

# Awakening the Heart



# Awakening the Heart

TEACHING POETRY K-8

Second Edition

Georgia Heard

HEINEMANN • Portsmouth, NH

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit <http://heinemann.com/products/E17132.aspx>

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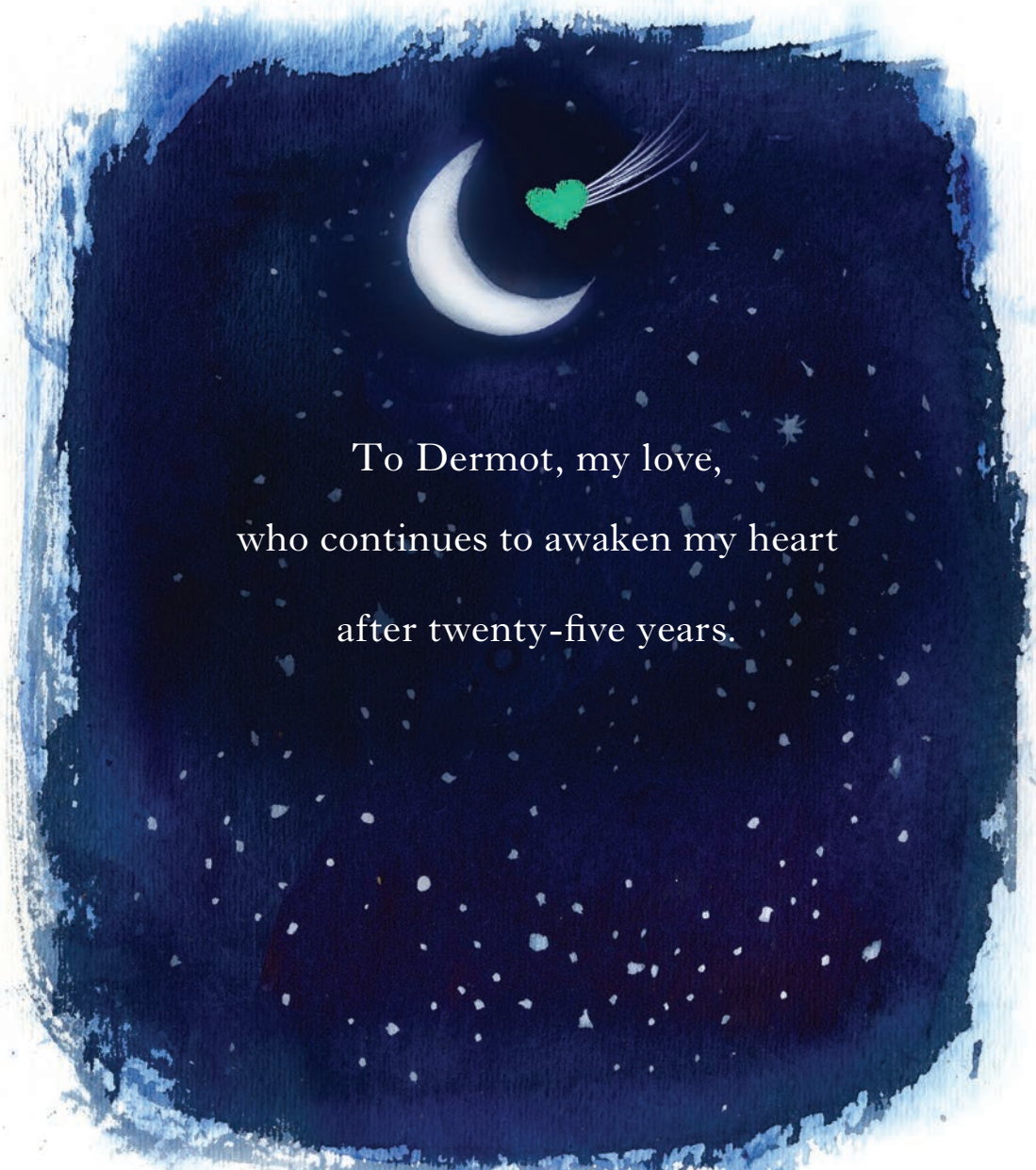
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A watercolor illustration of a night sky. The background is a dark, textured blue and black, representing the night sky. A white crescent moon is positioned in the upper left quadrant. A bright green shooting star with several white trails is located in the upper right quadrant. The lower half of the image is filled with numerous small, white, irregular shapes representing stars. The entire illustration is framed by a rough, white, brushstroke-like border.

To Dermot, my love,  
who continues to awaken my heart  
after twenty-five years.



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## To access the Online Prompts and Resources for *Awakening the Heart*, Second Edition:

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2. Log in with your username and password. If you do not already have an account with Heinemann, you will need to create an account.
3. On the Welcome page, choose “**Click here to register an Online Resource.**”
4. Register your product by entering the code **LIGHT** (be sure to read and check the acknowledgment box under the keycode).
5. Once you have registered your product, it will appear alphabetically in your account list under “**My Online Resources.**”

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## Introduction

Poetry can do many things: it can help us feel less alone; it can shake the dust off the stale and the stereotyped; it can help us make sense of the world; it can beckon us to look in the mirror and see our truth inside; it can provoke and evoke and connect us; it can inspire compassion for others. Elizabeth Alexander said, “Do we want to know each other? [Poetry reaches] across what can be a huge void between human beings” (2016).

In the past decade, the prominence of high-stakes, high-stress testing has swept poetry further into the corners of the classroom. But when the pandemic hit, the importance of building empathy and focusing on social–emotional learning became acutely clear. Attending to children’s hearts and humanity is as important now as it has ever been.

Joy Harjo, the twenty-third United States poet laureate, writes, “We use poetry to mark transformations. . . . Poetry can be useful for praise and even help deter a storm. Or poetry is a tool to uncover the miraculous in the ordinary” (n.d.). At some point in our lives, whether curled up quietly on a couch during pandemic lockdown, or gathered with friends and family at a wedding or funeral, many of us have had the experience of transformation that Joy Harjo refers to: reading or listening to a poem that touched us, took our breath away, made us weep—affected us in some way that was deep and inexplicable. How does a poem do this?

Finding a poem that stirs us is like meeting a convergence of words humming the same tune as our hearts. The poem whispers, *I know you*. It recognizes us. And in this recognition, we also acknowledge something forgotten in ourselves. Our circle gets wider and connects us to those we know and those we’ve never met. It awakens something that may have been frozen inside us. It helps us remember ourselves.

Poetry is not something to find only in April. Poetry is not a phonics worksheet exercise where children circle the double *e* and long *o* sounds. Poetry resists being corralled by reading-test questions. It's the way we speak to our loved ones every day and night: when you tuck your children into bed; the first words you say to your spouse or partner when you wake up in the morning; the intimacy of your voice when having a cup of coffee with an old friend. When we speak in a voice that's exclusively ours, that's natural, when we're not trying to be anything other than ourselves, that's the stuff of poetry.

We need poetry now more than ever. Not just during times of grief and heartache but every day. Poetry is a gift we can use to help us live in deep, knowing, and authentic ways. It is the doorway into literacy for so many children and a pathway to knowing how we feel, learning about who we are, and connecting with others and the larger world.

In an interview with poet Gregory Orr, my teacher Stanley Kunitz was asked about the purpose of poetry (HoCoPoLitSo 2012). He answered, "Poetry is mostly deeply concerned with telling us what it feels like to be alive. Alive at any given moment. In fact, if we go back historically if we want to know how people felt, how they lived, how they responded to experience, we have to turn to the poets of the past. . . . And they were the first, and they still are I think, the most intimate relators of what it means to be a living person on this earth."

In a virtual poetry workshop at the beginning of the pandemic, I invited fifth-grade poets from St. Luke's School in Connecticut to look around their world with a poet's eyes. Seeing the world with a poet's eyes and a poet's heart is not about finding a topic for a haiku—it's about polishing the film of familiarity and approaching life with a "wide-awakeness," as Maxine Greene described it. "Wide-awakeness," according to Greene, is "the ability to think about yourself, to reflect on your life. . . . It comes through being alive, awake, curious, and often furious" (1977).

Reading and writing poetry invites this wide-awakeness. It gives students the space to engage their true selves, express their feelings; it's a record of their creativity and their limitless imaginations. Poetry shimmered all around the fifth-grade poets I worked with, despite being stuck at home in the midst of the pandemic. Here is a collage of where they said they found poetry:

- "things that sing a deeper history"
- doorknobs—"Doorknobs are like poems. They've been touched by so many hands."
- "puzzles because there are so many different ways things can connect but you don't know how until you look at the picture"
- "the moon"
- "sweet laughter"
- "sadness"

During the past twenty-plus years since I wrote the first edition of *Awakening the Heart*, I have seen the transformational power of poetry. I've experienced it in my own life, and I've seen it in schools in almost every state in the United States and around the world—from farm schools in Iowa to the classrooms of New York City to international schools in Jakarta and Bangkok. I've crouched next to a six-year-old girl who closed her eyes and sang her sweet poem to me: “The sky is an angel’s pool. / God is their lifeguard.” I've witnessed the ways poetry can help children express grief about the loss of loved ones. I've listened to teenagers just released from prison read their poems aloud, thirsty to tell the “stories of their souls.” I've sat beside a kindergarten boy who looked out at his fellow six-year-old poets and read his eco poem: “There is only / One insect / One bird / One tree and / One Planet.” After a moment of silence, he said, “Think about it.” And we promised that we would.

So how do we teach poetry? I'm not even sure that *teach* is the right word. Maybe the question should be instead, how do we *infuse* poetry into our classrooms? How can we be sensitive to and supportive of children's natural poetic sensibilities? How do we create safe spaces for vulnerability, for students to share their interior lives? How do we create a poetry environment—a space either physical or virtual—that encourages expression and creativity, that supports equity and inclusion, and that respects and honors each student's unique perspective?

This new edition of *Awakening the Heart* stands on the shoulders of the original edition. The book was and still is a road map that includes many ways to infuse poetry in the everyday life of the classroom throughout the year. The world has changed drastically since the first edition, and so has my own life. But poetry has been my constant companion and, at times, a means of survival as well as a path toward thriving; it permeates the way I view the world. The children I have taught have helped me see that the real lessons poetry teaches are much larger than counting five, seven, five on our fingers or thinking of the best rhyming word for *moon*. The real lessons poetry can teach are life lessons. They are the foundation of both editions of *Awakening the Heart*. Each chapter in this book, from setting up a poetry environment to teaching craft, reflects these life lessons.

One of the most important life lessons that writing and reading poetry can teach our students is how to reach into and honor their well of feelings—their emotional lives—like no other form of writing can. Poetry, by its very nature, teaches emotional literacy.

My goal in teaching poetry is to share what it means to live and see the world as a poet does. What *does* it mean to see the world like a poet? Here are some of my thoughts. Interestingly enough, young children often share some of these perceptions.

## Seeing the World Like a Poet

Poets . . .

**Observe small moments around us.** Poetry is interested not in telling the whole story but rather in freeze-framing a small moment and then opening up that moment so we can observe it as if for the first time.

**Find poetry everywhere.** We see it not just in the typically poetic things like sunsets and flowers (although there is definitely poetry there) but also in fire hydrants and taxicabs lined up on Broadway—in the small and ordinary. Recently, I read a gorgeous poem by Ross Gay called “Ode to Buttoning and Unbuttoning My Shirt”!

**Are curious and filled with wonder.** I would say that at least half of all poems are inspired by what we’re curious about, the questions we have—not just the ones we can find answers to but the ones that are unanswerable and invite contemplation.

**Look at the world in new ways.** This is what metaphor and simile do for us: they take the film of familiarity off our everyday world. Metaphor and simile are natural for children—they think in associations and playful imaginative leaps.

**Fall in love with words.** Poets fall in love with both the meaning and the sound of words. In a fourth-grade class, a young poet used the phrase *glory clouds*, a wonderfully surprising way to describe clouds. What if she had used the grammatically correct term, *glorious*, instead? Listen to the difference poetically between *glory clouds* and *glorious clouds*. I understand the need to teach grammar, but in writing poetry, poets sometimes bend the rules in order to express something truer and more surprising.

**Pay attention to all of our feelings,** not just the happy ones.

**Don’t wait until National Poetry Month** to read and write poetry. Poets find poems every day.

Given the demands on teachers’ time, how do we infuse poetry into the everyday life of the classroom? How can we grow poetry slowly throughout the year so students’ experience with, appreciation for, and love of poetry can deepen and expand over time? How can poetry be not just another three- to four-week genre study but a continuous experience? I hope this new edition of *Awakening the Heart* provides some answers—and inspires even more questions.

## PROMPT 11

### Ekphrastic Poems *Art Transformed*

Poetry and art have always been deeply connected; they both awaken and uplift us, help us see beyond our ordinary perceptions, and show us beauty and possibility. The practice of reflecting on a piece of art through poetry enriches both the experience of the art portrayed and the poem. Ekphrastic poetry is an ancient poetic form; an early example is found in Homer's epic poem *The Iliad* (1951), where the speaker vividly describes the beauty of Achilles' shield. Ekphrastic poems often include not only a vivid description of the art but a reflection and commentary on how the speaker is impacted by the art. Some poets weave narratives that go beyond the frame and perspective of the art itself. Including ekphrastic poetry in the classroom can open up the world of art to students but also nurture imaginative connections.

## How to Teach Ekphrastic Poems

### Marinating



When teaching ekphrastic poems, first show and discuss with students a variety of mentor poems (see **Online Resource i-1**).

During a virtual visit to Elaine Juran's fifth-grade classes at St. Luke's School, I introduced a quilt block by Anna Grossnickle Hines from her book *Pieces: A Year in Poems and Quilts* (2003). The quilt shows a crow with wings outstretched, poised to land on a branch. It is stitched onto a cream background imprinted with graceful curving lines. After a thoughtful discussion about what they noticed about the quilt, fifth-grade students embarked on a collaborative journey to create some ekphrastic poems together to prepare for crafting their own individual ekphrastic poems.

#### Quilt Bird

Little bird  
on a tree  
above the clouds  
flying  
captured in a single frame

## The Landing

Soft like a bird's feather.

Wavy like a bird's wing.

Dark as a raven.

As light as the summer evening

Coming home.

After the fifth graders wrote their collaborative poems, we read Anna Grossnickle Hines' poem, and we compared their versions with hers.

Hines' poem beautifully captures the slow-motion landing of a bird on a branch. Comparing the poems allowed us to appreciate the different interpretations and creative voices.

Another mentor text we considered was Edward Hopper's 1930s oil painting *Early Sunday Morning*, one of his most well-known, which depicts a lonely early morning scene of closed shops on a quiet city street and a row of apartments above with windows and shades half closed. Then we read and discussed part of Dan Masterson's poem titled also "Early Sunday Morning" (2001), which appears in *Heart to Heart: New Poems Inspired by Twentieth-Century American Art*, edited by Jan Greenberg. What we admired most about Masterson's poem is how it extends beyond the four corners of the painting as the speaker in the poem tells a story, in the voice of a boy, of life with his brother inside one of the apartments depicted in the painting and then outside on a hot summer night as they climb to the roof of the building. His poem conjures a world outside and beyond the dimensions of Hopper's art.

## Brainstorming

When introducing ekphrastic poetry to students, I select artwork that is easily accessible on the internet. I look for pieces that are compelling and can be understood without extensive background or historical knowledge. If your class is exploring a specific historical, social, or cultural theme, it's wonderful to include art from that time period. This allows students to engage in ekphrastic poetry as part of their study. For instance, when discussing Edward Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning* (which was created in 1930), I briefly mentioned to the students its historical context related to the Great Depression and the approaching Second World War (in 1939). While time constraints limited an in-depth discussion, acknowledging these historical factors contributed to a more complete understanding of the painting.

Expose students to a wide range of artists, styles, forms of art, and time periods. Ekphrastic poems can be about any kind of art—painting, drawing, sculpture, photograph, fabric art, object, statue, building, installation, and even music, for example.

By exploring these different types of art, we expand students' knowledge and understanding of the diverse artistic expressions found in the world. Following is a brief list of art that's accessible online. However, I'm sure you'll find others as well, and you can even encourage students to find their own artwork. Giving them a choice of more than one piece of art to write an ekphrastic poem about will provide them with a sense of ownership in their writing process.

### **Art for Ekphrastic Poems**

*Infinity Mirrored Room—the Souls of Millions of Light Years Away* (installation), by Yayoi Kusama

*The Thunderstorm* (painting), by Grandma Moses

Any of the Water Lilies series (paintings), by Claude Monet

*Can Fire in the Park* (painting), by Beauford Delaney

Any quilt by Lucy Mingo of Gee's Bend, Alabama

*Young Queen of Ethiopia* (sculpture), by James W. Washington Jr.

### **Art Rooted in Historical Events**

*Walking* (painting), by Charles Henry Alston (inspired by the Montgomery Bus Boycott)

Lewis Hine's child labor photographs

Taj Mahal (building), by Ustad-Ahmad Lahori (chief architect)

Statue of Liberty, designed by Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi

You might also curate a collection of postcards featuring artwork from various museums. Provide students with the opportunity to choose a piece of art that resonates with them personally as the inspiration for their ekphrastic poem.

One of the best ways to write ekphrastic poems is by visiting art in person, so if your school is located near a museum of art or a town center with statues, interesting historical buildings, or sculptures, see if you can take students to view it. If you're able to do this, encourage students to choose an artwork and observe it, paying attention to the details, colors, textures, and emotions it evokes. They can take notes, sketch, or capture photographs to use as references later on.

Once back in the classroom, give students time to reflect. Ask them to recall specific details that stood out to them. Invite them to express their thoughts and interpretations through writing an ekphrastic poem using descriptive language, metaphors, and personal reflections.

If a physical field trip is not possible, consider using virtual museum tours or online galleries to give students a similar opportunity to explore and engage with art remotely. By incorporating field trips or virtual art experiences into your ekphrastic poetry lessons, you expose students to diverse forms of art and encourage them to find inspiration in the world around them.

## Craft Lessons and Writing

When guiding your students in writing their own ekphrastic poems, there are several tips you might give them. First, remind them to include their own personal reaction and feelings toward the art. Encourage them to reflect on how the artwork speaks to them and to express their emotional response. Guide them in describing the colors, images, actions, and overall tone or feeling of the artwork. Invite them to try to capture the essence of the art through their words. And, as always, remind them to incorporate vivid imagery, metaphors, similes, and other poetic craft to describe the artwork—that is, to paint a verbal picture.

Beyond that, they could try any of these techniques in their poem:

- **Expand the boundaries:** Students can move beyond the confines of the frame or scope of the art, exploring the unseen and imagining what lies inside, behind, or beyond the artwork. Encourage them to tell a story that expands on the narrative suggested by the art or takes it in a new direction.
- **Give voice to characters or objects:** Students can try imagining the perspective of someone or something within the art itself. What would they say if they could speak? This could include giving voice to a figure in a painting, to a sculpture, or even to the art itself. This adds a different dimension to the poem and allows for creative storytelling.
- **Channel the artist:** Invite students to write from the voice of the artist. Encourage them to imagine the artist's thoughts, intentions, or emotions behind the artwork.
- **Pose questions:** Students might ask questions about the artwork and the artist. Questions can spark curiosity and lead to deeper exploration of the art's meaning, symbolism, or historical context.



Finally, remind students that it's important to provide the title and artist's name somewhere on their ekphrastic poems. However, they can create a unique title for their poem that differs from the title of the original artwork.

## Poetry Showcase

To introduce the writing of ekphrastic poems to fifth-grade students in St. Luke's School, I carefully chose two art pieces: Vincent van Gogh's timeless painting *Starry Night* and a photograph of Yayoi Kusama's sculpture *Flowers That Bloom at Midnight* displayed in the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris. The majority of students were drawn to writing poems about van Gogh's iconic masterpiece, while a few were captivated by Kusama's sculpture. Witnessing their first attempts at ekphrastic poetry was truly inspiring.

Amelia wrote from the perspective of van Gogh himself as he gazes out of his window and finds inspiration for his *Starry Night*. Her inclusion of van Gogh's close brother, Theo, adds a personal touch to her poem (see Figure II-31).

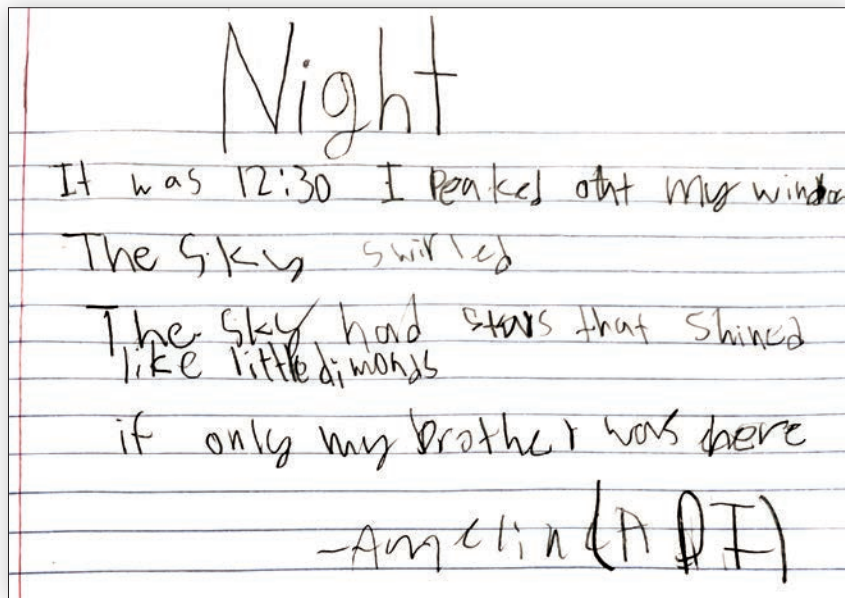


Figure II-31

Cici wrote “The Hazy Glow of Starry Night,” which blends an ekphrastic poem and a persona poem and explores the inner workings of the artist’s mind and how he might have been inspired to paint his famous painting.

## The Hazy Glow of Starry Night

*painting by Vincent Van Gogh*

I am laying in bed  
wide awake. No sudden movements  
until I break.  
I need to see the starry night,  
the haze in the air,  
the whisper in the breeze.  
You might say if I were you  
I would be fast asleep.  
But wait one second for you  
haven’t seen beyond the horizon  
where farmers farm  
and animals talk.  
In my mind  
I climb the highest mountain  
to see every night  
every light in my town  
flick off.  
Then the stars turn on brights  
and lead my mind with lights.  
All the colors all the night  
feeds me my dream.  
Now I’m floating in space  
the real world is behind me.

In her poem, Sophia combines a vivid depiction of the painting with an imagined small town beneath the starry sky (see Figure II–32).

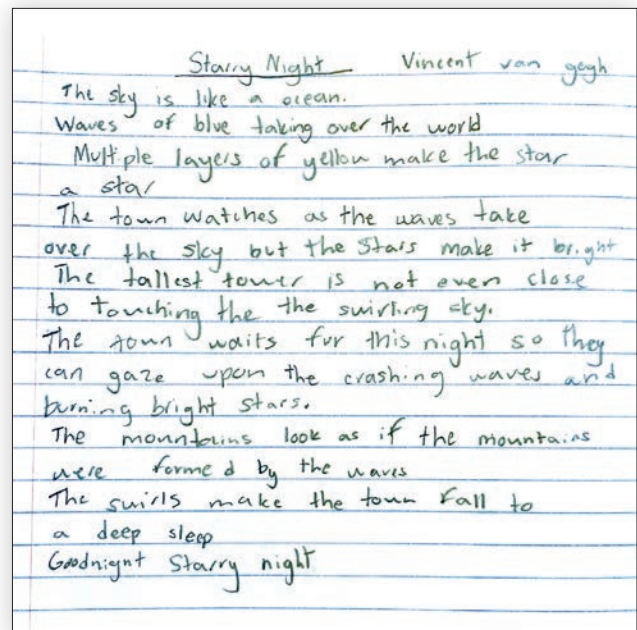


Figure II-32

And in this poem, Grady uses imagery to draw readers into the beautiful world of *Starry Night*:

### Stars Shining

Stars  
shining in the sky  
while the wind  
howls through the air.  
Churches point  
touching the yellow sky  
while the moon stares  
on the town.  
Houses light up  
making the town  
come alive.

Above the rest  
cypress trees  
guards  
protects  
connecting the earth  
to the heavens  
protecting the town  
with its mighty  
branches.  
Stars shining.

Will's ekphrastic poem, about Yayoi Kusama's *Flowers That Bloom at Midnight*, is written from the perspective of someone viewing the sculpture in the park and also captures the remarkable essence of the sculpture (see Figure II-33).

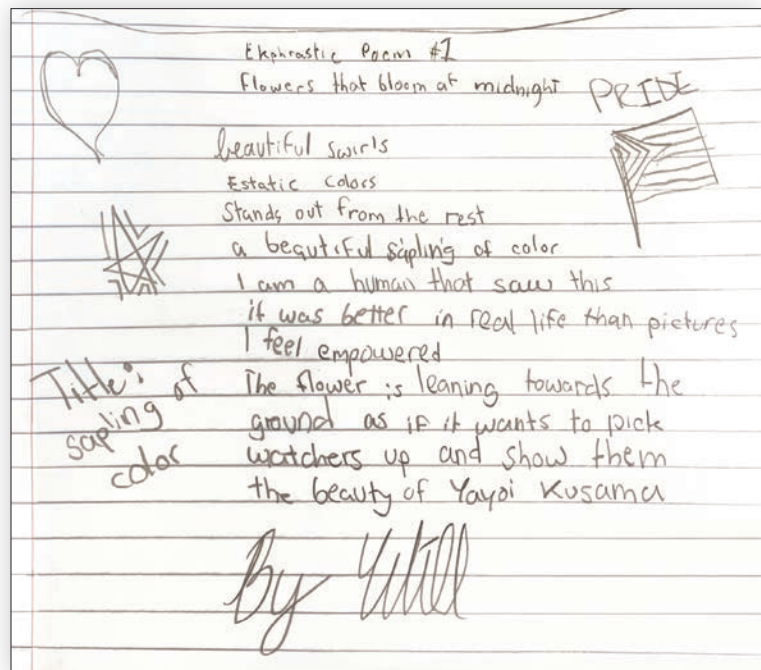


Figure II-33