

Creativity is for everyone

When it came time...

for Martha Skogen to visually articulate her poetry, there was only one option: children.

This book represents a unique collaboration between a writer of minimalistic poetry and children from grades 1-9. The result is a reversal of the normal roles called "reverse Ekphrasis".

The Glass Tree is a beautiful demonstration of how adults and children can work together. It also shows the astonishing capacity of children to use their artistic creativity to interpret the world as it is seen through the eyes of a poet.

THE
GLASS TREE

Martha Skogen

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Skogen

Poems for
everyone—
Artwork by
children

THE
GLASS TREE

Foreword by Jon Davis



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GLASS TREE

© Martha Skogen, PhD
Artwork by children of Trondheim International School (THIS)
Designed by Martha Skogen
Trondheim, Norway.
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For
you and your creativity

So much of ourselves
Hailed by no coincidence
Reach into deep earth

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Ekphrasis & Reverse Ekphrasis

I have often claimed that poetry is closer in spirit to painting than it is to other forms of writing. The poet's sensitivity to nuance and shades of meaning, to the shape of the poem on the page and the synesthetic sense of language's pallet—the pure primary colors of the open vowel and the crisp consonant, the secondary and tertiary colors of the diphthong, the hiatus, and the digraph— all reinforce this sense. It's no surprise, then, that poets have associated with painters and sculptors throughout history, that they have written extensively about painters and painting, visited their studios, curated exhibitions, and staffed major art journals. It's no surprise either that there is a category of poetry called “ekphrastic” poetry that responds to visual art.

Among Europeans, the Roman poet Horace (65-8 B.C.) first drew attention to the descriptive nature of poetry and its kinship to the visual arts in his *Epistles*, when he made a comparison between the two arts by introducing the Latin phrase *ut pictura poesis*, “like a picture [is] poetry.” The Greek poet Homer had already written the first long description of a work of art (an intricately imagined shield) in the *Iliad*.

Among works in the European traditions, passages describing artworks also appeared in the long poems of Dante and Spenser, though probably John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is best known of pre-twentieth century ekphrastic poems. Among the best known ekphrastic poems of the twentieth century is Rainer Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo." In both Keats' poem and Rilke's, one feels the poet's intense need to respond to the particular work of art before them. The poets did not intend to interpret the artworks on their own terms but, instead, explored their personal lives in relation to the work of art. "In most contemporary [ekphrastic] poems," according to the American poet Alfred Corn, "description of the original work remains partial, but authors add to it aspects drawn from their own experience—the facts, reflections, and feelings that arise at the confluence of a work of visual art and the life of the poet."

The ekphrastic poem has become a staple of the contemporary poetry workshop. Many workshops even begin with an ekphrastic exercise as a way to encourage beginning poets to ground their poems in detail, a task made easier when the details are floating in front of you as you write. There are even American poetry journals called Ekphrasis and The Ekphrastic Review, which specialize in such poems.

Martha Skogen's *The Glass Tree* approaches the whole poet/painter connection from the opposite side of the equation. Let's call what she's doing, for lack of a better term, "reverse ekphrasis." In *The Glass Tree*, she explores what happens when you invite young artists to produce a visual artifact in response to a poem. For whatever reason, this is a much rarer procedure. One can uncover many notable visual responses to novels, but few visual works responding to poetry. And many of the extant artworks confine themselves to illustrating the poem as literally as possible; few engage in the kind of response that Alfred Corn claims poets have to paintings—not pure description, not interpretation, but personal response.

In the experiment that produced *The Glass Tree*, Martha, who is both poet and visual artist herself, brought some of her own brief poems to Trondheim International School and encouraged the students to respond to her poems by producing visual art. In her introduction to the activity, she made it clear that she was interested in their "individual interpretations" of the poems, and this somehow freed them from the need to illustrate her poems, and freed them, too, from the specter of "completing the assignment correctly." Among the purposes art serves, if it does, indeed, need to serve

Part I

ROOTS



As you lay waiting
Under my glass tree,
Did you know peace?

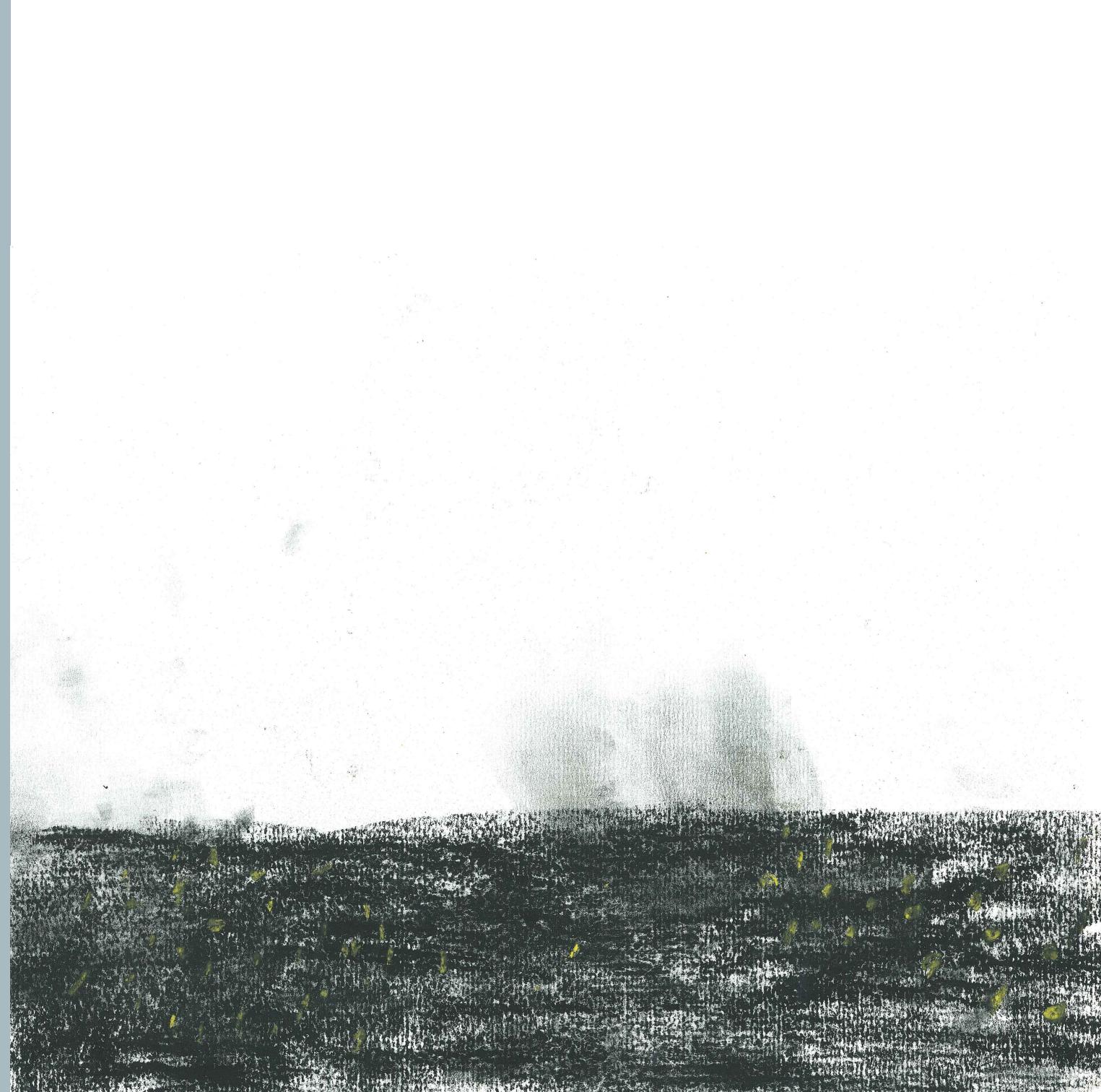
Unnamed solitude
Hides wild inspiration
Inside awareness

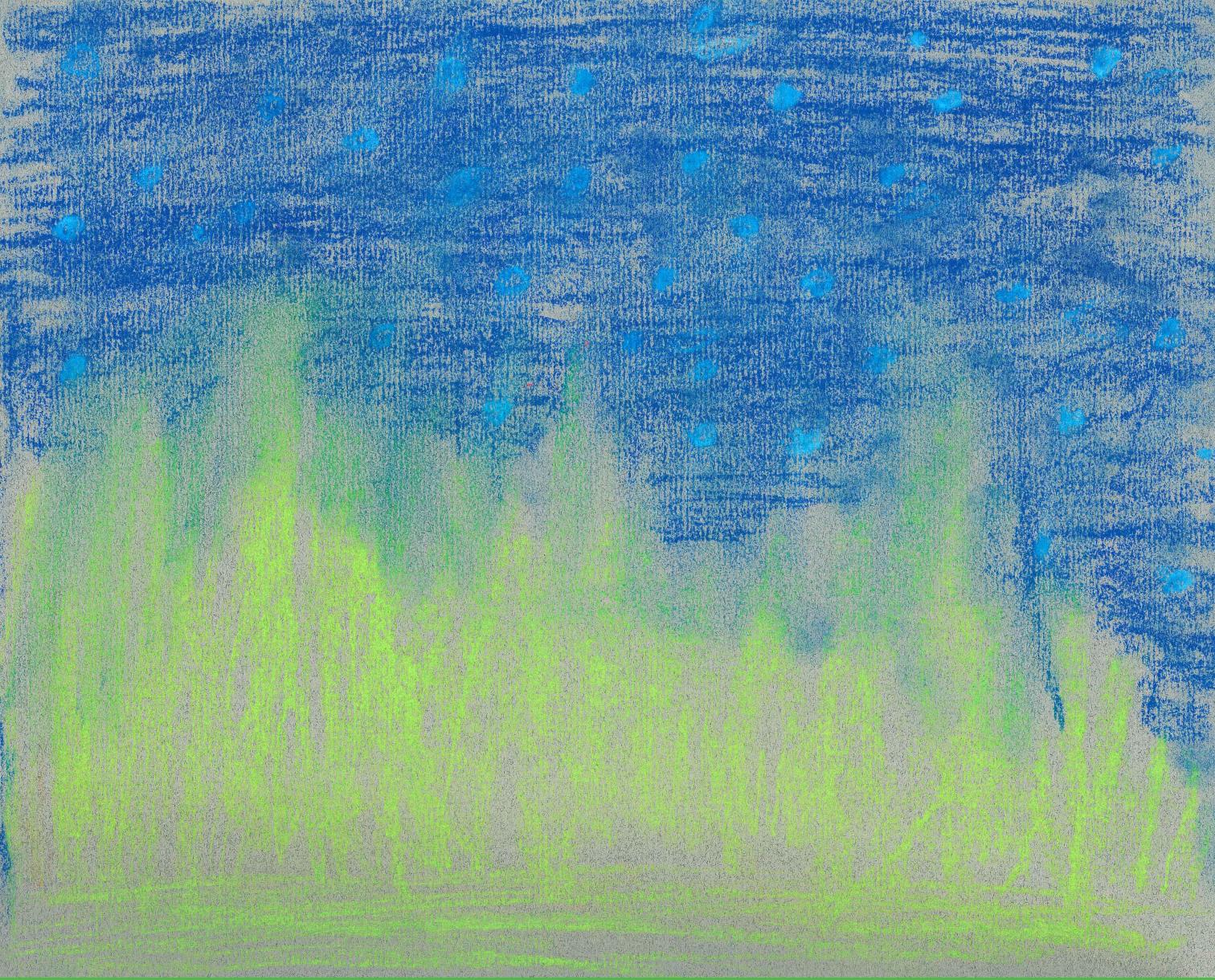
Liquid sunshine heaps
In mounds of crystallized
snow—

Winter sparkles
In a summer smile

How difficult to embrace
Each quiet,
twinkling moment

Sheltering
between our thoughts





Blades of pewter grass

Slice edge, crisp silhouettes

Into indigo nightshade



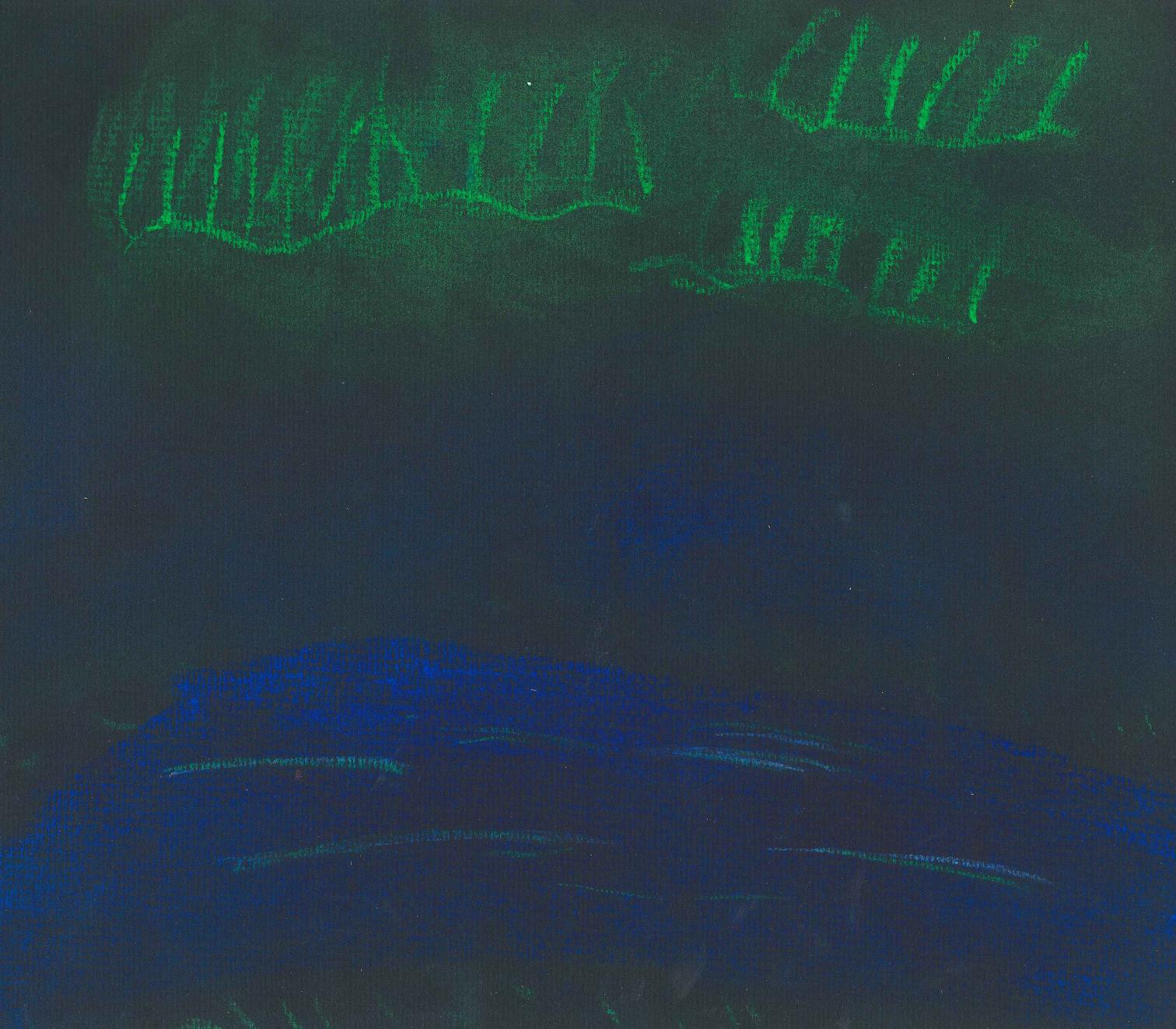
sunlight twiddling in treetops

painting

worn forest floors

To be truly free,
how many selves
must I rip out
to construct from scratch?





○ Chartreuse Borealis

Witness foam tumbling
Along riverbanks
Swirling with magenta

Conversations reflected

These fearless contrasts
Prisms of melancholy
Life's heliotrope

NOTES ON THE ART

Part I ROOTS

a. **Que Zhu, Grade 3**

This illustration not only captures the essence of the poem, it transcends it. The tree appears to be three-dimensional and translucent with light shining on all sides of the tree. Importantly, light is depicted predominantly on the side **away** from the sun. This young artist solved a well-known, advanced artistic challenge that artists have studied for centuries. You inherently understand that this is exactly how light behaves when moving through glass. The figure, although small in size, grabs our attention due to its strong contrast and distinct shape. We are pulled into the composition to understand more. The person is depicted as alone... yet somehow the artist communicates that the person is not lonely. It appears that the central figure has indeed found peace.

In a wondrous and delicate way, this child has unwittingly provided an answer to a very big question in my life. It is an answer that I will never know for certain.

b. **Ferdinand Wahba, Grade 9**

This poem conveys the magic of opening our experience to multiple perspectives. For the illustration, this artist seems to employ a wonderful metaphor: the abstracted image appears as if it is being seen through a microscope. Of course, there was nothing but this student and his imagination. In looking at this composition, I can easily feel the sense of discovery and little burst of joy that occurs when the soft, diffuse view suddenly pops into focus.

c. **Danait Mahari, Grade 3**

This illustration made me speechless when I first saw it and it continues to surprise me. The abstract interpretation is simple, elegant, and striking. Indeed, making a composition visually "simple" yet interesting is very difficult to do. It takes genuine courage to choose such a restrained and minimalistic approach, especially for someone so young. Furthermore, one of the greatest challenges of creating art is knowing when to stop, and this child has accomplished it magnificently.

The poem describes the threshold between thought and non-thought, and all the potential that occupies that infinite space. This artist chose to show this boundary as defined, yet also slightly blurred, with a soft, gentle breach that punctures the beautiful white space above. This is an intriguing solution that deepens the theme of the poem. This illustration has forever altered the way that I imagine the concept of consciousness itself.

Ingenuity

Bring forth all that we now need

Limp through tipping points

Wake audacity

Assured that we do nothing,

Be our undoing

Part II TRUNK

n. William Alexander Nygård, Grade 1

This is a visual story that invites the reader in for interpretation—mine is as follows. Each element in this composition is loaded with meaning. Notice the three figures that represent the three stages of life. They even hold hands suggesting connectivity, while the oldest (with cane) is at the top. I wonder: does this imply that wisdom triumphs, or perhaps death is near? This is an composition from a *first grader* and like all the other children, this boy simply listened to the poem, chose his media and went to work. I was thunderstruck.

Compositionally, the interplay between the gigantic moon and the similarly-sized mound create an interesting dynamic. These dominant shapes form a visual relationship that encourages our eye to alternate between them. The high-contrast lines in the mound keep the interplay well-balanced while directing our eye upward towards the figures. The figures are pivotal to the composition as they bridge the earthly and heavenly aspects in visual, literal and metaphorical form. In the upper right corner, the small astral objects serve to counterweight the larger objects below.

The poem addresses the antiquity of life. This young artist amplifies this idea by presenting the progression of life as it exists between heaven and earth. He provides room for us to project our own meaning as well.

How thrilling it is that this very young child could address such a profoundly universal theme with this degree of insight and sensitivity.

o. Emilie Behne-Svensson

Children can be highly aware of global issues and art provides an important tool through which they can communicate their feelings about them. Initially, it caught me off guard that this child interpreted the poem as an environmental concern. Yet it fits the poem wonderfully.

Here, a diver fetches trash from the seafloor while her irritation is obvious through her thought bubble and use of symbolism: an asterisk. We do not see her face because we don't need to—she could be anyone. That was clever. This artist rendered the poem in a sophisticated way and then chose to make a powerful social commentary about it. The starkness of the pencil drawing only strengthens her message.

Two grand canvases
Canopies poke at iced skies
Dappled moon shadows

Part III BRANCHES

A **Gaia Broekmans, Grade 8**

What a bold statement this is! Can the universe really be found in a raindrop? This was an intriguing visualization of the poem that makes me want to know more.

B **Emilia Yakovlyeva, Grade 2**

This is a powerful drawing filled with symbolism. Look closely: there is a small knife next to the severed tree. These two objects symbolize a vast range of meaning that can address many issues. The tree stump is a somber visual element, yet the figure has a happy expression. I want to know what is going on here. The combination of these elements is unsettling and makes me think.

C **Betsabé**

Love changes us. Distance grows or shrinks, boundaries stretch, things become distorted. As two become one—or one splits into two—our ability to understand is thwarted. Our warped perspective can cause us to feel upside down. This illustration captures the feeling of confused reality in a clever way that utilizes the entire page, including its edges.

D **Finn Galloway McCann, Grade 5**

Like so many other children, this artist drew his illustration with bold confidence, decisiveness, and efficiency. This artist simply put it away when he was finished—no questions asked. From what I could tell, there was no self-judgment either. It makes me wonder: when, how, and why does that change as we mature?

E **Anonymous, Grade 4**

When was the last time you looked up at the clouds and saw a mythical creature? I like to think that they are still there, waiting to be rediscovered. I enjoy the mysterious written word in this composition. It is an integral part of this illustration and forms a trompe l'oeil as the dragon's other wing. The word counterbalances the figure and shows the beauty of typography. I suspect it is the creature's name, but it does not matter: it is a strong compositional element in itself.

F **Ferdinand Wahba, Grade 9**

This abstract illustration captures everything and nothing at all. The conundrum of life is vague, unbounded and diffuse. Yet there is something to it, represented in this work by one, central dot. This was a challenging poem to illustrate and the artist did so wonderfully. The result is a harmonious description of the poem's central theme: the self-contradictory surreality of life itself.

WORKSHOP METHOD

Trondheim International School (ThIS) is an International Baccalaureate World School (2008) in the city of Trondheim, Norway. Beyond their inspiring pedagogical approach, ThIS encourages interaction between the student and parent communities through active involvement on local, national and international levels. My collaborative workshop was possible because the school is genuinely interested in parental engagement. Below is an outline of steps that made this project possible.

Concept & preparation: After two introductory meetings where I pitched the concept to school administrators, the idea was taken internally for discussion. Shortly thereafter, I was invited to present the idea to all the teachers. Together, we developed a plan for how to organize the day-long workshop while adapting it to the full range of classes. Prior to the workshop, the school provided the students' caretakers with electronic consent forms. It is notable that every parent/caretaker permitted their child to attend.

Because the Primary Years Program, grades 1-6 (PYP) differs from the Middle Years Program grades 7-10 (MYP), there were two approaches, with a common introduction.

In-school procedure: I briefly introduced myself and explained why I was interested in their illustrating my poetry. I asked students if they had written haiku, and everyone had—some just a few days prior to my visit. I instructed the students to pay close attention to the images that the poems generated in their mind's eye. I assured them that there was no "right or wrong" interpretation because each child interprets the poetry differently according to their own experience. I was interested in their *individual* interpretation as an artist—this was not a shared or group activity.

Finally, although I made it clear from the beginning that I would not be able to include every drawing in the book, that was not the point. I hoped that they would enjoy the process of visualizing poetry. From what I could tell, the children were excited to participate for the sheer experience of it. They understood that selection of their work was anything but guaranteed. They were reminded that they could opt out at any time, and not one child chose to do so.

To prepare the children to hear the poetry, I did a brief mindfulness exercise (ca. 3 minutes). When they were relaxed, I read each poem one by one (10-12 per class) while I walked around the room slowly. The reading of the poetry itself took approximately 5-7 minutes. The children were quiet, engaged and respectful at all times.

In-school procedure (cont.):

After the poetry reading, the teachers helped children choose a poem to illustrate. We did this by projecting the poems onto a large screen. Each poem had a unique code that the children wrote on the back of their art. Students were able to choose between three types of art: watercolor, pastels or pen & ink. Only once during the day did a child ask me what a word meant.

I stayed present at each work session and only moved to the next only after a work session concluded. I was impressed by how independent the children were, from 1st grade onward. Once they began their artwork, they showed ownership of the process. They also seemed to enjoy it.

SELECTION PROCESS

I could see very early during the workshop that the selection process was going to be an enormous challenge. After I laid out all the artwork in a large dining area, the selection criteria became more clear. I had prepared myself to make tough decisions yet at times I just had to let the decisions rest. The artwork drove the process and the selection criteria arose organically.

First, the child's artwork needed to relate to the poem in a relevant manner. This did not mean that the artwork needed to match *my idea* of the poem's meaning. Some of the images included here were those that caught me completely off guard. A number of the artworks surprised me by how they amplified the poem, or how it sends the reader in an unanticipated direction. To me, this is the real power of the creative collaboration. The children demonstrated pure creativity in their interpretations and ability to manifest a poetic idea visually. Some images simply stunned me.

Secondly, the artwork needed to represent the child's investment, either through time to create the work and/or their dedication to it. Finally, the drawing needed to show a hard-to-describe aspect: the child's emotional commitment to the poem. This is difficult to describe in words because for me, it is only possible to see—and feel it—through their visual communication.

Manifest respect
Spanning decades and landscapes,
Swing past latitudes

AFTERWORD

As most parents have experienced, children are born aesthetically aware, and they engage in the arts long before they can read or write. Pablo Picasso even said that all children are born artists; the problem is to remain an artist as they grow up.

As the fortunate Head of an IB World School, I see how art-making impacts children every day. With reference to John Dewey's significant educational theories, upon which the IB programs are based, I find it inevitable to associate The Glass Tree, with Dewey's Arts as Experience (1934, pg. 3):

By one of the ironic perversities that often attend the course of affairs, the existence of the works of art upon which formation of an esthetic theory depends has become an obstruction to theory about them.

In common conception, the work of art is often identified with the building, book, painting, or statue in its existence apart from human experience. Since the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience, the result is not favorable to understanding. In addition, the very perfection of some of these products (...) creates conventions that get in the way of fresh insight.

Carefully tending
while our outside hearts
burgeon.

In overflowing,
you hold waterfalls.

GRATITUDE

My appreciation goes to many people, each of whom played an essential part. Although there are too many to name, I would like to thank in particular:

Jon Davis

A great teacher not only provides knowledge but instills deep confidence where there previously was none. Without knowing it, you have given me an incredible gift: the courage to be a poet and finally embrace all of my creative selves. Your encouragement has literally been life-changing. Our discussions have given me an even greater appreciation of wordcrafting than I could imagine and I am deeply grateful to have met and worked with you. I am honored that you are an integral part of this book. Thank you for everything.

The students of Trondheim International School (THIS)

I appreciate your artwork more than I can say. Thank you for embracing this concept, and joining me on a new part of this book's journey. Even though it was not possible to include every illustration, I hope that I have done well to support each one of your artistic interests.

The teachers of Trondheim International School

To all the wonderful teachers of THIS, your kindness in welcoming me into your classrooms and generous support made our workshop incredible. I would also like to thank Hope Steen who always had a smile, an encouraging comment and was incredibly helpful with planning & logistics from day one. Meet the rest of the talented staff at www.this.no.

The parents and local community of Trondheim International School

Without your support, this project would not have happened. Thank you for a great day during which I am certain that I learned more than your child(ren).

Agneta Amundsson, Head of School, Trondheim International School

Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to write the Afterword. This book would not be complete without it.

THE
GLASS TREE

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TEDx: "The Power in Children's Art"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5_NhBeNry4