2023 ART TALKS BACK
Ekphrastic Poetry Contest

MUSKEGON MUSEUM OF ART
The thread I weave
cannot be found in the lineations
on the most stained of glass cages,
or underneath the most stifling of latinate labels.
The saga of the flock has been written
on the wings of birds but have surveyors
ever stopped to hear it straight from the beak of one?

I hatched here in a realm that would soon
gain the entertained name of “The Last Frontier,”
yet to my brood, the plains were eternal,
with no first field and no last land,
no boundary between an ever-gorgeous,
and an ever-changing everything.

Like the dust in the spring dancing lek,
every fiber of our feathers swirls in
a haughty, heartfelt hue of belonging.
And as we rise from chick to challenge-hungry cock,
as vibrant and sprightly over the hills,
blazing plumage regal, swaying with the sunrise.
Mystifying is the sense that flutters with us.

There are gulls on oceansides
who believe our wings will never be useful,
and eagles upon cliff sides
who dare to cheapen footwork and tail-rattles.

Yet still, we bob
every bit of our blaze-colored crests
Yet still, we flash
every fleck of our pearl-dappled breasts.
Remember,
the preening spirit of every new season
Remember,
the resonating romance of it all.

*Lek: A gathering place where the males of some species of birds engage in competing mating dances.
Mesostic (Landscape 1977-1979)
Chester Winowiecki

Inspired by Landscape 1977 - 79, Chuang Che

alone
A disembodied eye
views the scene:
golden light reflecting off
the sheer,
looming cliffs, while frothy, frigid
water spills down a
Craggy face

or is it
a farm building
weathered to dusty
brown, before a
field of ripe grain?
the line of sharp wire
fencing hovering
near:
keeping in or out, dividing
sectioning

or

closer, the
trunk of a
young tree
saw cut dark with chain oil
supine
blocking the sight of
the fire roaring behind it
spitting and

crackling as it burns the freshly cut wood
carve a rattle out of cedar
fit the halves together with a few small stones
shake it to hear the sound sheishóox
that ancestors used to summon the spirits
bring the elongated top to a tip, a beak
carve in relief a stern face with curved eye,
wings with feathers like fingers of spruce twigs,
and a tail that mirrors a human mask
will it be raven, or eagle, or woodpecker
no, a grouse, a simple spruce hen, life-size
who sits in silence as we pass
to form this rattle now, let human breath fill glass,
molten from salmon-colored sand in a furnace
hotter than ancestors dreamt, though their
dreams still inspire the breath
hold the rattle in the hand, but
dance it only in the mind, for no one
has handled the spruce hen’s spirit
or the spirit world it faces
imagine the sound of this rattle sheishóox:
strong rain striking spruce and cedar,
the scratch of devil’s club as it rubs against shirt sleeve,
the scrape of the fishing canoe as it’s pulled
ashore across the sand and gravel,
and the sudden flutter of the grouse
who startles us by flying with joyful caution when we tread too close
listen to the echo of a shatter
the sound of the fragments fallen and gathered
in the heart of this fragile rattle
hear the sheishóox of the grouse’s wings
flying further into fog and forest
follow them there they will find you
spirit of salmon, spirit of cedar
spirit of ancestors, spirit of the spruce hen
Bombs During English Class

Maria Rooks

Inspired by Quarantine at Gramma’s House, Jonathan Thunder

A bomb strolls casually into a room. Time melts. Grandma’s got a gun, and danger is knocking at the door. Flying turtles drum a powwow beat while pink monkeys pilfer chicken pot pies.

My memory is populated with atonal fragments-

Morning school buses bouncing on Rez roads,
The Space Shuttle launches on TV.
Turquoise jewelry. Feathered hair.
Broken beer bottles. Haunta Virus. Gilligan’s Island.
Pacman and Asteroids at the Trading Post arcade.
School trips to the drunk tank at the Gallup jail so that we students would be scared straight.
Cedar smoke, sand and sage,
heat lightening over the mesas, downpours and arroyos,
Pondarosa Pine that smells like vanilla, snakes, and skinwalkers.
Levi’s button-fly 501 blues and mixed tapes of Journey and Air Supply.
Sharks teeth in the desert rocks. Deep mountain lakes.
Drunks driving on Route 666. The lonely train whistle of the Santa Fe.

A white teenage girl -a bilagáana- does not really belong on a Reservation in New Mexico.
But Mary Oliver would say “Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.”

Every afternoon while I dozed in my high school English class,
The soldiers at the nearby army depot blew up the old munitions stored in the bunkers.
The three o’clock bombs rattled the dusty, classroom windows,
And I would wake to see a plume of smoke rising over the hogbacks in the blue, cloudless sky.

We are handed strange, scary, sad... and often beautiful, beautiful things.
Sometimes the dissonance and isolation leaves us breathless.

Alone and together we must keep telling our stories. No matter what.
Your Invention of Blue
Linda Nemec Foster

Inspired by Le Singe Dans le Palais Venetien, Françoise Gilot

You invented the color blue even before you were born, even before the bald Spaniard (and his cubed women) walked behind you with a huge umbrella on the Cote D’Azur.

Now, you stand alone—front and center—with your invention of blue contained in this crowded landscape of dream and waking world: architecture of Venice and pensive monkey. His long, meandering tail could be the handle of a tea cup or a backward question mark asking—am I a jungle animal or merely an artist in love with myself? And, you, the only woman to leave him. Eleven years later, you painted this blue/green/black/white universe overflowing with so much left unsaid.

In your hands, blue assumes its own identity. Deconstructs and reconstructs itself in your own image: survivor/creator. The Palace appears as if in a mirage. The monkey appears as if he’s a fixture in a dream. The blue dusk of the Grand Canal emanating from your hand, swallowing the landscape whole.
Honorable Mention

**Stilled Life With Monkey**
*Amy Beth Edwards*

Inspired by *Le Singe Dans le Palais Venetien*, Françoise Gilot

I’ll be the monkey if I can come to the party. Under hooded eyes, I’ll observe it all and remain still in the slap and fizz of this life. I’m the tourist here, Never belonging, only longing.

I met them all at the parties. Matisse painted me sky blue with green leaves for my hair. Pablo looked at me and never saw Dora again. For ten years the curve of me propped him up. He liked my art until he didn’t.

I was the monkey at his cocktail party. The topic of conversation, not the one conversing. The inspiration, not the respiration. Ever the muse, never the music.

No one ever noticed my nails stained with oil, waft of turpentine in my hair, red and orange splatters on faded dungarees, or the brightness of my light beneath his shadow.
The Hymn of the Village Church
Sung to the melody of the 1867 hymn Immortal, Invisible
Victoria Everitt

Inspired by The Village Church, Pauline Palmer

I once was a fine church on our village green,
The prettiest sanctuary ever seen.
With mahogany pews and a steeple so straight,
I was proud to stand tall in a founding Free State.

Built in Eighteen-Sixty, I preached Rights for All;
“Free Agency for All Mankind!” was my call.
The Kingdom of God would incarnate on Earth,
And our President Lincoln would foster its birth.

But when the War ended and fighting was done,
It was hard to know who had lost and who’d won.
My people knew there was still much more to save
In the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Two centuries turned, but I always stood fast
’Til Provincetown gave me a new role at last:
As a library where folks assemble at will
To read, write, and speak of their Rights--Freedom still!

Notes:
• After 1915, Chicago artist Pauline Palmer spent her summers painting landscapes in Provincetown, MA, under the tutelage of American Impressionist Charles Webster Hawthorne
• This painting’s title focuses on the Methodist Episcopal Church of Provincetown, which was built in 1860 and remained a Methodist church until 1960.
• After short-lived conversions as an art gallery and later a local history museum, the venerable building was restored and renovated in 2002.
• In 2005 the old church re-opened as the Provincetown Public Library, which it is to this day.

*The poem commonly known as “’Twas the Night Before Christmas” has the same meter.
Month of the Grouse
Jennifer Clark

Inspired by Grouse Rattle, Preston Singletary

Grouse, get us through these lean months of late winter and early spring when we are almost out of dried fish. Hungry for the stew of earthy sounds, our fingers take flight to touch your tail. Beak grazing on needles of spruce and pine now sweeps the sky. Language once thought lost, curves and flows, red ribbon rivers of song carving a path to our bones. May we soon welcome cockles and clam, first harvest of herring eggs, and cedar baskets dripping with seaweed gathered from Strawberry Point. In your black belly ringed with fire, pebbles leap, sounding the season of eating no more shellfish. With heads high and dancing in tandem with fine breeze, time now to fly and rattle this world with joy.
Nestled in the heart of town,
A village church, a precious crown,
A maternal gaze from above,
The poised glide of a dove,
Its stained glass windows tell a tale,
Of hope and faith that never fails,
A field of promised orchids lay,
Bloomed like an eternal flame,
Pure gold carillon, forever stained black,
Hourglasses rain with translucent lilacs,
Lost souls yearn,
Looking at the mirror ready to burn,
Homely hands stretched humbly wide,
With green tears and goodbyes,
Never forget in this sacred place you find,
A sense of comfort, pure and kind.
Charcoal Nights

Frances Kendziera

Inspired by Landscape 1977-79, Chuang Che

The expanse of sky was the color of charcoal
From it oozed the spectral moon’s rays
Beams of light danced upon the surface of the inky waters
Waves glided over the shore,
tenderly pulling the sand into its depths
There was nothing to be heard
but the consistent ripple of the sea

Every night was the same
When the moon reached its highest point in the cosmos,
the silence was disturbed.
Not by the occasional caw of a gull
or the sporadic creak of an elm,
but by the girl.

The girl who visited the shore every midnight without fail
as if it was her closest friend
She would stand in the water,
allowing the waves to caress her ankles
She’d stare with hollow, murky eyes into the horizon
and the ocean would send gusts of wind toward her,
as if blowing a kiss.
breaking up isn’t embarrassing
Kendall Hibbard
Inspired by Le Singe Dans le Palais Venetien, Françoise Gilot

In the beginning, I was upset, embarrassed, and ashamed when you left me.

It all seemed surreal, as if this past year was wasted.

But the first time someone asked me if we broke up, I thought I would be able to say: “We broke up, a mutual agreement,” not “they broke up with me.”

Then maybe no one would know I was crying, wishing, and reminiscing every night before my dreams swept me off of my feet, and released me from the pain of our new, well, my new reality.

I cannot remember when I started to realize; Feeling and being alone is not actually that bad.

Even though you didn’t love me back, that doesn’t mean my love was embarrassing, or something to be ashamed of; it just means my love isn’t for you.

For now, my love is reserved for me, and only me.
The church looks beautiful. But looks deceive.  
A place where you’re supposed to feel safe isn’t always safe.  
Eventually there will be a place where you feel safe and where you can be free to be yourself.  
You’ll never have to pretend to be someone you’re not.  
You might not always find that place right away and when you do find it.  
You’ll know right away.  
When you leave it will be hard but it will be worth it.  
Some will not go to where they find safety because they’re told that they are supposed to be safe where they are.  
But there will be a few that realize that that’s not how they truly feel.  
They will break free but at what cost.  
They will be told they’re not thinking straight, questioned if they’re in the right mind.  
Say that it’s so unlike them to act this way.  
The truth is that this is how they have always been, it’s who they truly are.  
They have never seen it because everytime you tried to show the real you, you were told that you can’t do that.  
You are constantly told how you should act and what you should believe is right and wrong.  
No room for you to find out what you think is right or wrong.  
No room for diversity.  
Everytime you try to figure out what you believe they shut you down.  
They tell me I should figure out what I want to do.  
But then I try to tell them what I want to do and they tell me I shouldn’t do that.  
They say we’re free to leave and we don’t have to do it if we don’t want to.  
but as soon as we try to stop they say that you shouldn’t do that.  
No, that’s wrong.  
They question why we want to stop.  
know the consequences if anyone does that right.  
Why would anyone want to deal with the consequences?  
Just wait a little while and see if you still want to stop.
Leaves sway on the branches of the leaning Ginkgo tree
Exposing its green leaves like a green firework that has just exploded
You can hear the familiar sound of the church bells ringing
The white building standing tall and proud throughout the village
Just like the Village’s tallest Elm

People perk at the sound of the church bells
A summoning call of God’s children to join him
And the joyous choir singing their sweet tunes that taste like honey
The church of the village, where the people sing free

The children in their Sunday clothes
Early morning service calling their names throughout the peaceful village
Sunday, the day of rest, the day to be with the Lord himself
The day where everyone doesn’t have to work, where everyone can kick their feet up and relax
In the evening they gather, potlucks with cheery music

Walking through the luscious courtyard full of life
With the trimmed bushes and a gravel path to the buildings
Friends gather along the pews
Good and bad news spreads through the people like wildfire
But the choir keeps singing their sweet tunes

Adults and children walking
up the wooden white steps.
The wooden white steps
that lead to the Father’s house.
The place where you can feel safe
and wanted by the Lord
With the joyous choir still singing without a care

Once more the bells ring
The choir still singing
The people enjoying

Ding-Dong Ding-Dong Ding-Dong
Throughout the village
From the church
The only church

The church of the village
The sweet sound of singing
The bells ringing
The Father’s arms open
for anyone and everyone
This is the Village church