, colors imprisoned in the waves and ripples—greens, dark blues, hints of twilight orange—struggling skyward.

Look more closely: The slave's facial expression is a tad serene, as if he's almost content to remain *in media res* between slavery and freedom, the Known and the Unknown, an *exemplum* of life itself.

Almost—

We know that M. was anything but serene: his violent mood-swings probably indicative of bi-polar disorder. Remember, too, the dangers in both the visual arts and literature (less so music) to “read” intentionality into the work.

Nor should we forget universality. Like the rest of us, Michelangelo was a prisoner of Eros. And the naked young man in the stone—imperishably handsome.

refusing each other  
the stone  
the stream

### MICHELANGELO'S *LAST JUDGMENT* (DETAIL)

A jumble of figures, some blessed, most looking to God for a (bittersweet) redemption.

The guy on the cloud is St. Bartholomew, demonstrating his martyrdom by doing a show and tell with his flayed skin (the face on the skin is Michelangelo himself).

Herewith my own parable of Judgment Day:

*Appearing before a panel of three judges—one looks bored as if he can't wait for tee time—a man bows his head, trembling.*

*The bored-looking judge speaks: “Look up, man!”  
Then: “You are allowed to judge yourself.”*

*Astonished, the man is silent for a long moment. Gathering his courage, he says, “Very well, then! I have lived a pure and exemplary life.”*

*The three confer on the bench. Tee-time clears his throat and looks the man in the eye. “You have been found wanting. The judgment is passed.”*

*“But what is—”*

*“Your judgment is the judgment.”*

St. Peter's coffee-cup—  
DO I LOOK LIKE I CARE?

ALEXANDER CALDER'S *LOBSTER TRAP AND FISH  
TAIL*

Eloquent as the silences of wind-chimes on windless nights, Calder's mobile is flash-frozen in the space reserved for it by MOMA. Influenced by the "biomorphic" shapes of Surrealism, this huge construction seems poised to enter a different universe—no, to enter *from* a different universe, an alien life-form stopping by to say hello.

At the Swan Bar—

"If you were to search for intelligent life in the universe, where would you begin?"

Sipping a Kokanee beer, his companion taps the bar emphatically with his knuckles.

breath of air  
beautiful movement—  
breathlessness

CARAVAGGIO'S *THE CALLING OF ST. MATTHEW*

*The blackness remains—*

Trivia question: Who was the only disciple to die  
a natural death?

Don't recall! Peter and Paul were crucified upside  
down.

embraces of  
two shadows  
. . . two crosses

But look at this magic moment: Caravaggio's  
figures, including Matthew himself, seem poised to  
fall into an abyss: the artist's organic shadows black as  
death.

bitter moon  
taste of  
shadows

Light-years (light!) from our everyday world, the  
huge canvas—11' by 11'—reminds me nonetheless of  
an encounter my father-in-law had with a pastor-  
neighbor in the desert. (My father-in-law, a man of  
top-shelf intelligence, was scientific to a fault, which  
meant he took things—everything, A-Z—literally;  
not a metaphorical bone in his body.)

The pastor explained that he'd come to the desert  
(like Matthew!) because "I got the calling."

"Who called you?"

early morning wind  
flash  
of a mourning dove

## VELAZQUEZ' MAIDS OF HONOR (DETAIL)

Brown, luminous, sparkling with curiosity, the eyes have it.

But the little girl's pretty angel hair—she is a princess—belies those no-nonsense lips ready to purse; something's not quite right in her world.

Hello? She'll be a force to be reckoned with when she grows up.

This sweetheart will break hearts: from failed love, no: from political contingencies, yes—she'll marry whomever it's expedient to marry. But there's more: Velazquez was the first artist to use light as a creative medium—for him illumination doesn't embellish the world, it is the world.

If this sounds like Impressionism, not to worry: Monet and Renoir did their homework in Velazquez.

wings open to the moon  
a lace-wing moth  
. . . expectations

. . . My heart was broken, or bent at least, when I was 12 years old. The girl was no Spanish princess—ah, but she had angel hair—and she taught me a

lifelong lesson: Suffering, like art, doesn't evolve. I was in as much pain then, sixty years ago, as I would be later on in college, when a dark-haired girl from San Diego pulled the plug on our love affair.

Once upon a summer seeds were planted in my heart: still germinating as we speak, still summoning an ironic smile when I recall the poet's line:

*I want to ask Christ to give me back my childhood.*

60's radio

Jim Morrison—

*This is the end*

## VINCENT VAN GOGH'S *THE STARRY NIGHT*

The poetry of night—

Vincent knew it well, while most of us think automatically of the suns and sunflowers of Arles—a twining and twinning of lovers' gazes.

A few years ago the world's oldest woman passed away in Paris, age 112. She remembered Vincent quite well. A twelve-year-old girl working in her father's paint store in Arles, she recalled a "dirty, foul-smelling, unpleasant" man—Vincent—coming in to buy paints.

In *The Starry Night*, a touch of velvet softens the darkness between the café and those wonderful preposterous stars. This caress comes to us courtesy of the artist's tender doppelganger—the one falling in love with recalcitrant cousin Kay.

Whereupon Vincent became St. Vincent: martyred to his muse and to Eros.

Doppelganger? I should've said altar ego.

a vagabond  
star-gazing—  
stars gazing

## HABITATS FOR HUMANITY

### I — Nicholas HILLIARD'S *A YOUNG MAN AMONG ROSES*

This guy's the Joker from a deck of 51: ideal for playing Solitaire.

So what's missing here? Oblivious to the truncated deck he belongs to, he doesn't appear lonely.

soft light-in-leaves  
her last words—  
to me

Dealing Solitaire for the umpteenth time, I look out on Swan Lake, thinking of fishes oblivious to their habitat—

. . . Thinking too of the medium we swim in. Which is? I mean right now, this moment, as I cut the cards again?

Let's put it this way: *The sun hasn't risen yet.*

bright reds  
soak into  
a dark sky:  
night birds sing  
for us and not for us



## II — PETER BRUEGHEL THE ELDER'S *THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND*

*We turn from the light to see.*

Christ said: If the blind shall lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.

But take note of Brueghel's poor wretches bringing up the rear. They share a long skinny pole so the last one won't be cast adrift in a world of darkness. What a touch!

Yes, Christ was speaking in parables: but looking at this forlorn procession of *aveugles*, one can't help but be moved—

I think of Christ's words when, by the window I happen to gaze at motes of dust which enable me to see *their* habitat: a slant of light.

white cane, dark glasses—  
no one sees  
the blind man

## CLAUDE MONET'S *THE RIVER*

A house shimmers in the water; the structure itself is hidden behind the voluptuous leaves of a chestnut tree. As early as 1868—only two years after the appearance of the first Impressionist painting (by Eduard Manet)—Monet invites us to enter a world of reflections.

T.S. Eliot writes of flowers which have the look of flowers frequently looked at. This river has that look except, as I say, what we're seeing isn't the river but its nether world, the hell of a good universe next door E.E. Cummings wrote about the year before Monet died.

Bow cradled by a flower-strewn shore, the boat appears to be taking a nap. And the woman water-gazer: take her out of the picture, it's been suggested, and you could hang the painting upside-down without changing much.

I was reminded of *The River* last summer when, becalmed in a rowboat on Holland Lake, I watched a lemon-yellow slice of moon rise in a brandy-colored sky (a forest fire burned out of control in the mountains). Then, as I turned my gaze to the water, the mountain-peaks became stalactites festooning Plato's cave.

—These nether-mountains pointed to the earth's  
center where, Native Americans once believed, a  
goddess dwelled: Native Americans who, like all of us,  
lived in a world of reflections.

. . . trembling when a fish jumps  
sycamores—  
seeing them for the first time

#### JOHN HENRY FUSELI'S *THE NIGHTMARE*

Last night's dream images have left me, harpies  
abandoning the shores of sleep while singing a Siren-  
song: *See you in a few hours.*

I've never had a full-fledged nightmare, though  
some bad dreams have come close, and I can't  
remember the last time I had a really good dream. Is  
it just me?

Dreams are borderlands and, although Fuseli  
depicts the woman in nocturnal torment, if we  
remove the demon familiars—grinning devil and  
horse—her posture becomes one of wanton  
abandonment: almost—*is it just me?*—sexual ecstasy.

silence of a white owl  
dark earth  
darkness between stars

## JOHN CONSTABLE'S *HAMPSTEAD HEATH*

No one saw the English sky until Constable painted it.

There's an internecine war going on here: clouds vs. clouds. On the one hand, Constable's busy sky leans toward an abstract expressionism this painter would never know; on the other, it "embodies a full apprehension of natural effect"—Constable's own words.

The heath exhales darkness; and the clouds—*the clouds, up there, the wonderful clouds!* Baudelaire sang—seem in a hurry to cross the heavens to somewhere, anywhere away from the human universe.

a child writes,  
*Where do they go?*  
*Only the clouds know*

What's going on in the village down below? Who knows? Who cares? This is Mother Nature's cosmos where no humans need apply—unlike Monet's world of the river, Constable's immortal clouds won't even pause for reflection.

congregations—  
in the cathedral  
clouds in the windows

## VINCENT VAN GOGH'S *WHEAT FIELD AND CYPRESS TREES*

A *New Yorker* cartoon depicts a bandage-swathed Van Gogh on crutches, his ear bandaged of course. An arm and a leg are also missing.

"Good news, Vincent," brother Theo looks up from reading a letter. "She really liked the leg."

*How do I love thee?* Vincent quotes from Elizabeth Barrett Browning—this in a letter to Cousin Kay. *Let me count the ways.*

. . . Not a good idea, Vince. In love what is added may also be subtracted.

*Point:*

A narrow wheat field wends across the picture plane left to right: a river of yellow if you like—but also the yellow brick road leading to an anti-Oz of madness.

*Counterpoint:*

Playful as dolphins—a few actually look like dolphins—the clouds seem to smile down on a row of blue hills resembling them in brushstroke and texture.

*Point:*

A few slap-dash poppies are sprinkled in the foreground—drops of Vincent’s blood, soon to be shed in a field of nightmares?

*Counterpoint:*

The cypress tree flips the wheat field’s undulating brushstrokes upward, toward the grays, pale greens and paler blues of a sheltering sky—

soft yellow sun—  
sudden urge  
to touch nettles

PAUL KLEE’S *TWITTERING MACHINE*

We’ve arrived on a planet where life forms resemble, well, twittering machines. I’m reminded of a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip featuring a trip to Mars in Calvin’s red wagon. Having landed safely the pair encounters a Martian—something Klee might’ve drawn—who immediately freaks out (Calvin leaps into Hobbes’ arms) and scoots.

Hobbes remarks, “He’s as afraid of us as we are of him.”

Calvin’s reply: “Yeah, but we’re ordinary earthlings, not weirdoes from another planet like *he* is.”

twinkle twinkle double star  
two twilights  
for the price of one

## ANTONI GAUDÍ'S CASA MILA APARTMENT HOUSE

*MacArthur Park is melting in the dark,  
All the sweet green icing flowing down;  
Someone left a cake out in the rain—  
I don't think that I can take it  
'Cause it took so long to bake it  
And I'll never have that recipe again—*

—From the song *MacArthur Park* by J. Webb

It didn't take long (from 1905-1907) to bake this cake. Gaudí's melting forms (do people *really* live in the Casa Mila?) remind one of a gingerbread cake left in the forest (although newly-planted trees in the foreground are still immature) by a sorceress.

Forget labels. Call it Post-Impressionist architecture; call it Modern Baroque—what does it matter?

Gaudí is better known for his Sacred Family cathedral, also in Barcelona, best seen at night, fully-lit. Refer to him as Gaudy if you like; the unfinished cathedral is, for me, a marvel of pure beauty.

But how many tourists, cameras hung around their necks, turn away from these structures in disgust and bewilderment?

Lemmings, I say, DNA wired for the terrible mass

yearning toward the *cliché*—

Ugly is in the eye of the beholder.

soft colors in the rain—  
strange nostalgia  
for rooms I've never known



GEORGES ROUAULT'S *HEAD OF CHRIST*

Christ as orphan. . .

—Focusing on the wild black ink-lines  
intersecting His face, what do we see?

Strands of twisted barbed wire; or calligraphy gone  
berserk; or—

This is Christ of the concentration camps: keeper  
of the Mystery who couldn't, or wouldn't, darken the  
skies over Sobibor, Majdanek, Bergen-Belsen,  
Buchenwald, Treblinka, Birkenau—

This is Christ scratched into stone by a  
condemned Polish officer at Auschwitz—

This is Christ *Agonistes*. Then and now they turn  
away from Him as, in paintings and sculptures of the  
Cross, His head twists away from the One who  
forsook him.

cries and whispers  
what He said  
what they heard

*THE LESTRIGONIANS HURLING ROCKS AT THE  
FLEET OF ODYSSEUS* [ROMAN: WALL PAINTING  
FROM A HOUSE ON THE ESQUILINE, LATE 1ST  
CENTURY B.C.]

*And lifting up his hands Odysseus  
prayed to the nymphs:  
"O slim shy Naiads, young maids of Zeus,  
I had not thought to see you ever again!"*  
—The Odyssey

The turquoise calm of the bay belies a scene of  
horrific violence. This is where Odysseus lost most of  
his crew and much of his panache.

The name of the Lestrigonian king is *Antiphates*—  
Greek for "against renown." Because Odysseus doesn't  
shout his own name (symbolic of his psyche, or soul)  
into the teeth of a mob of savages, they never know  
who he is and nearly wipe out the fleet.

Rewind to Odysseus' earlier adventure with the  
Cyclops. The one-eyed monster's name is *Polyphemos*,  
or "much fame." In the womb-like cave, Odysseus  
calls on his nimble wits, telling Polyphemos his name  
is "Nobody." This makes sense, because until  
Odysseus is re-born, winning his psyche through  
inflicting or suffering pain, he is no one.

After blinding Polyphemos and free of the cave, he

proudly bellows his name over and over: “It is I, Odysseus of Ithaca, did this to you!”

—To me, most intriguing about Odysseus’ twenty-year tour of the Mediterranean is the manner of his homecoming. Washed up alone on Ithaca’s rocky shores, clueless as to where he is, he falls into despair. Then, a strange ritual: he begins slapping his thighs over and over. Like a pinch after a bad dream, the stinging pain awakens him to a happy shock of recognition: this island, this land of “harbors, cliffs, and summer trees,” is home, is Ithaca.

Filled with joy, he falls to his knees and kisses the earth.

Once again pain is the key. Tiresias, the soothsayer from the Underworld who knows all, told Odysseus that pain is the basis of life, of human identity itself. (*Tiresias* means “the weariness of rowing.”)

Thus Homer’s ghost, whispering to our minds:  
*No matter where we are, no matter how lonely or frightened, we are home—home is where the psyche is. And the gods have not forsaken us.*

found horizon—  
stopping at our toes  
all these oceans