

An impressionistic oil painting of a coastal scene. The sky is filled with soft, blended strokes of light blue, lavender, and pale yellow. Below, the sea is a vibrant turquoise, with white foam from waves crashing against dark, craggy rocks. The foreground shows more rocks and a sandy or pebbly shore, rendered with thick, textured brushstrokes in shades of brown, grey, and white. The overall style is expressive and atmospheric.

# EKPHRASIS

POEMS BY **CYNTHIA ROTH**

*A. T. 2015*



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DUSIE



EKPHRASIS

## SOMETHING LIKE STRENGTH

The noise began at a tender age. A silent hum  
circling my tattered asking, small embrace.  
Then love showed itself in snatches of light  
and dark elusive. I would stay, drive or run  
unceasing for a glimpse.

Today I have so much love my ears can  
hardly stand the sound of so many birds and bells.  
And that sad hum I left in the Channel Tunnel in 1994  
while the sea churned above that chalk  
to a rushing tone of sweet surprise

as I decided, at last, to have a child. Something like  
strength had entered my heart as I beheld each  
massive bronze sculpture of a woman,  
*The Six Continents*, in Paris the morning  
I finally got that I was love itself.

This is not small stuff, and neither was  
that moment I remembered your heart  
and voice saying yes, yes, use mine. I still  
sometimes imagine a world where we  
could freely walk to the hum of each other's content.

## LEAVING US BE

I predict this love will not survive  
the first frost. Nor will it outlast  
the first snow. Halloween is soon upon us  
and I doubt I will think of your arms  
at all once the leaves fall and the mums  
have been trampled by goblins and clowns.  
I believe our dreams of pleasure  
will retire to a closet nobody will open  
until the power goes out and a king decides  
three dogs are not enough for warmth.  
Desire will wane and die a quiet death,  
be buried frozen so deep in a forbidding forest  
not even a hungry wolf could dig it up until spring.  
Hikers, chancing upon the grave, will pause  
in the winter dusk, entranced by the size  
and scent of moon flowers covering the ground  
and climbing the trees. They will become so full  
of surprise they will dance our dances,  
sing our songs, make love until their light  
outshines that of the moon, their scent  
overpowers the fragrance of flowers.  
No, it cannot persist to bother us now.  
It is a creature of spring and summer, I hope.

What I am trying to say is this love is dressed  
for a journey, not a trip, but it's hard not to let  
all this talk of clothes remind me of you,  
undressing me. Or how happy I feel  
when I go for long hikes in December.  
It's okay. Tomorrow I will put my summer  
dresses away and hang the winter drapes,  
trade yellow linens for blue. And I am smiling  
at the thought of love going elsewhere, stealing  
other unsuspecting hearts, and leaving us be.



## EKPHRASIS

While I drove too fast toward the flashing  
lights of the river, you undressed a body  
so like the Vatican's *Colossus of the Nile*,  
I could not speak. I thought of Jesus  
and Caesar both, walking in the quarry  
of the men who carved that figure from stone.  
What can I tell you except what I know?  
Shoulders insouciant of their strength.  
Legs, a field upon which fat babies dance  
for rain and crocodiles sleep. How does it feel  
to be a playground for the known universe,  
if only for bites of time divided into slices  
by the unwelcome lights of passing cars? Only  
a sphinx could know the words *rough red wine*  
would make me pick you up in any weather heaven  
could muster. What force of nature are you?  
Where do you start and end and why on earth  
do I let you turn me around and push  
me down until I am that flood everybody  
prays for until it arrives, complete with bruises  
that surface all through the following week  
to remind me of you, reaching and pressing  
inside me, and how I pulled you to me too fast  
as though I were saving you from drowning.

## LE CITRON

The first time your smile caught me  
I knew I had fallen into a slim, rolling moment  
of imaginary vision I only reach through beauty's light:  
Manet's bare-breasted models painted wet into wet  
with obvious pleasure, the poetry of Neruda,  
the wind off the Tennessee River I breathe in  
while swimming parallel to its curving line.

The strong pull of your voice had me surprised,  
hamstrung, Charley-horsed into my longing,  
inside out for the lilac tint of your palms  
in lamplight, the mindful way you massaged  
my hip as we lingered in bed. The first time  
we kissed, some girl knocked at your window,  
wanting you. My hand

on the front doorknob, books and papers gathered up  
messy, fast, I heard you behind me whispering,  
*Come here*, and then your eyes, then a dry  
but darkly warm, full kiss - and I was gone.  
Driving home I remembered Joel Hanan,  
a boy I loved in high school who hurt me by keeping  
several girls on a string like cranberry garland.

I thought of the postcard he sent from Paris  
of Manet's *le Citron*. When I saw the painting  
years later in the Musee d'Orsay, I wrote in my notebook:

*Reproduction does not do justice to this work.*

It was an oil painting, the size of an open hand,  
of a large lemon on a dark saucer, framed in carved,  
gilded wood. It held a light like yours. A beauty  
I had thought only art or a river could possess:  
evidence of what is taken, what falls away.

## IN A DREAM OF TRANSLATION

Alice said to William while kneading dough,  
*I thought I'd give up the ghost before finding  
a man who, on his own accord, was drawn to touch  
my shoulder, hold my hand, thread my arm 'round his arm  
or hold me gently about my waist whilst walking us home  
on a cold winter night instead of rushing by.*

William had imagined all husbands loved this way, or would if they had known Alice, his mother's maid, in her youth. Her story, as always, gave William the phrase he had wanted, listened for. *Give up the ghost* was balanced in tone. Consonant, heavy, closed in the center, but moving toward an ethereal, lighter consonance, an open mouth. She had also given him

*Fashion not yourselves to the world. The spirit is willing.  
Fight the good fight.* She gave to him and was *The salt of the earth.* Like Paul borrowing from poets in his letters to the Greeks, William took from this woman her common, beautiful voice when translating Paul. He was banished for this work by every power except God.

In the suffering world and his hidden life abroad,  
the language of Alice made the simple wise just as the sun,

without effort, holds the earth in its orbit and your voice,  
on the line, gives me new courage. Unlike William I translate  
what I see. Like him, I let you thread your thoughts  
through mine though I interrupt too often.

When I finally decide to close my mouth  
a translation reveals itself in this country  
where your hand touches my shoulder  
and your arm finds mine: *Friendship is a refuge in my world.*  
Trying to remember each moment with you, I find this:  
*Your face and shoulders know the language of the sun.*

Cynthia Roth was born in Mississippi and grew up in Tennessee. For most of her adult life she has been a transplant in the Midwest where she earned MFA degrees in fine art and creative writing at SIU Carbondale. Honors include an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship in Poetry, semifinalist in the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition, a short film about her life and work produced by WTTW Chicago, and returning to her home state to discuss writing and experience delicious fried okra as a Tennessee Williams Scholar in Poetry at the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Her poems have been published in *Moxie*, *Word Riot*, *Poetry Midwest*, *Dogwood*, the *Pittsburgh Quarterly*, and other journals. She lives near the Shawnee National Forest and dreams of canoeing the Tennessee River with her husband, John Medwedeff, to whom this first chapbook is dedicated.

**Cover:** *Sea* by Ukrainian artist Pereta Vyacheslav (b. 1978);  
**Back Cover:** Letter written in 1535 by William Tyndale from his cell in the Vilvorde Prison, from **William Tyndale: A Biography**, by R. Demaus, New Edition, revised by Richard Lovett (London, 1886), p. 437;  
***The Colossus of the Nile***, likely a first century A.D. Roman copy of a Greek sculpture excavated in the 16th century.

The first edition of *Ekphrasis* consists of 60 copies signed by the author, of which 40 are not for sale. The font is “Verlag” from Hoefler & Frere-Jones, originally designed for the Guggenheim Museum. This chapbook was made possible by Susana Gardner of Dusie Press, who graciously brought me into the 2014 Chapbook Kollektiv.

