

I like to write about art, not to describe it but to try to make the work say something in my own voice. This way of responding to art is called ekphrasis. The following is based on the introduction to my book *Art for Poetry's Sake*:

A poem I wish I had known during my teaching career is Jarold Ramsey's beautiful "Running West," written for Asher Brown Durand's 1860 painting "Genesee Oaks." "Running West" is from Ramsey's book *Thinking Like a Canyon* (Antrim House, copyrighted 2012). He has generously allowed me to use excerpts from the poem here.

Ramsey, a small-town boy from Central Oregon, (I have known Jerry since high school. (He was a Madras High School White Buffalo, I was a Bend High School Lava Bear.) He earned a BA from the University of Oregon and a Ph. D. from the University of Washington. Then he and his wife, Dorothy, turned their faces east to Rochester, New York, where for many years he was a member of the English faculty at the University of Rochester and the director of the Plutzik Memorial Poetry Series. The transition from the Oregon high desert to Rochester was not easy at first. One homesick day, Ramsey happened upon Durand's painting, whose "giant but kindly oaks" began a healing process. Looking further into the painting, Ramsey was inspired to evaluate his changed situation. He begins the second stanza:

*I began to see where I really was,
a different earth under my feet, a different
sky over my head, but becoming home.*

The second section of the poem is a retrospective as Ramsey revisits the painting on his way back west at the end of his teaching career. Here the poet invites the painter to come along on a journey through the painting.

*Now, a quarter-century later, steeling
myself to move on with little rituals
of goodbye like this one, I come back to your masterpiece.
It is nearly June again, and I discover
I am nearly the age you were when you painted these oaks.
Fancy that, old friend! What if now we
snatched up some of your foreground burdock,
the Seneca remedy for aches and pains,
and just galloped together into this scene you've painted,
past the man with the pole or gun on his shoulder,
past the interested cows, past the great trees themselves,
and pell mell down the irresistible
grassy slope to the river, which we skitter
across like those water-walking lizards of Borneo,
and on, you and I, running easily,
to be last seen approaching
some far painterly vanishing point,
still running west?*

“Genesee Oaks” offered Ramsey the perfect opportunity to send his voice out through an image. The point of ekphrasis is not to explain the art to the viewer or to get the viewer to change his mind about what he sees. The ekphrastic poet is not saying “understand the artist,” but “understand me.” Should the writing cause the viewer to see something new in the image, the

revelation would only be a by-product. It is interesting, though, to consider that Asher Brown Durand, had he been around to hear Ramsey's poem, might have seen a new way to appreciate his own work, for Ramsey has taken him by the hand so they might run together through the landscape and

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