Ekphrastic writing, or writing about art, was created by the Greeks but popularized by the Romans. The goal of ekphrasis was to make the reader or listener envision a work of art as if it were physically present. Looking at art and describing art is central to being visually literate in our image-saturated world.

The Toledo Museum of Art hosts an annual Ekphrastic Poetry Contest, in which we invite visitors to submit an original poem inspired by a work of art in the TMA’s collection. The following poems are the 11th annual 6–12th grade Ekphrastic Poetry Contest submissions.

Please note that entries may discuss topics that are considered upsetting, disturbing, or offensive by some readers.
Prisoner of Thought

Within the reaches of this dark, cold house of stone and iron
Sat a husband and a wife, together
They lived comfortably among the silence and darkness

Her husband tended to think about his world
Perhaps a bit too much
He approached his wife after a long day
And asked her one simple question

“What is there to do?”

His wife knew that her husband asked these questions often
Questions difficult to answer, not supposed to be solved
Yet her husband still expected an answer

a smile and a shrug was not enough for the prisoner of thought

Her husband desired nothing more than to make his escape
To throw open the bars of the iron window
And leap from it, soaring off into the loud, warm world
A world he had been long deprived of experiencing

And so, on one warm night
He jumped from the windowsill
Away from the prison that had held his mind in a cage of steel
He was finally free to do as he chose

And then everything faded away

The warmth that he had desired for so long
had only just begun to prance upon his skin
And just like that
His soul was free, but his mind was gone

Daniel Knorek
9–12th Grade

Wilhelm Hammershøi
Interior of Courtyard, 1899
Oil on canvas
Gift of The Georgia Waldo Apollo Society, 2000.30

Vilhelm Hammershøi
Interior of Courtyard, 1899
Oil on canvas
Gift of The Georgia Waldo Apollo Society, 2000.30
Gwendolyn Pyle

9–12th Grade

I Used to Have Night Terrors

Zebras would scream at me.
   Go back home! Go back home!
Cavemen would chase down endless dark halls.
Horrible snakes would steal my play tea set.
Crabs would pinch off my toes.

I would wear my throat down
   scream after sandpaper scream
   calling for a hand to rip me out of my mind.
Jan Quiambao
9–12th Grade

**Childhood Hole**

Sun taking over our minds
Excitement filling our lungs
Like the fresh air around us
Reminding me of the times
Before we had to drown out
father's screams
Or have to crouch under this tree
In our hiding place
I watch over you and
Childhood leaves me
Grazes you

Maybe I'll keep you here
Hope that the water
Will keep you safe
And resist
Change.

Charles Courtney Curran
The Swimming Hole, about 1894
Oil on canvas
Gift of C. S. Ashley, 1908.82
The Eternal Flame

This was once a place of glory. Where voices were heard, where they spoke truth to power. Now it’s nothing but a ruined monument to hate, charred and hollow. Our ignorance, our vanity, our blindness to what we cannot see—we did this. Under that white marble was a black heart, and nothing is hiding it now. So below these gates, above these graves, remember: The spoken word is like a spark, igniting a fire that blazes, higher, singeing the very stars. And fire is a purifying thing. When fueled by love, when fueled by pride, a flame is a symbol of hope, a candle in the dark, a remembrance that life is getting better, That we are getting better. But fire is a terrifying thing. Some fire is fueled by silence, fueled by foolishness, and that flame leaves a dark mark on our souls.

Energy cannot be extinguished, only absorbed. The vicious bite of yesterday is the bitter vitriol of tomorrow. It will never go away because it is a part of us. The worst part of us. But as I walk through this city of soot and sin, where the stone is scorched and the sky is scarred, where lies flowed like lava through Pompeii, I declare: Let it be known that we are not cowards. Let it be known in the face of death and disease, we are defiant and we are divine. Because our ancestors did not die for nothing. Did not fight for nothing. Our legacies, our liberties, our libraries were not burned for nothing. Have we learned nothing? Because the biggest threat to humanity is humanity. And as I stand here, where a democracy died and a dictator was born, I ask: Is history doomed to repeat itself? But we already know the answer.
We sail into the void,
Its enigmatical form rests in the water
The gloomy, unlit, blue,
Casts its reflection
Upon our ship
I observe

A thought is sailing across the other sailors
I see it in their manner
The way they talk
The way they move

Our captain is no different
Her smile seems glib
She walks unsteadily
She wants us to feel safe
For if we don’t, she fears
She will tear apart like a canvas upon its frame

It’s embedded in our actions,
I can’t help but feel I have it too
This thought, this idea, this concept,
Tells me that I won’t be alive much longer
The Bird

She commands her kingdom with her power she has.
She casts color on the walls, for she is a bird.
Nothing can hurt her because she is glass.
Her warriors defend her.
She casts light throughout the kingdom.

Butterfly is what she uses.
She is very powerful, but
She is glass, nothing can harm her.

Power is all she needs, as my daydreams
Go away, I continue to think
About the Bird, for she is my every thought.
Kevin Brandon
6–8th Grade

A Lovely Sea

Winds blow.
Violently,
shaking,
rustling,
the sails of the ancient ship.

The canvas is beginning to wrinkle and fold.
Top left corner,
dark frame exposed.
Sails high, billow, unfurled.

Waves rock.
As the sun sets,
the sky erupts
a mix of golden hue,
Then pink, purple, and blue.

The sailors lost.
On a beautiful infinite sea,
unheard cries.
They will die loving faithfully.

Titus Kaphar
Watching Tides Rise, 2012
Oil and tar on canvas

The 2019 TMA Board of Directors recognizes this work in honor of Director Brian Kennedy
and his efforts to both develop strengths and expand directions in the permanent collection.
Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 2018.25
The Storm Approaching

A storm is approaching,
The wind is rustling,
The birds are flying,
The tips of the broad, green mountains are fading,
And the storm is nearing.

The frightened animals are hiding in the trees, bushes, and logs that nature has provided them with,
Trees stand proud along this sheltered beautiful, cyan lake.
The clouds are buzzing with rage,
Yet the water remains calm, ever so gently moving,
As the storm marches closer.

A man and his dog are running now,
Trying to escape the inevitable wrath of the gods.
The clouds let out a war cry, roaring above their warning,
While the flowers open up their petals, welcoming their sensation.

Without a second left to think,
The large, dark clouds unleash their anger.
Heavy, large raindrops erupt from the sky.
There isn’t a sight of any blue sky to be seen,
Except the darkness that has imbulged the sky.
Elizabeth Desser
6–8th Grade

Simplicity

Alone in crowd of muted colors
darkest shade solus in the middle
overlooked and forlorn

Layers after layer of dull colors
like pieces of a puzzle fitting together
further out the more complex
yet simple

Bland tones enclosed by a lustrous frame
insipid and sheen
device a simple beauty
to create a perfect harmony

Diverse yet equivalent
all tints on the big color wheel
all humans on the planet we all call home

Differences coexisting
To create unity, not discord
to be a community, to be one
The Venetian’s Life

Venetians silently unseen, alive within the paint in fragmented brushstrokes. The light fades, the playful sky nurtures, the canals bring purpose. Just another day in this city on the water.

A cathedral in the distance, a steeple with its cross, both guard the Grand Canal from the uncertainty of the outer world.

The gondolas, roped to spiraling, ancient struts that keep the boats from floating afar. As if held by the gentle arms of a mother.

A person wrapped up, gone in its own life, can not see the array of colorful hues that lay with the hidden within the paint.

The hardships of a venetian finding its purpose in life. Looking into the water which transforms an old, wrinkly, wise face into a young mind that feels everything but knows nothing.

He looks away when the sun ends its day, and the nightlife of a venetian emerges.

The late-night pubs open, and the pigeons reclaim the squares and alleyways.

A whole new world opens as the sun goes down. The darkening colors say farewell to the day.

A hazy evening ensues from the steam of the boats. A scene rather normal at the end of a bustling day.
Ben Heckert
6–8th Grade

The Glade

Oak Openings or my backyard
Clear sky or windy day
Either way

The trees climb tall
The birds soar far
Not a human near, not a shop, nor a bar

The trees mixed together
All shades of green
Together they stand, all tall and lean

The sky, light blue
The shrubs, vivid green
Either way, one of the most beautiful sights ever seen

A dirt path lie
Winding down the land
Trampled by the soles of men

There lie a painting
Surrounded by the safety of a frame
Rustic gold with fine detail
Miriam Hill
6–8th Gradee

One Spirit

As the sun lights the sea
There comes outstanding beauty
With one drop it shatters
The surface is not what matters
Ripples, energy in rushing waves
The drop is one with the sea

So simple on the surface
But with so much depth
So much meaning and purpose
Every mirror, living breath

Far beneath the surface
Many lives flourish
So much more than meets the eye
The place where trillions live and die

One universe, many lives
Each piece: plain, simple
United, indescribable
Flexible
Shifts and changes at any angle
A person is seen differently by one than another
Not one soul can see their potential

When seen individually, only glass
But beneath lies reflection of perfect light
A million individuals together are a million
Who can achieve so much more than any one might
Sanibel Kujawa
6–8th Grade

What lay on the other side?

New adventure awaits
Not all know their new fates.
The sturdy gate stands in their way
What lay beyond, brand new day or an empty bay?

The metal is harsh yet elegant
And every detail is so evident
There is gray and there is gold
The gate is simply quite bold

Glory and a life of happiness on one side
Leaving behind all of the tears that have been cried.
A smiling face roams the streets
A wonderful sight to all he greets.

The other side is filled with loneliness and desperation
Where all of life has lost concentration.
The flowers are wilting and the sky is gray
All one wants is a little hey, are you doing ok?

Every face looks so curious
But some still seem slightly furious
Yet no one wants to scold
For the world beyond will soon unfold
The Pureness of Nature

A rainbow is formed by sunlight,  
Shining through tiny raindrops,  
The rain bends the light from the sunshine,  
And colors the sky for all of us.

Red and green, colors of Christmas  
The time I spend with my family

The pureness of light  
My eyes can not believe.  
God divided it out  
And made a beauty spectrum for me.

Shining for the heart  
My eyes to behold.  
Joy for the youth,  
Promise for the old.

Reflection of the sun  
Alive, free, and bright.  
A backdrop of rain  
Colors, the fire of light.

Arch through the sky  
Gift of his care.  
The presents of God  
In a rainbow so rare.
The Clockwork Town

The people in the town work and roam.
The sky is full of grey clouds.
Yet the people there don’t care, they still call it home.
The buildings are so close, it seems overcrowded.

The stone of the buildings are so old,
The ghost of the people who placed them down are gone.
The smoke from the chimneys billows out into the cold
Frosty air; the sleepy town yawns,

After long days of work,
To keep their bustling city alive.
Working in shifts like clockwork,
So they may thrive.

The mighty church tower protects its civilians,
With its great position.
Divik Patel
6–8th Grade

**Horizon**

The wind howled and the boat rocked
Wood creaked beneath my feet as waves crashed against the boat.
I stare into the horizon;
knowing that I might not make it.
Knowing, knowing, knowing.

One of the greatest and worst things about life,

Now the sun starts to set.
The sky blazes with color, yet provides no warmth.
The last gasp of beauty before the world fades into darkness.
I prepare myself.
Preparing, preparing, preparing

I hope we will hit land.
That is my greatest desire.
We will have made it through the hardships and struggles.

Joy and excitement will course through my veins.
There will be endless possibilities,
endless opportunities,
endless adventures.
Endlessness, endlessness, endlessness

We will be Free.
free to roam the land,
free to make our own choices,
free to have our own life.
Life, life, life,

Hard, sad, painful, delightful, hopeful, adventures life.
Nature’s Trophy

High waves crash against warped wood
The silent air, deafening.
I see no boats, no fish, no birds of any kind,
I drift alone, alone in the sea.

I look out across a watery grave,
At the beautiful purple and orange,
That meet at the edge of the world,
Created by the setting sun.

The wind fills my sails,
Edging me forward on this perilous journey,
As the waves crash against the wall,
Carrying me further out to sea

Away from my homeland, no chance at salvation,
Nature’s trophy,
Ensnared forever,
Upon the sea.

Devyn Pienta
6–8th Grade

Nature’s Trophy

The 2019 TMA Board of Directors recognizes this work in honor of Director Brian Kennedy and his efforts to build, develop, strengthen, and expand directions in the permanent collection. Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 2018.25
Joy Reams
6–8th Grade

The Waves Crash

Swish Swish
There the waves go
Colliding with the sides of the boat
I am breathing deeply
Waiting for the tides to calm
Looking up I pray to mother Mary
Calm the tides
Going from side to side banging my head each time
And of the sudden I
Black out

Then I see bright colors is in my face
The sun is setting
Pink, yellow, and orange
I feel as though I am flying but I suddenly realize

I am and I even appear to be a bird
Looking down at my family mourning over my body as they wrap my body
to dump it into the ocean
I scream but what comes out is a little chirp
I sing to them hoping they can hear
I miss them so much
It is like my family is being ripped away from my family
I look at my mom and think
Do not cry we will be together
One day as a family
Girl at a Trough with a Bucket

It does not catch your eye.
But once you look,
It pulls you in.
It gives off some sort of radiance,
of something interesting.
Unfinished.
Uncertainty.
What’s the story?
Is she sad?
Where is she from?
What is she thinking?
This is what gives off the radiance.
Imagination.
Is she feeding something?
Is there a purpose?
Is she in the country?
If you want to, she can be.
Artistry.
The Dark Lords

Hatred of a name makes the fear of it grow
But how can't it grow when you only know
Voldemort and the KKK
No one else to blame
Fear of them itself is a stabbing pain

Memories of happiness are long gone
When they harm with killings and fear
Remove lives with the swish of a wand

To think is to plan and to plan is to do
There are no ways to remove what these people have done to
The millions of beings who believed like me
They wanted happiness, health, and family

The colorful swathes are only imaginary
Ideal ideas of what could have been or be
Masking the truth in a rainbow is not what I see
You can pretend all you want
Hope and dream away
But history will always be here to stay

Forgetting history is one way to guarantee
It will repeat itself if we can't see clearly
Their choices should be remembered
Or we will be reliving our worst nightmares
The downfall of our past and present
All at the hands of history
Alone

I have lived my whole life with no voice—
Stuck
Masked by everyone else,
Engulfed by a cloak that stands out from the others.

I walk alone,
different.
Separated from the life of my peers.
Bringing myself up, only to be walked over once more.

I stick my hand out for help,
searching for a path to follow.
But my hand remains cold.
No warmth or comfort has come,
and I stand alone in this place of terror and mistakes.

If only I could fly away,
escape this place and soar through the sky,
open my wings like a bird of freedom and peace.

But reality has set in and once again I am trapped in this world.
My voice contained,
imprisoned by a mask of adults and fear.
Madrin Snyder
9–12th Grade

Bright painting

Bright colorful neen
Makes me think of summer
Pink, orange, and bright yellow
A hot summer drink with polka dot straws

Three straws for three thirsty people
Lots of brightness to blind you
Turn For the Worse

Waves crashing against the hull of the boat
Icy, blue, and mysterious
Wind blows strongly from the west
A wonderful day to sail

A glowing orb dips into the dark sea
Transforming into a show of brilliant colors
Wind howling even stronger than before
Rocking and waving

Wind is whipping us off course
Looking at the sky and seeing something strange
The corner of this magnificent sky is disappearing
Peeling away from existence

Sky going from light pink to white
All happening in the blink of an eye
Feeling the air shift
A happy day turned into a horrifying one

Rushing back to land
White sky starts to follow
Wondering if it’s the end
Will we ever make it home
The wind blowing ahead,  
The noon of the damned,  
With some freshly picked flowers  
Soon to be dead  

The town was once full,  
Children playing in the streets,  
Until one fateful day,  
That made the town shrink  

The day of reckoning  
Many call it,  
When so little bombs  
Became atomic,  
When a small town  
Looked like it got hit by a comet  

Though so many people  
Perished that day,  
Only a single building really remained,  
The flower shop owned  
By a person named Helene  

On the edge of the blast,  
The window of the shop flashed,  
As this had signed,  
That this day  
Had been many people’s last
One Driving Force

I look out the window of this building, workplace, factory, mill. Dense, green, forest surrounds me, a river below, dusty clouds above. A pleasant breeze cools my face.

My work winds down, I observe, wading ducks, soaring birds, working men and women.

Across, a man works on his little boat, jostling with tangled ropes and nets, preparing to sail.

Women wash in the clear, blue river, cleaning their linens, clothes, towels, dishes, pots, and pans.

Everything surrounds the water, the river, a master provider, an essential to humanity, invaluable.

Powers the mill, Refreshes the wildlife, Washes our textiles, Ferries us far and wide.

We must show our respect, gratitude, for all it has supplied by keeping it healthy, pure, as it is the driving force of life.
Ekphrastic Writing

POETRY CONTEST 2020