

# EKPHRASIS



**ISSUE NO.1**



# EKPHRASIS

Dear Reader,

With pleasure, we present the inaugural issue of Ekphrasis Magazine. Our intention for this issue was to foster conversation between artists across disciplines, fields, and media within the pages of a single publication. The formation of this magazine coincides with two endings: that of our undergraduate years and that of the decade. At this liminal interval, itself Janus-faced, we are thrilled to have found this collection of art that looks both outward and in, that is both intensely personal yet still holds the echo of common experience. We are honored to have been entrusted to share it with you.

In literary studies, the word “ekphrasis” has a very specific meaning. (We’ll spare you the Merriam-Webster entry.) Our broader approach intends not to diffuse the term’s meaning, but to dilate it at the intersection of literary and visual art. In the mythic imagination, the crossroads are a place where one can make a deal with the devil, or chance upon a stray god. We hope that Ekphrasis offers, if not the sacred or profane in their literal sense, an iteration of this crossroads.



With thanks,  
Jay, Hannah, & Michelle



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**Editorial Board** *Michelle Chow*  
*Hannah Link*  
*Jay Castro*

## *Last Mushroom of Cairo* . . . Ali Hassani

The first pangs of nausea began promptly at dawn on the second day of my visit. I stumbled, retching, out of the guest bedroom. I forgot where the bathroom was, and headed toward the living room. I looked out the floor-to-ceiling window and was overcome by the reflection of the rising sun on the Nile river, drenched with a blood-orange dye. I sat on my grandfather's sycamore rocking chair, hunched over, and found a moment to admire the river he bathed in as a child.

I vomited all over the window. It ruined my view. It was the *fattoush* salad from the night before. The tap water he used to rinse the balcony-grown cucumbers was not intended for my pampered insides. My grandmother knew better and only ever fed me cooked food.

I left my mess, walked back to bed, and slept better than I ever have in Cairo.

I wake up around midday. My bedroom has no windows, but I know the sun is still out because there is a bright strip of light coming in from under the door.

"*Giddo, fi shaay?*" Is there any tea?

No response. I put on my slippers and walk into the living room. My vomit, now dried, still obstructs my view of the Nile. The front door is open, and *Giddo* isn't home. I take the elevator, virtually unchanged since he moved into the building in 1958 with his bride, my *Teta*.

I find him bent over a patch of grass in the building courtyard. He senses my gaze, and, without confirming my presence, asks "*Habibi*, do you see that mushroom? It is, I know it, the last mushroom of Cairo."

I smile. "You're right, *Giddo*." He wrests it out of the ground and hands it to me. I don't chew it before I swallow.



*IF YOUR DESIRES CAN FIT IN THE BEAK OF A BIRD . . .* Aydan Shahd

I don't know what I do! My friend from faraway and I  
over breakfast, ravenous, decide we like goat cheese on toast more  
than making something of ourselves and more than anything  
we had thought we wanted. Butter soaking into pumpernickel.  
I had thought I wanted to spend my days writing love  
letters and books on Woolf, then I saw the silhouettes  
of bodies in my kitchen. Life, and a lover! I leave my bed at 3  
and bring him coffee.

Walking to the park, I see two sparrows sandbathing. I think,  
I must do something. I scratch futilely at the trunk of the oak.  
Before me I see years skating along the river of ice. A country house  
I once found unbearably lonely, I think I might like to hide there with him  
and invite the sparrows for lunch. Our dinner table made in the meadow.  
Do we dream broken hourglass and sand shower  
and old scurrying squealing things on our shoulder,  
or is there always fullness?

In the park the starling shrieks. Above me  
gleaming underbellies of airplanes  
in the sinking light, traceless.

*After Sebald . . .* Maya Sibul

Larisa was standing, with her back toward the glass door that lead onto the patio, peeling apples with a short blunt knife, and with each motion of her thumb—she was cradling the small orb in her left hand, wielding the utensil between her right thumb and pointer finger—would dig into the supple flesh of the fruit using her thumb to propel the blade and would jostle the knife until a section of apple tumbled into the ceramic bowl situated on the countertop. Then Erich approached the table where I sat in a hard plastic chair, handed me a plate with two pieces of charred toast, and went on to explain how he had nearly burned the slices but managed to salvage their remains, and now, in fact, they looked quite crisp and appetizing. The wide panoramic windows which opened onto the patio were suffused, in their purview, with the sprawling expanse of flat, manicured greenery which extended from just beyond the patio fence toward the miniature homes in the distance, the mountains whose various shapes and pigments contoured

the blue sky. It was in moments like these, after having awoken—remarkably late in the morning and without the incessant chirping of an alarm clock—that I felt the haziest, subsumed, as if still clutched by slumber, in the sensory details of the figures around me who ushered me gently into the kitchen and prepared for me my breakfast while I listened, mutely, to the muffled thrum of their voices, traced their penumbral shadows along the kitchen walls.



Whenever I spend the weekend at my Aunt Larisa and Uncle Erich's home—my cousins, Marti and Abe, either at university in Boston or else playing football away games in some neighboring city—I am stuck by the sensation that I, perhaps in a stratified time, existed amongst these strangers as if they were my own, as if they were indeed figures available to claim as my own. Then, of course, there are those succeeding moments in which I am certain I know nothing of their lives, a tenebrous idiocy that strikes me often as terribly mundane. If, when Erich sits beside me on the wicker rocking chair that borders the breakfast table, he reaches out to tussle the top of my bun, unruly from a night of dubious and fitful slumber, I consider the boundaries which exist between my body and his own, the thin ancestral filaments that persist, like gossamer, and which allow him to reach toward me without hesitation. As I've said, it is those same faint silhouettes of comprehension, perhaps insoluble, which sanction Larisa to kiss me each night, in my small bedroom off of the kitchen, with her diminished and furrowed lips, and feel a remote kindredness; I am the daughter of her sister, a beloved body in rhythm with her own; our bodies are not yet, and perhaps never will be, foreign to each other.





It is Larisa who tells me of my grandfather Uziel and of my grandmother Shifra, who, upon their arrival in Cleveland from Tel Aviv purchased an unassuming brick house with a yard and a narrow driveway in Elkdale Court—Shifra, plump, expecting Larisa, and my mother just a squat toddler. Lisi, Lisi, your mother would say, Larisa tells me now as she gathers the apple wedges and begins dropping them into a plastic blender which bears, at its bottom, a broad four-pronged blade gleaming dully in the brilliant sunlight. Later, the kids at school started calling me Lisi, Larisa tells me, I hated it because it seemed too cutesy, insubstantial, but it stuck. Our Doda Alma came often to help on the weekends, Larisa says. There was one weekend, I was young, but I just barely remember a trip to a distant acquaintance's pool, a family who had recently moved from Herzliya and settled outside of Cleveland, and I distinctly recall the sensation of being fetched from my seat in the car, like a compact piece of luggage, by my father, not the type predisposed to sensitivity, hoisted up the driveway on his broad shoulders and carried into the yard where he positioned me, not quite artfully, on a slotted pool chair with metal arms and legs. Lisi, Lisi, your mother was calling, Larisa laughs and tosses her hair back behind her bony shoulders gaily, looking toward me for some indication of contentedness. Your mother thought I had been taken away from her, she clung to our mother's back and refused to let go. Our mother fussed over me while our father took photos. Larisa smiles, and returns to the apples wedges contained within the blender, turning her back toward me for a moment to nudge the switch on the electric kettle where the water begins to simmer. I try to imagine my aunt, then, as she had been many years before, a baby sheltered in some adult's robust forearms, slung over the crest of their shoulder, propped, perhaps in the tender navel space between hipbone and ribcage, and I experience a sensation akin to heartbreak at the realiza-

tion that this woman before me, perennial, but nonetheless solely extant in the present, is the second child frozen in every image of my mother in her youth, in the storied mementos stranded in some nook or cubbyhole, perhaps forgotten in a tin box upon some shelf in my grandfather's closet. It seems to me that such photographs, when they surface, if they surface, seem to rise perpetually, like a diaphanous mist, from the depths of our residences, those hopeful abodes of our souls. In dark handwriting on the back of a photograph of my grandparents sitting outside, dressed in white, looking somewhat terse or troubled, are the names, *Uzi and Shifra*, alongside the date, *1971*, and the location, *Cleveland, Ohio*, like some remnant of a past disinterred. I sense the cool vexation in my grandmother's gaze; she stares downward at her arms which are spread across the table with her fingers neatly folded together, and I feel, stirring within myself, a certain distress, as if I were not entirely trusting of my own eyes.

*excerpt from: A History of Glitter . . . Adam Glusker*

there were other glitter dreams, ones where i'd drag the dull knife across my waistline, make a big circle up to my chest and back down again. the thing that protruded: gone. out poured red glitter covering the white tile bellow my feet, a hole a foot in circumference where my stomach should be, but no blood, no liquid at all in fact. finally! a straight line from my collar bones to my toes. i jacked off in the mirror, looking straight at the hole, used the glitter on the floor as lube. i came and i filled the hole back up, made the hole whole again, my skin healed as i let the glitter seep into my pores.

we guild ourselves with glitter and roaches equally  
for the crunch of exoskeleton and plastic foil  
produces the same sonic effect  
in tandem with the bass already shattering our ear drums.

blood is actually blue or purple before it makes contact with the air and oxidizes. maybe faggot blood is different, maybe it sparkles until the air sucks the life out of it. maybe that's why the red cross still won't let us donate blood. maybe the aids virus is a spec of glitter that multiplies. maybe patient zero saw a piece of glitter on the ground and picked it up, placed it on his tongue like ecstasy, and was enchanted with divine illness that turned everything inside out.



*excerpt from: Sugarplum . . .* Courtney Eileen Fulcher

I had physical therapy three times a week on the Upper West Side and I found a job through another of the apprentices as a living mannequin in the Garment District that was twice a week. I would stand and people would drape cloth over me. How does the sleeve feel? Can you move your arm more? I didn't feel like I knew enough about tailoring to be any use to anyone. I would look up what they said on the subway back. My days were empty. I would lie in my bed and prop my legs against the wall and just stare at the little Degas copy I had, a fourteenth birthday present from my parents. The woman at the Met gift shop who sold it to us said that the model was one of dozens of poor girls who hung on the margins of the Paris Opera. *Petits rats*, they used to call them. At that age I had secretly thought the statue very erotic in its self-possession, but now it seemed so cruel that Degas would cast this young girl who would never grow up to be a ballerina in bronze, her mistaken belief visible forever.

*natural order* . . . Emily Robinson

You're not going to tell me that the ponds of water not yet drained from the street aren't natural. You're not going to tell me that everything we humans do is unnatural. I'm sorry we're a species dead set on self-destruction. I don't know how to help you. It's human not to live in a beaver's borough. It's natural for us to make and make and want and want and crave the excess. It's in our nature to categorize and discriminate, that's how we learn 1 from 2, red from blue. It's in our nature to use and use what's in our nature to abuse and excuse our behavior from the realm of balance. We like being colonizers. We like thinking we're the smarter ones taking everything, but it's okay. It's really okay. Don't worry so much. Humanity's fucked. But because it's natural for us, it's in our nature to fuck it up— in nature, if it's not in your nature to adapt to her, then you wind up dead in the end. But she'll be fine, Nature. Her nature's survival.





*excerpt from:*

***“Missed Connections”***: *Six Craigslist Poems . . .* Thomas Wee

***The cab that almost hit you on Market***

It was early afternoon on Saturday you were on your bike on Market Street  
and completely unaware that you were facing oncoming traffic  
particularly the speeding cab I was riding in  
The driver skidded to a stop,  
and you apologized to him with a sheepish smile.  
I was glad to get a closer look at you.  
Want to join me for a (less life-threatening) bike ride sometime?

\* \* \*

***Laila***

Lets both get divorced and marry each other again.  
I miss you  
and me.  
And I'm not the only one.



*Child's Plaything* . . . Alex White

**Woody:** YOU. ARE. A. TOY!

**Buzz:** I can fly you dummy, I'm no toy.

**Walt D:** Cut! Do it again, but this time make it sassy.

**Woody breaks into tears.**

**Woody:** When can we stop, partner?

**Buzz:** Walt, my daughter is going to graduate from high school without me.

Walt D laughs.

**Walt D:** Fellas, fellas, fellas, fellas, fellas. Read your contracts again. We're gonna keep making these movies til your bodies break down, or til the US collapses under its piling debt. Whichever comes first. Or last. Whatever, the point is, I'm keeping you here.

**Buzz:** This is ridiculous. I oughtta vaporize you with my space laser.

**Walt D:** Ha. But you can't, now can you Buzz? Because you're a TOY!

**Buzz:** I can fly you dummy, I'm no toy. Look at my wings you dummy.

**Woody:** \*sigh\* Yee haw. :/

**Walt D:** Fellas, fellas, fellas. Let's get going, time's a wastin'. Are we still rolling? Great. Action!

**Music begins. Woody trudges to center stage. Spot on Woody. Woody has the voice of an angel but sings with the tone of someone who hasn't seen the light of day in years.**

**Woody:** Country girl shake it for me, girl. Shake it for me, girl. Shake it for me.

**Buzz joins Woody in center stage.**

**Buzz & Woody:** Country girl shake it for me, girl. Shake it for me, girl. Shake it for me.

**Enter Sid the kid, you know, the one that liked to hurt toys, that one, not to be confused with the kid named Sid from the PBS television show Sid the Kid.**

**Sid:** Grandfather's clock is in the meadow. Lord have mercy, where did my head go? I was young, now I'm old, my soul is sold...Thought I was rich... but was it fool's gold?

**Woody & Buzz & Sid:** Country girl, won't you shake it for me before I lose myself.

**Lights up. Walt Disney didn't like the song.**

**Walt D:** Hey fellas. The honky-tonk is cancelled. I think I might slice you up with a butcher's knife and put you in a person-sized microwave. I might add paprika for seasoning. Oregano for garnish. And then feed your flesh to my hounds with a side of horseradish. And that's no joke. Toy Story 5 is over, and you're all fucking dead.

**Slinky Dog enters sipping Starbucks, with an eye-patch and a wizard hat, riding Bullseye.**

**Slinky Dog:** Hey *fellas*, what did I miss?

**Play silly cartoon sound effects and the applause of a studio audience.**

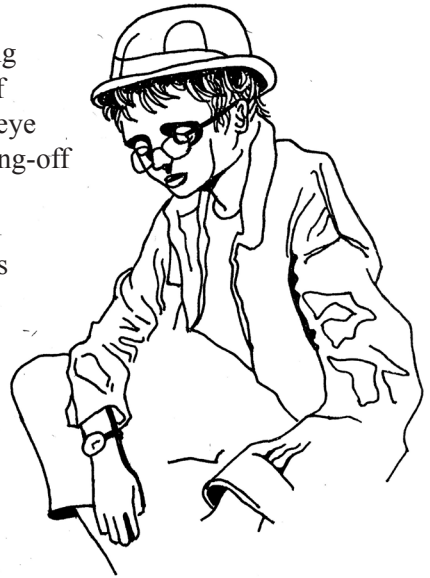
**Blackout.**





## *Ghouls in Numbers . . . Yi Wu*

A dash, the dashing of a spectral howl  
like when one swipes his tongue, shining  
full of pulverized diamonds snapped off  
from wedding rings, against your right eye  
so you may not sight where the branching-off  
occurs, where division of phases lies  
easier. The taste of finely sliced lips  
doused with high-purity jet fuel requires  
repeated assaults on the exit routes  
from our well-guarded cemetery



## *InfiniteLoop.java . . . Sal Volpe*

```
//InfiniteLoop
//@author sapph0
while (myLoveForYouTranscendsTheCosmos)
{
you = theOnlyOneWhomICanComeToCherish;
for (yourBeauty = unmeasureable; I < you; you +
me)
{
if (iMustWaitOneMoreMoment)
break;
if (youAcceptMyProposal)
continue;
```







