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 Ekphrastic Poetry Contest submissions.

Please note that entries may discuss topics that are considered upsetting, disturbing, or offensive by some readers.
Our Last March

How do I forage the nature of our demise:
Do bees beckon the fruit to become on boughs
Or do they simply gather what they can
Before coldness sets in
And bestow faultless masterpieces
As postscripts to their beloved blossoms

Charity Anderson
Amy Ballard

FIND ME

Vacant rooms on vacant floors
deserted windows, darkened doors
courtyard in shadow all times of day
shell of a hermit crab moved away

This will be me when he is gone
until I can turn the power on
and find some furnishings of my own
like the ones he said I’d outgrown

Find some tapestries, sculpture,
glass open the window, let the breeze pass
plant geraniums, paint the door
You’ll find me sunny, myself once more
Janice Bethany

On a Gray Scale

Inside the museum is a portrait of a man. You notice his tailored coat, vest, neck cloth elaborately looped,

his look of mild restlessness caused perhaps by sitting so still with life calling beyond the backdrop. The manuscript prop is

a sign of his literacy, and the man surely apprenticed and achieved, earning the means for this portrait, a mark of status.

You study his reserved, reflective gaze, finding quiet visions in his smile. He appears to be a fair man; if he

were a barrister, his searching eyes say he would weigh both sides of your premise. His lean physique implies temperance.

The slight erosion of hairline speaks to past and coming years. Painting the man’s thick hair, the artist may have brought out

resistant strokes in both their natures but not at either’s expense. This man was somebody. A choice was made to

portray him modestly, in black and white oil on panel, leaving you with the man’s understated place on a gray scale.
O two-faced gossip, wear the spiraling helmet and your dual punishment, tattooed like ringworm boring into your surprised skins. With one face you must hear like a man, with the other, listen like a woman, weeping forever at what he said, she said. Labyrinthine language tightens in whining coils, one torturing each ear. Soft whispers carry sharp messages, martial throwing stars that carve your conscious, your conscience. Listen painfully and you must eternally, your neck cords straining at attention; lips part, nostrils flare, eyes round: What have you heard? What do you hear? Fiery news singes your brain, steams from every orifice and armless, you can never loosen this hell-helmet. Its leather leash braided into your elaborate necklace binds you to the iron block where you relentlessly, endlessly listen, listen.
Kelly Eckel

Distinguishable Revulsion

Who controls the eyes I see in the mirror?
It is me, I blur your vision to withhold the truth
What is the purpose of your torture?
To purge your dreams with unrealistic expectations
How do you keep my loathing so fierce?
I tell you that you are nothing
Why would you wish me harm?
Because I am you

Pablo Picasso
Woman with a Crow, 1904
Charcoal, watercolor, and gouache on paper, mounted on pressboard
Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1936.4
Capella rises, dusk replaces day;  
the shepherd’s star now guides the goats that roam.  
It’s a sign that pierces clouds and lights the way  
of a weary peasant woman bound for home.

Barefoot, she treads the dusty well-worn path.  
Around her waist a silver sickle’s tied  
to cut down brambles, briers and long grass  
that grows prolific in the countryside.

She’s gathered new potatoes in the field;  
they fill a hessian bag she’s holding high,  
while in the distance Angelus bells peal,  
reminder of a son who came to die.

At home she’ll rest; her day of work is done.  
She’ll rise again, at dawn, to greet the sun.
Sarah Fisher

Unreachable

Each square a shadow of someone who attended this table,
The visage of a soul no longer present,
Each section its own story woven into a room now unattended.
Huge and dark at first, yet so bright within its intricate depths.
Nothing left to feed us but expectation.
I desperately want to tear it from the wall, to breathe the smell of distant fabric into my lungs,
To feed the texture to my brain with my fingertips, holding the seams and memorizing them.
I walk away with clenched fists, fighting my own breath.
The feast gone, deliciousness devoured,
An empty table left alone stabs at my soul over and over again.
I return for more, repeatedly standing in its beautiful emptiness.
I am bound with the questions of a vastness unanswered, clinging only to the hope of something later,
A calm white cloth screaming out its need for more.
My heart is on this wall.
Walter Glasshouse

The Door to Infinity

Infinite, serene, the endless expanse suggests divinity incarnate
In a glance, perception morphs with every subtle change in iris angle
Lights that radiate inside like the songs of vibrant angels
Solace to her mind, polka dots in time... Quell the anxious mutterings with details pointed fine
Thank you for the stillness... The mirrored silhouettes rebuild us
Thank you for the fire that flies softly from your soul
Thank you for the water that you’ve offered down below
Unafraid to see forever, you travel outside boundaries of dimension
You peer into our consciousness, revealing all intention
Have I?

You came here to find rest. And now so have I.
This grass, yellowed, in the late season, is withered.

Once, it stained the feet of my childhood, green with life, running in a spring breeze, reveling in a summer to come.

We found our color here, a dazzling ballet of wildflowers and contentment.

All too quickly I let that verdant dance wash over me while I chased death, and took you with me.

I desired more, and so many long hours I offered to the Insatiable so I could give us what you already had.

All the while like these trees offering their shade in the autumn sun you waited.

I did not know more could become less until the cold breeze of winter’s grasp ripped you away.

Now these leafless trees that once sang are silent. After a season, you found what you wanted. After too many, so have I.
Melissa Helton

Pandemic

Girl. I feel ya. Hands and feet half way toward movement, to hopping off that perch, but stalled. It’s a pandemic and we’re still in the graph’s upswell. The galleries are empty, the libraries and restaurants. Graduations and weddings canceled. I know you’re worried about your sick sister and your old, old mom, the kids at home turning feral, the scary, scary news. I see your big head filled with all those thoughts, your eyes cast toward the floor under the weight, your body 100% inertia. I understand, darling. Let’s share this moment on the livestream because it’s all we can do. Because love, right now, is an empty building. Love, right now, means staying away.
Lydia Horvath

Woman: Vahine

How I came to be
faceless, a counterbalance
and how I was included
by that man
in the same way as
a beast of burden, a tree
important only as
acquisition, composition –
my real meaning
forgotten, left out,
or worse –
  twisted into
  something alien

How it was that I
sat for him,
talked for him, even
  Allowed him –

So exotic to each other
it seemed enough, at first –
but with
decision, volition
all out of balance –
  only him with a face,
  choosing the time,
  the place

How the day drew on
with warning, an omen
a sign of thunder but
no rumble
showing the spirits’ imbalance
my sisters seeing, but
passing us by
  Better to leave it be
  and forget,
I heard them thinking,
heads bowed,
mouths silent,
knowing what was coming
Jacob Kempf

And I Approach the Weapon

I don’t know
what it was
that woke me that grey dawn.
Did I even hear something,
or was it my imagination:
The porter? Slack? Steel wheels on steel rails?
Footsteps quickening in the hallway
thrust me to my roomette door,
a figure emerges from the darkness,
stocky and cumbersome, it moves toward me.
I duck out of sight as the hunchback passes.
Seconds to minutes and I’m in the empty hall,
a glint lowers my gaze downward
and I approach the weapon
as a beast stalking its prey.
A quick sweep and the machine is gone,
snatched under my skin for a short time.
I disappear again into the roomette,
my free hand opens the latch, humidity entering.
Soon, I feel much lighter, freer, calmer.
The humidity is gone and I’m at ease again
not even thinking twice as the quickening wheels
lull me back into my sleep.
Matt Kizaur

What They Say In Aberdeen
An Elegy for Janet Crane Barley

Only kindred souls truly knew the misty-mystery blue of you.
Braemar’s breathing shuddered upon your leaving, our full hearts cleaving
Trees and mountains upon sky, the closing of your eyes, lost among the waters of why
A tapestry wrend, our circle-thoughts ended, the tatters of matters pretended:

Will-o’-the-Wisps’ soft-kiss whispers and scriptures of missing her.
What they say in Aberdeen, about this once-girl who came to glean
Stories of Finn, the one and only, and ale offerings to the Seonaidh
Bespoke herbridean promises and honor-bound Culloden marches
She wove threaded words for clan and kin, winding ways there and back again
Blessing Sir John’s Aigas Hides, rolling tales of lochs and downs and tides
The Framer’s cloud-piercing light, and sacred-lantern incants’ night
The sleepy heads of sullen maids, spitting kelpie curses on their graves.

She kept them all in painted prose, pleating stories each Highlander knows.
Hold fast the lonely hunter and fairy-glow Cú, the magic salmon in spring-river new
And walk among the clouded moors, through heather fields and oaken doors
To feel sprite-moments of her loving heart, banishing achy doubt as each depart.
Lisa Kokoski

**Rock Solid**

Water and earth  
Potash feldspar, quartz, plagioclase, biotite, and hornblende  
Points, lines, angles, surfaces  
Euclid and Burton  
Perimeter = 2 \( (a + b) \)  
Area = Base \( \times \) Height

He rolls his red walker off road and makes a beeline to one of the legless chairs,  
Connects some black flecks with his index finger, locks the hand brakes, and lands hard on the polished seat.  
The stacked parallelograms are joined at the hip.

I sit sideways on the mate, lean into the angled back, and fold my left arm on the warm shelf beside me.  
He won’t hear me unless I aim for his right ear.  
“Boy, this is living,” he says as he pulls a few Hershey’s miniatures from his pressed shirt pocket.  
We divide them even-steven and share the water I carried in my pack.

He looks at the tree and we try to guess its age.  We wonder how far its roots stretch.  
He marvels at the aimless grain of our granite chairs.  I have seen it before in a state capitol.  
We can’t decide if the chairs were permanently placed by man, men, or crane.  
He tells me again how much he loves rocks  
And then scans the sky for birds.

I hear him softly sing *Amazing Grace*, but it is  
How Great Thou Art that comes to mind.
Sonnet: To the Swallows

Within our campus, spring’s sure sign arrives
Appointed day when feathered friends return
O’er causeway gracing skies with swooping dives
At last appears glad sight for which I yearn.

Admire their fork-tailed royal coats of blue
Take note: an open beak’s sweet chitt’ring ways
Arise high soaring, drop and glide on cue
And water-skim ’mid sun’s bright glitt’ring rays.

But those who trod on by all miss the show
With lowered heads hunched over screens they stare
While circled flights crisscross above and low
Air acrobats performing feats so rare.

If I but stop and watch a moment here
Perhaps you too may share this joy so dear.
Frank O’Hara Undisplayed (in the Closet)

I visit my favorite museum
wanting to pay a visit
to Frank O’Hara.
It’s been a while since I’ve seen him--
half-reclining on the couch
with the Bonnard slipcover he never picked out
his elbow slumped into a cushion
right arm draped across abdomen,
bare legs spread and toes curled.
He’s so comfortable, there’s plenty of room
I’m sure he’ll invite me in
offer me a soft drink, drop the new
Bud Powell on the turntable
(his friend Fairfield Porter
out back cleaning his brushes)
He knows I’ll stay silent and listen
as he laments Lana Turner’s collapse
and Billie Holiday’s demise.
I promise not to overstay my welcome
to keep my outright sadness
over his impending death
and his absence from these gallery walls
to myself.
Timothy Langhorst

Silence

Enter in to it.
A serene, intimate solitude.
Light creating suggestions of permanence.

Like atmospheric music, a melisma of dust motes,
Notes, subdued piano, electronic drone, violin,
drifting, scattered, forming.

It envelopes you
Revealing a place
That remembers and forgets.

Transitory light
like wool of the Avassi sheep, spun yarn, dyed in natural shades,
Hushed, monochromatic hues,
A resonant rainbow of grey, brown, black on patterned, textured wall.

A simple table,
Offset, bearing no weight,
Rests on an inarticulate horizon between floor and wall;
an undorned white cloth, purposefully draped over the table
waiting for the magician to snatch the material away
revealing a secret.

This modest space
like the possibilities of an open-ended question
speaks and sings, soundlessly musical.
Threads of life and death, chaos and certainty.
Connecting and disconnected.
Nodédet beyn ór uveyn ófel
Moving between light and darkness.

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1 Recommend that this be read while listening to Into Silence I by Jane Antonia Cornish, from the album, Into Silence.

2 Nodédet beyn ór uveyn ófel (Moving between light and darkness) from Five Hebrew Love Songs, by Eric Whitacre, lyrics by Hila Plitmann.
David Lymanstall

Praise Light

I rise each day
Before dawn,
When the blackness of night
Envelopes the
Determined light of morning,
To witness
The transition, the birthing
Of a new day.
To see
The magic of light
Refract from
The feather of a bird,
Restoring the glory
To pigments of every shade,
As they appear to say, “good day”
To the fading night.

Melchior d’Hondecoeter
Poultry in a Landscape, 1660s
Oil on canvas
Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1949.102
Amanda McGuire

Modern Marquetry

Above the single wall oven, a fresh jar of pickled cucumbers.
And out the picture window, a sunset so red it’s atomic.

Where plywood and insulation have fallen so has a tree,
its limbs a clothesline: a yellow tee with baby doll sleeves,
green trim, and a bow at the center of its collar. There are
hints of beauty here—framed indigenous art, unblemished,
wheat shellac on the vintage toaster—among this disaster.
Slow down, my love. Look carefully. What was once the fridge
now a bird cage, chicken wire and padlocks. By the sink,
a tube for rainwater, harvested in a clear plastic dispenser.

String and twig hardware on the cabinet, closed. In the open,
glass jars with naked labels, a metal tin that once held cookies.

Have you noticed, dearest? It’s us, living this, in our own home,
and we are barely surviving, even though the linoleum is in tact.

Alison Elizabeth Taylor

Kitchen, 2014

Wood veneer, oil, acrylic and shellac
Purchased with funds given in memory of Larry Thompson by his children and grandchildren, 2014.22
So Much Color and Well-Being in the Air

Who needs a sky with a roof so blue?
Strokes of wind bruise the upper air
And whip the greenery into spiral waves
But can’t perturb the white façade.

The house sprawls with a natural ease
And huddles close by its neighbors.
It gathers the countryside around its door
And the land returns a hard embrace.

The rambling stone wall beside the road
Seems sprung complete from the sloping ground.
Behind it a garden is tossed in bloom
And in front, red poppies clamor in the grass.

A fitting habitation, thinks the summer guest,
As perfect in its purpose as a robin’s nest.

Gary Momenenee
James J. Momenee

The Reaper

The reaper toils at harvesting souls in the spirit of Millet, 
Beneath the “Good God Sun” on an Auvers’ summer’s day

Vibrant yellow sheaves of wheat flood the fields with golden light,  
Tassels of grain swirl and sway from the mistral’s menacing might

A cumulus cloud floats slowly over the frenzy down below,  
Casting its shadow provides fleeting relief from July’s fiery glow

Wielding his sickle he slashes the stalks at a constant steady pace,  
Wearing his wide brim straw hat that shades his weathered face

Ghostly bound stacks of wheat line up to receive the eternal promise,  
God’s grace is bestowed upon the disciple for a blessed and bountiful harvest

Vincent van Gogh
Wheat Fields with Reaper, Auvers, 1890
Oil on canvas
Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1935.4
As soon as my eyes land on the painting, *Rooks in a Field*, I recall that small packet of cards in my grandma’s upstairs drawer, Rook. A game I never got to play as an only child. Yet, I loved that picture: A Rook’s silhouette on the deck. I marvel at how much Rooks look like crows. Crows always fascinate me, they’re no “bird brains,” they make their own tools, they take on complicated tasks, they recognize human faces, they play pranks. It is odd a group of them are called a murder. Perhaps that’s where Hitchcock got his idea for using them in his thriller, *The Birds*. A movie that instilled fear of these creatures for years in so many. I admit these birds look ominous when flying in a flock overhead or looking to land – perhaps searching for food, a respite from a long flight. Or are these birds I’m looking at carrying an omen – that these coughs in the gallery are the precursor for a coming pandemic, where unlucky humans stay stationary and solitary, while Rooks (and crows) in fields still flock and are free to come and go.
Sarah Ray

The American’s Dream

Columns sprout like trees
from the earth. Gold leaf
capitals adorn the skyline.
The muses arrive on the breeze
shaping and sculpting this motif
of high society shine.

From my balcony I see
a fantasia to false gods,
built on slave labor suffering.
We are not free!
The man on the pedestal nods,
and demands our offering.

One day the river will rise!
The marble will erode!
That is all to which I aspire,
here in a nation built on lies.
Horrors of his generation, to us bestowed!
Nevertheless, burning bright, there is a fire.
On “Two on the Aisle”

The dinner hadn’t gone as planned, but now they were here
She had put on the dress, beads and lace, an intricate show
And now, the fear
A pearl earring lost, rolling beneath the velvet row
Of seats, empty now, as he stood waiting, unable to see or hear
She was ready to leave, but could not go
And now the lights were down, heavy curtains, slowly skimming the floor
The beginning of the show
She breathed in and smelled the fog of make-believe, burgundy lips, wanting more
Kelly Rothgeb

Glory of the Cherry Blossom

Look up at the stream of lights and blasts
How they glisten and mock the cries of the innocent
Children screaming and begging for mercy
Fire immerses their dreams forgotten
Washington gloats in their glory
Another win they say
They do not feel the despair and loss
The millions of dollars falling from the cherry blossoms blur their vision
Poetry of the Soul

Light in lace patterns,
Creating shadow chiaroscuros among the trees,
Like how the sun shines through stained glass,
Casting mosaics onto the forest floor
In kaleidoscopic shapes,
Stars fallen to Earth,
Prismatic meteors.
Taller than Gothic towers,
The trees instill quiet and peace,
Breathing life into your spirit
Amid the stillness of the woods,
Your feet upon the dirt,
Entwined with your roots,
Telling you your truth
Like sermons in a cathedral would do.
This Is Our Reclamation

My mother sinks bulbs into soil
and their sprouting is her first full breath.
Her lungs expand with the garden’s rising
and by summer the sky is hers to inhale.
She brings me fragrant clippings.
This is heritage:
The extension of self through creation
and the sharing of it, as if to say,
*i am worthy of space.*
*And so are you.*
So I take up the pen.
The words form like birds at bath,
lifting and swooping, warbling joy
and heartbreak. There is beauty even
in their making—the turn of my wrist, the pause
of my hand, the rhythm of rooting thumbprint
onto paper. This writing is a charting.
*i, too, have walked.*
*i, too, have story.*
This is how I become, like so many women,
the rain clearing its throat after drought.
Each stroke a drop reclaiming land.
I open in splashes, silver arms
raised in victory.

Chungli Choo
Vase, 1986
Electroformed copper, silver plate
Gift of The Georgia Welles Apollo Society, 1996.10
Andrew Newell Wyeth
The Hunter, 1943
Tempera on masonite
Elizabeth C. Slocum Bequest Fund, 1946.25

Michael Schulz
It’s Time To Move On

We perch inside the limbs and freeze
with fear. We see The Hunter, watch the peeling bark,
the falling leaves. Beyond the hills, the cattle eat the skin
from fallen trees. The grass has turned to dust.
The tanbark used to line the floors of circus tents,
the pieces broken up on racetracks, crushed
beneath the hooves. We want to fly away and find a pond,
where tannins leach and turn the water brown like tea.
We want to drink the wine inside the cooper’s barrel,
after years of shaping hundred year old trees.
We never knew a buttonwood is just a sycamore,
or that it’s used to make the smokeless coal that burns
inside The Hunter’s stove. We feel the cold.
The wind is pushing us to chase the sun.
We want to leave, but know, with just a look,
to wait until the shots are fired, before we burst into the sky.
Caged Bird

Just look at you,
feathered, coiffed, corseted, chokered, muffed,
shod - no peek of delicate ankle bone,
a caged pretty bird! Contained!

Will you lift your heavy skirts above your ankle to flee from your perch
step by step
into the square where sculptures of men and might reign?
Your eyes hint maybe.
Yet, you may not walk about London alone!
You’ve no means to support!
You must temper your intelligence!
Your place is in the home!
You’ve no right to vote!
Rigid mores forbid your flight!

Before sleep, your body deliciously freed from its pretty-bird couture,
luxuriates,
as you loosen your pinned chestnut hair.
Running your bared hands through it,
you contain your hair in a braid.

Slipping into your nightdress, you cover your body once more.
In darkness, when his wiry, ruddy beard rasps your softness,
the cage door - open for only a whisper - closes.
**Susan Spencer**

**Instagram Man**

Hey you
Yes you, you Instagram man
I see the way you look at me
Through beady eyes and voluptuous chin
Stop looking, please
You say I am yellow and short, my eyes stay open in the middle of the night
I am not, so I pull the skin off my fingers, just the rough parts
I pray you stop, please
And now I eat too much, and too little
I go get bulb cancer, I rock back and forth on the bus
How about now, Instagram man?
Still rocking
You look funny, we laugh, eyes leaking
But there is no we
And there is no you
You are me
George Stamos

Melancholy Serenade

Another night
Of classical music
Before me,
To bore me.
The struggle for
Eyes to stay open.
My chin bouncing,
Snapping back,
The precise jab
Of the Steinway keyboard
Making my head
A speed bag.
And she,
Of the private box,
Takes no notice of me,
Her coat is being checked
By a man in tails
And perhaps,
After the performance,
He will drink champagne
From her slipper,
While I take
My toast and tea
In the study,
And let Proust put me
In the catbird seat.
Withholding

Rothko’s planes of layered pigments barely press toward each other like teenaged thighs—inadvertently but controlled, aligning in football bleachers.
Like china cabinet wine glasses hovering, not clinking together at footsteps.

My son taps his phone. My onions simmer on the stovetop. I don’t ask if he’s ever kissed a girl or boy.
I can’t remember for him the first time he gasped and screamed in sterile hospital air.
I can’t press his chest against another to ignite sparks.

Some pigments were never intended to blend, or would bleed so fully they would transform.
He thinks he knows the risk in transformation.
It’s as if Rothko knew I could never say everything, knew that my son would never boil over, that I can’t remember for him the moment he decided to lean away, and I can’t instead unsteady his balance into me.
Sometimes two beings are bridged only by air carrying the scent of browning butter. Some bodies coexist, appreciating, simmering from safe distance, like a dare.
Dedicated to the 17 victims of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas H S shootings in Parkwood, FL on Valentine’s Day, 2018.

Though they are not, they might be Huck and Tom, Becky and Emmaline, gallants and gals in a simpler time. The wild woodlands, the verdure of white pines, the golden rust of birches, fuse, blend in ripples upon the shallow face of a slow, welcoming brook. How lazy the day, how innocent the guidance, the helping hands. The boulders and the treefalls have shoulders rounded by time, are too sage to suggest anything but peaceful whispers or a refreshing nap.

One boy, shoeless in the water, holds steady, his feet planted in the painting’s background; while his friends balance atop a fallen log, bridging the waters and the painting’s foreground. Children, can you imagine what lies beyond the next hill, or the place I view you from? For you, the death and carnage of the Civil War is one decade gone. But other disasters are lurking: soon, someone may stumble upon your little paradise and clear the trees; someday, an entrepreneur may wet his hanky in the brook before drilling a well that pollutes the water. Far worse, someone you know and trust may blame you for his misfortune and his pain, and bring a rifle to school and slaughter your friends, obliterating their futures.

As families mourn, someone else will defend the insanity, claiming (using highfalutin words) that killing children is a right guaranteed by a piece of paper so infirm it is housed in a museum. It will be up to you, 21st Century Beckys, Toms & Hucks, to reach out again and set things right, to speak up and demand safe schools—as you are—and end the philosophical tomfoolery. I wish I could be blind to the countless horrors that taint the time and space separating you and I, jading this portrait of your wholesome day afiel—because it breaks my heart to see what you once were and what we have become.
ADULT
Ekphrastic Writing
POETRY CONTEST 2020