



Deep Calls to Deep: Photopoetry as a Process of Call and Response

Esther Wafula and Phyllis Muthoni

Abstract

Photopoetry is an art form that involves the interaction between photography and poetry to produce a new artefact—the photopoem. This article presents two photopoems based on a collaboration between Esther Wafula, a poet, and Phyllis Muthoni, a photographer. In dialogue, the poet and the photographer respond to questions suggested by the *LIRIC Journal* editor about how their collaboration began, what inspires their work, and what photography and poetry uniquely bring to the collaboration. The poet also describes the organic process she uses to create photopoems. The implications of photopoetry as a form of creative expression are briefly discussed and an invitation made to explore its potential as a possible tool for research for the self and creative writing for therapeutic purposes.

Keywords: photography, poetry, photopoetry, photopoems, collaboration

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Poems and Photographs



First the water, then the blood

Forfeit your piety for the joy
That once hung down in clusters
For the harvester's plucking.

Taste the soil, taste the wind
And then the songs to which
The grapes were crushed.

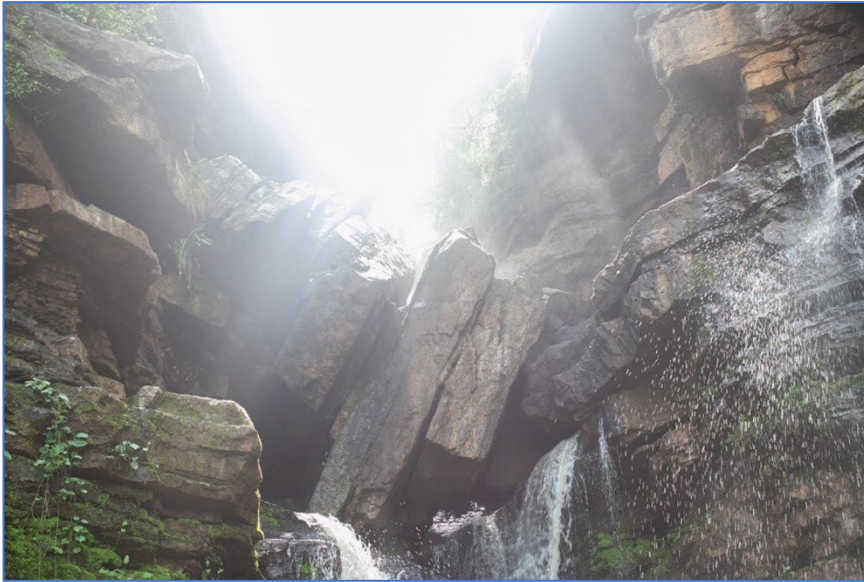
What quenches thirst
Also
Dissolves.

A second birth, and even a third
May be necessary
Before you launch.

And then again
When the ocean comes for you –
Scaffolding and all.

Poem by Esther M. Wafula.

Photograph by Phyllis Muthoni. See <https://pmuthony.art/myportfolio#/food/>



The River's Many Tellings

To some they are a riddle,
A mere curiosity,
On a busy itinerary.

To others they are a warning
Like Lot's wife,
Who started then faltered,
And was turned into salt.
Or the woman of Herculaneum
Petrified with all her jewels.

But, to some who descend
The narrow steps
To find them,
These boulders are a totem
Not subject to obsolescence.

No human ferried them here
To track planets or seasons,
To mark crossings,
Or immortalize victories.

They are not sleek with oil
Like Jacob's pillow,
Or pregnant with dew
Like Gideon's fleece,
But they too are holy –
A story
Polished to ripeness
By the river's many tellings.



Poem by Esther M. Wafula.

Photographs by Phyllis Muthoni. See <https://pmuthony.art/>

Subject: The collapsed boulders at Akaa Waterfall, Eastern Region of Ghana.

Introduction

Photopoetry is an art form that involves the interaction between photography and poetry to produce a new artefact—the photopoem. A variety of other terms have been used to describe this art form, including *photopoetry*, *photopoème*, *photoverse*, *photographiti* and *photometry*. Photography and poetry are often considered separately as independent modes of expression, which they are. However, by responding to a photograph with a poem, photopoetry unlocks layers of meaning that neither craft could have achieved independently.

Michael Nott (2018, p. 2) posits that ‘the relationship between poem and photograph has always been one of disruption and serendipity, appropriation and exchange, evocation and metaphor.’ Blogger Thea Voutiritsas (2020) observes that this interaction allows the creation of

poetry that is, ‘more than a caption or an explanation, it is a revelation. A photopoem adds depth and context to both the photo and the poem while remaining open to interpretation—even extending an invitation to imaginative engagement.’

This article presents two photopoems based on a collaboration between Esther Wafula, a poet, and Phyllis Muthoni, a photographer. Esther and Phyllis have been friends for more than twenty years. Their photopoetry collaboration began spontaneously in 2020 during the COVID-19 lockdowns. At the time, Phyllis often took photographs in her neighborhood in Accra, Ghana, as part of her exercise routine during the lockdown. She would then share her photographs with Esther, who was living in Nairobi. On her part, Esther had decided to write poetry regularly during the COVID-19 lockdown and began using some of the photographs she received from Phyllis to inspire new poems. They enjoyed their collaboration so much that they decided to keep it going after the COVID-19 lockdowns were lifted.

In the section below, Esther and Phyllis describe photopoetry and their collaboration in more detail as they respond to questions suggested by the editor of the *LIRIC Journal*.

The Conversation

Question: Is there any relationship between photopoetry and ekphrasis?

Ekphrasis (or *ecphrasis*) has been defined as ‘verbal representation of a visual representation’ (Heffernan, 1993, p. 3). In ancient Greek rhetoric, the term ekphrasis was applied to the skill of describing a thing in vivid detail, with the goal of making the reader envision the thing described as if it were physically present. Some of these descriptions of art are done using prose while others use poetry.

Photopoetry and ekphrasis are related since both practices use words to respond to images. However, we think they differ in some key respects. When poetry is written as ekphrasis, fidelity to the image, that is, describing the image as closely as possible, is key. Ekphrastic poetry tries to describe the image it is responding to so closely that it seems to be attempting to recreate the image in the reader’s mind.

On the other hand, photopoetry uses the image only as a jumping-off point or creative prompt, then the poet follows the inspiration wherever it may lead. The reader may be able to see some relationship between the

image and the poem it inspired, but the poem does not necessarily aim to recreate the image in the reader's mind. Nott (2018, p. 9) takes a similar position when he states that in the photopoetry, the encounter between photograph and poem 'fundamentally alters the ekphrastic relationship between poem and photograph. When poem and photograph are seen side by side on the page, the verbal does not represent the visual, nor the visual the verbal.'

We see ekphrasis and photopoetry at opposite ends of a continuum, with ekphrasis on the more technical side, where the writer's words aim to be as descriptive and true to the image as possible, and photopoetry on the more interpretive side, where the image inspires the poem, but the writer is free to take imaginative leaps or follow tangents that may take the poem far from the literal components of the image.

Question: Is there any precedent in therapeutic writing or writing in general about how to write in response to photographs?

Yes, scholars describe how writers can harness the power of personal photographs and found images to prompt creative inspiration and personal healing. These include Kate Thompson in her book *Therapeutic Journal Writing* (2011), Celia Hunt in *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing* (2000), and Judy Weiser in *PhotoTherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums* (1999). In an article titled 'Inhabiting the Image: Photography, Therapy and Re-enactment Phototherapy,' Rosy Martin (2009, p. 38) posits that 'the photograph as metaphor can be used as a route to the unconscious. Photographs offer up a slippery surface of meanings to reflect and project upon and contain a myriad of latent narratives.' These authors offer a range of ideas about how individuals working privately or with the help of a counselor can use photographs to facilitate reflection. Writing in response to photographs can deepen such reflection and the exploration of both joyful and painful memories in personal and family histories.

Question: How did your photopoetry collaboration begin?

Esther (the poet speaking to the photographer): Our collaboration has developed organically over several years. The first photopoem I wrote was in response to a photograph you had taken of a flowering cactus in 2018. However, in 2020, while living in Nairobi, I started writing photopoems regularly in response to photographs you were sending me during the COVID-19 lockdowns. This was one way for me to demonstrate

my appreciation for the amazing photographs you were sharing with me from Accra. On the other hand, I had already decided to write a poem daily during the COVID-19 lockdowns, and therefore your photographs provided fresh inspiration for that endeavor. I enjoyed the process so much that I continued writing photopoems in response to other photographs you posted on your photoblog even after the COVID-19 lockdowns ended, which is how the two photopoems I submitted to this issue of the *LIRIC Journal* came to be.

Phyllis (the photographer responding to the poet): Like you, I was triggered by the movement restrictions of early 2020 to do something consistent for self-care. Even during the strictest lockdown in Accra, we were allowed to walk within the neighborhood. I started walking as a way of getting some exercise and getting out of the house. I then started taking my camera with me, and my walks became photo walks.

As I could not walk very far, I decided to delve deeper into exploring the flowers and insects around. My macro photography became a little more intentional.

In many ways, our collaboration was your brainchild. You wrote a response to the photo of the cactus (I don't remember whether I sent it to you, or you came across it on my blog). I was pleasantly surprised when you later responded to another one of my photos—the one of the jewel shield bug. I realized then that your interest in my photos was taking on a new dimension. In early 2020, you proposed that we consider turning our joint work into a long-term project, which we did.

Question: What is your inspiration or philosophical thinking about photopoetry?

Esther: I did not have an explicit philosophy about photopoetry when this collaboration begun. Now, I would say that an evocative photograph seems to pierce through the many mundane moments in life and invites an attentive response. Evocative photographs captivate and stimulate the imagination. For me as a poet, this is a good example of deep calling to deep. Writing photopoems is my way of accepting these invitations and entering into the depths toward which such photographs usher me. Once my attention is captivated by an evocative photograph, I take it as a given that there is something meaningful I am expected to explore, learn, and/or distil from my engagement with that photograph. The photopoem I write in response is the artefact that demonstrates my deep engagement with that particular photograph.

Phyllis: Our collaboration has been an unstructured process from the beginning—other than the agreement to work together in the long term, there are no ‘rules’. We both have high standards for our creative work, and therefore we can take for granted the fact that we will bring our best effort to the collaboration. I think our friendship of many years, cumulative experience, commitment to excellence, and value for creativity are the bedrock on which a trusting and mutually supportive project has emerged. For me, the greatest value in a multidisciplinary collaboration is that each discipline supports and enhances the other. There is a beautiful confidence and humility in the idea that my art doesn’t have to be ‘the star of the show’. Counterintuitively, my art is enhanced and given more meaning than it did while it stood alone.

Question: What did you want to do or find out through your photopoetry?

Esther: As mentioned earlier, this collaboration started spontaneously, with no ‘research’ questions in mind and no predefined goals. However, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, I developed some intentions for engaging in this photopoetry collaboration. These included using photographs to inspire my daily poetry writing practice. In other words, I decided to take the photograph(s) you sent me on a particular day as one of the given facts of that day that I should attend to and write about. Your photographs often primed my creative pump and also enriched my daily writing practice which was already under way. In this way, photopoetry has enabled me to cultivate deeper attention to what is happening in my life, including the magical and curious moments you capture in your photographs of insects, flowers, people, or places. I also delight in the serendipity and surprise that this process affords me since I never know when you might share a photograph or what it might be about! I also never know what tangents such photographs may evoke in me. Photopoetry has allowed us to enjoy and affirm each other’s work, and this has enriched our friendship.

Phyllis: You are right—there was no structured process or intention to research. Your very first response to my photo of a cactus provided a template that we could build on. It would be interesting to take a retrospective look after a while and see what lessons we might draw from this. For example, without your proposal to work more intentionally together, we may not have produced the body of work we currently have. We have benefited from certain traits that we share—commitment and consistency, for example. But these were already in place, and I doubt we could have come this far without them.

Question: What is the process of creating photopoems? What is your methodology?

Phyllis: I don't take photos specifically for the collaboration. Every poem you write in response is always a pleasant surprise. You come across my photos on my photo blog, on my WhatsApp status updates and profile photos. From time to time I send you pictures of photos that I particularly like.

Your interpretation of the photos is sometimes quite surprising. I think this is because I photograph with certain assumptions about my subjects that you don't have. For example, one of the poems you wrote was based on a photograph of two men walking at dusk. I assumed (as one does), that he was walking home. You, on the other hand, saw him walking away from home. I believe that creating photos for their own sake creates these 'open' canvases in such a way that I am not trying to influence your take and interpretation of the photos. This is one of the benefits of allowing the creative process to take its own course.

Over time I have become a little more involved in shaping the poems. For example, you invited me to give input into the selection of the poems for this submission. I also gave editorial input into the two we finally decided to feature here. I believe this demonstrates deepening trust between us.

The fact that we are both Kenyan means that there is very little cultural bridging to be done. We hardly need to explain each other's contexts except on very specific points. However, a similar collaboration between individuals from different cultural backgrounds would likely have led to interesting discussions about culture.

Esther: For me, the inspiration for a photopoem strikes in response to an evocative image. Such an image is pregnant with meaning and alive with energy—a latent energy, the way fire is latent in a match, which comes alive when the match is struck against the right kind of surface.

This is not to say that the beauty of your photographs is not evident until they are interpreted poetically. But I believe that writing a poem in response to your photographs illuminates them in a special way—opening the image up to new interpretations and even tangents you as the photographer may not have considered as you took the photograph. Using poetry to explore a photograph from these different angles seems to broaden and deepen engagement with the initial image. It is similar to

using the flame from a match to light one candle and then additional candles to brighten a room.

Phyllis: But do you follow a specific process when writing a photopoem?

Esther: That is a great question. I have only noticed in retrospect, after writing many photopoems, that I seem to follow a particular process. When I encounter an evocative image, the possibility of responding poetically is planted in my mind. I would call this *the invitation*. I hold the image in my mind with gentle curiosity, in a sort of *reverie*, during which I allow the image to ‘speak’ to me through its color, play with light, the subject matter and the implicit message(s) it seems to hold. I brood over the photograph from different angles, like one would a dream image in Jungian dreamwork. This curious pondering can take several hours or several days, a process I like to think of as *incubation*. Some of the things I consider here include personal associations I have to the image—what does it remind me of from my own life experience? What feelings or questions does it invoke in me? I also use amplification—what does the photograph evoke from the mythical, archetypal, cultural, and/or historical dimensions?

After such an incubation, I eventually sense when the image has ‘ripened’ sufficiently in my mind so I can start writing the associated photopoem. This step is signaled by the emergence of either a phrase or a theme that tugs at me, leading me to start writing the poem. Once I start writing, the rest of the poem emerges in line with the initial phrase or theme that the incubation inspired. I would call this *the response*.

While I try to honor that initial impulse, no photopoem emerges perfectly made. I play around with different phrases, metaphors, tangents, and so on until I feel satisfied that the poem conveys the ‘message’ the photograph inspired me to put across in the first place.

Here, I hasten to add that the message I convey in my poem is only one of numerous messages that other poets could draw from the photograph, were they to write their own poetic responses to the same photograph. Everyone responds to an image differently because we each bring our own associations and amplifications to it.

But in summary, my process of writing photopoems involves an invitation, a reverie, an incubation, and then a response.

Phyllis: That's amazing. Until now I wasn't aware of your mental and creative process in this collaboration. As a photographer and poet, it is very interesting to hear someone else's thought process and see it in action.

Question: What have you learnt or discovered through this collaboration? What unique value do you think photography and poetry bring to the collaboration?

Esther: This collaboration has helped me discover some of the things that poetry and photography have in common, and also the unique capacities each of them has as a mode of expression. Since photopoetry begins with the photograph, would you like to comment first on what you have discovered through this collaboration?

Phyllis: There is always an element of surprise to our work, which makes it exciting and worth looking forward to. You never know what photos I will take or post, and I never know which photos you will respond to. In addition, we are both in very different geographies and time zones. I am waking up to the differences in the social and personal contexts from which we write. These contextual issues inform my perspective as a photographer. It has been interesting to become aware of the assumptions I make while photographing. I would certainly want to explore this aspect of our creative work in time.

A photograph is a snapshot of a moment in time. It is said that one can never take the same photograph twice, even with the same camera settings and the same subject. There are always subtle (and sometimes major) changes in the light and other parameters. So, a photograph freezes an extremely short moment in time. Of course, depending on the genre and the photographer's skill, photographs can tell powerful stories without a caption.

Photography requires attention and observation. Macro photography, in particular, zooms into and magnifies a subject or a part of it. It is uniquely able to draw our attention to details in a way that other genres of photography cannot.

This is similar to other crafts—applying oneself, honing skills, investing in the appropriate equipment, and, most of all, consistent practice. As I photograph I am paying attention to the light, composition, my subjects, and the equipment at my disposal. I want to take the best photograph I can with my skill set and the circumstances at hand.

For our collaboration, photography provides a canvas. So far, our work has proceeded on the basis of your response to my photographs. This is not to say that it cannot be any other way.

Esther: In the context of photopoetry, the photograph is primary. The image is the seed that sparks poetic insight. It feeds the poet's imagination visually. It opens the door for exploration in the symbolic world for metaphoric insight, themes, and stories. A photograph provides a snapshot of a particular subject at a particular moment in time, as if capturing reality in a capsule. As such, the photograph that inspires a photopoem focuses the poet's attention and provides parameters within which the poet's imagination can wander.

Whereas a photograph freezes reality in a snapshot, the poem written in response to the photograph opens it up to a variety of interpretations and possible tangents. The poem enriches the photograph by lending it voice, movement, texture, and depth through the themes, subjects, and narratives it explores in response to the photograph. Through a photopoem, a photograph that was taken in one setting can be interpreted using the mythologies and stories from a completely different era. A photopoem can help articulate the humor, sadness, wisdom, or other dimensions that are implicit in the photograph.

For example, my poem in response to your photograph of the collapsed boulders at the Akaa Waterfalls in Ghana, which we have featured above, addresses the theme of suspended motion, the idea of being in limbo. This theme is animated in reference to the biblical story of Lot's wife who was turned into a pillar of salt and the jeweled hand of a woman discovered in the ruins of Herculaneum. The value of stones as markers of important milestones and epiphanies is also hinted at.

Question: Is there an 'ethics' of photopoetry? For example, does the poet have to seek permission from the photographer before a photograph is used as inspiration for a photopoem?

Esther: The inspiration to respond to an image poetically often arises spontaneously, before the poet corresponds with the photographer to request permission to use the photograph in a photopoem. There are some photographs in the public domain whose creators may not be traceable.

However, whenever possible, the poet should not publish their photopoem before contacting the photographer to let them know that their photograph inspired a photopoem. In principle, I think the poet should provide adequate reference details about the source of the image used,

similar to what an author would do when citing another person's written work. The poet should use this approach even if the inspiring photograph came from stock photo sites.

In a collaboration like ours, the poet and photographer negotiate the rules for the use of the photographs and the resulting photopoems. In our case, you as photographer shared the photographs with me. The first photopoem I wrote in response to one of your photographs came as a surprise to both of us. But after that, I think there was an understanding that I might respond to your subsequent photographs poetically. There was an implicit understanding that I had your permission to do so, and this view was encouraged by the fact that you continued to send me photographs and seemed to appreciate the photopoems I was writing in response.

However, I always share my photopoems in response to your photographs with you first. Then, when I thought of publishing some of the photopoems, I consulted you first, and requested your permission to feature your photographs.

Phyllis: I concur—once we agreed to collaborate, permission to use my photos was henceforth implied. I have appreciated your responses and enjoyed seeing the poems emerge. I believe the principles of collaboration should be allowed to emerge with time unless copyright or other legal issues are at stake. It helps that we are friends and trust one another—both in terms of character and our commitment to excellence in our creative work.

Implications of Photopoetry

Question: What are the implications of using photopoetry as a medium of creative expression?

Below is a synthesis of thoughts from both Phyllis and Esther about using photopoetry as a medium of creative expression:

1. Photopoetry can help individuals to cultivate a more integrated kind of attention—through the interaction of images and words—the resulting photopoem provides a depth of understanding that is greater than either the photograph or the poem separately could.

2. Photopoetry leverages photographs or images for their inherent symbolism and facilitates articulation of the resulting metaphoric insights in words. Poets can use photographs or images to prime their creative pumps and to inspire fresh ideas.
3. The value of using photographs in therapeutic settings has been addressed in Judy Weiser's book *Phototherapy Techniques: Exploring the Secrets of Personal Snapshots and Family Albums*. However, we believe that in addition to discussing photographs in therapy, writing poems in response to the photographs can help distil and articulate the salient wisdom and insights the client finds in their own photographs (or other photographs they find evocative) in a memorable way.
4. Photopoetry can be offered as a coaching/counseling assignment to help clients broaden and deepen their engagement with their personal or family history, e.g., using the family album or their current life.
5. Photopoetry can be an alternative way of journaling or documenting one's experience and delight in old or new surroundings, e.g., one's daily route to work, after moving to a new city, when visiting a place of interest, or during a pilgrimage.
6. Photopoetry can offer a wonderful collaborative activity between friends, teammates, or even strangers—to open new avenues for discussion, including between people from different backgrounds and worldviews. Whether the collaboration comes before friendship or vice versa, photopoetry has the potential to deepen understanding, mutual respect, and mutual supportiveness amongst the collaborators. The collaborators can also leverage each other's respective creative spheres to advance one another's work.

Reflections

Photopoetry is a dance between photography and poetry. It creates a new, distinct form—the photopoem, which can be more meaningful than either of the contributing art forms would have achieved on their own. This article has demonstrated the unique value photography and poetry can each bring to the partnership, and the broad possibilities that photopoetry offers to enhance attention, delight, and creativity for individuals in personal or collaborative projects. While our photopoetry project began spontaneously with no research objectives in mind, similar projects could be undertaken with explicit research purposes, for example, to explore photopoetry's potential as a tool in creative writing for therapeutic purposes.

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