

## THE ART OF WRITING ABOUT ART

This afternoon, I'd like to give you an overview of ekphrastic poetry, which is a big fat Greek term for art which reflects on other art, usually poems about paintings. In this talk, I hope to be giving you some practical craft suggestions that you might want to use in your own work. There really is no "right or wrong" way to create an ekphrastic poem, just a number of different approaches. I'm not intending to give a poetry reading or an art history lecture, even though I'll do little bit of both, but I will try to be as hands-on as possible.

The term "ekphrastic" comes from the Greek, and originally meant "to describe" or "tell in full." (from "ek" for "out" and "phrazan" for "declare or pronounce"). In terms of contemporary writing, it's really just a fancy term used for a poem written in response to a work of visual art—usually, a painting, sometimes a sculpture, and less often, a conceptual artwork or installation.

Jorie Graham was asked in an issue of *Poetry*, "Can one 'get' your poem without having seen the painting?" She replied, "Well, the long history of ekphrastic poetry [for example, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"] assumes one can, as few such poems are ever printed with an image alongside [Side note: This is largely because of cost. Online journals can often do this, and I have a fair number of pairings on *Verse-Virtual* and *The Ekphrastic Review*, which you can see in their archives via my website] Back to Jorie Graham: Some poets feel the represented image would distract from the poem. I would have loved to have the Matisse painting on the cover of my book, but the Centre Pompidou would not give permission. At any rate, a painting is, in a poem, a painting run through an imagination and a spirit other than the painter's. It's not trying to describe the painting, it is trying to speak from it." In other words, it's not Matisse's painting any more, it's his painting filtered by Jorie Graham's poetic sensibilities. I can't put it any better than Graham just did, so let's begin our exploration of the various approaches one might take in writing an ekphrastic poem.

I like to think of paintings like Richard Hugo did in his essay, "The Triggering Town," that they're just the "way in" to your true subject, whatever that may be. I try to embark on these little journeys, ie. writing a poem, not knowing where they're going to take me; as Robert Frost said, "If you know where a poem is going, start there."

And a quick technical detail about writing ekphrastic poetry. In writing a poem, make sure you give proper attribution to the painting, either in your title, or as an epigraph, in italics, under your title, with the name of the painter, painting, date, and medium used, if you know it.

I was an English major and Art History minor as an undergraduate, so what especially draws me to ekphrastic work is that I love looking at paintings. This gives me the perfect excuse to spend an afternoon in a museum, to buy coffee table art books, or to treat myself to an art calendar each year. One of the marvels of the modern world is that now you can jot down the titles of these slides, go home, look up the paintings I'm going to

show you on the internet, and then write poems about them yourself. Back when I was in school, in the Dark Ages, when we used manual typewriters for word processing, all we could do was pencil sketch the slides in a darkened classroom, and then hope we might remember them on an exam three months later. . . .

## GREATNESS

*George Bilgere*

Monet came in from the cold,  
stomping his boots and shaking off the snow.  
He was in his haystack period  
and he was working on the haystack of winter,  
which was proving to be much harder than the haystack of fall.

That one had been easy. The mellow afternoons  
turning cool with a hint of wood smoke at twilight.  
The ducks coming low over the wheat stubble.  
But now his hands and feet, even his paints, were frozen.  
However, he was great—a great painter,  
the inventor of Impressionism—  
which was a consolation.

Alice took his coat, unlaced his boots,  
and sat him down at the dinner table.  
She knew what was coming: a long talk about the haystack  
over wine and her *coq au vin*. She thought,  
*I eat my suppers with a man who spends his days  
staring at a haystack. Week after week. Month after month.*  
She loved him for his passion,  
his steady, bulldog fidelity, but sometimes  
she felt a twinge of jealousy toward the haystack.

Soon it would be spring, and Monet  
would be painting the haystack of spring. She sighed,  
a mixture of contentment and restlessness.  
The funny thing was, her *coq au vin*,  
on the scale of greatness, was actually superior  
to his haystack paintings. Alice was a genius  
of the *coq au vin*, and also of the *crêpe*.  
Her *crêpes* were miracles, levitating above the plate.

Finally, she had a way of tossing her hair  
away from her high, pale forehead  
while at the same time  
scrunching her lips into a little *moue*,  
and she could do this better than any woman in Giverny—

indeed, better than any woman in all of France.

But Greatness, historically speaking, does not concern itself  
with *coq au vin* or hair-tossing,  
or even that irresistible little *moue*. Greatness, in this case,  
is the steady haystack of a man's love,  
burning, freezing, coalescing,  
but enduring  
in the changing light.

## PAINTING

- Claude Monet Haystacks <https://mymodernmet.com/monet-haystacks/>

Bilgere has clearly done his homework on this one. He knows that Monet had a number of subjects that became obsessions: the water lilies, the cathedral at Rouen, the haystacks. For me, one of the things I've learned by studying paintings is that there's nothing wrong with obsessions, with writing (or painting) in series, choosing the same subject over and over. I like the way Bilgere brings in Monet's wife (also the subject of a series of paintings), and his sense of humor. Feel free to let the painting suggest a narrative, then move it far outside the frame. . . . Remember, there are no "rules" for writing ekphrastic poems, just different approaches.

Approach #1: Speculate on the work, its creator, and/or its reception when it was painted.

Approach #2: Expand the moment into a narrative. Look *into* the painting, not at it.

Approach #3: Start by paying close attention to the painting, then move outward. Go beyond merely describing the painting (although you can start there), take us someplace else. Try not to use adjectives or adverbs (here's a great quote from Stephen King: "The Road to Hell is paved with adverbs"); remember that nouns and verbs are your power words.

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## Two Views of Delft

See how two different writers respond to this work differently.

### **VIEW OF DELFT**

*Carl Dennis*

In the view of Delft that Vermeer presents us  
The brick facades of the unremarkable buildings  
Lined up at the river's edge manage to lift the spirits  
Though the sky is cloudy. A splash of sun  
That yellows some gables in the middle distance  
May be enough to explain it, or the loving detail  
Vermeer has given the texture of brick and stone

As if he leveled each course with his own trowel.  
Doubtless stones in Cleveland or Buffalo  
May look like this on a day when the news arrives  
That a friend is coming to visit, but the stones in the painting  
Also put one in mind of the New Jerusalem,  
A city we've never seen and don't believe in.  
Why eternal Jerusalem when the people of Delft  
Grow old and die as they do in other cities,  
In high-ceilinged airy rooms and in low-beamed  
Smoky basements, quickly, or after a stubborn illness,  
Alone, or surrounded by friends who will soon feel Delft  
To be a place of abandonment, not completion?  
Maybe to someone returning on a cloudy day  
After twenty years of banishment the everyday buildings  
Can look this way or to someone about to leave  
On a journey he isn't ready to take. But these moods  
Won't last long while the mood in the painting  
Seems undying, though the handful of citizens  
Strolling the other side of the river are too preoccupied  
To look across and admire their home.  
Vermeer has to know that the deathless city  
Isn't the Delft where he'll be walking to dinner  
In an hour or two. As for your dinner, isn't it time  
To close the art book you've been caught up in,  
Fetch a bottle of wine from the basement, and stroll  
Three blocks to the house where your friend is waiting?  
Don't be surprised if the painting lingers awhile in memory  
And the trees set back on a lawn you're passing  
Seem to say that to master their language of gestures  
Is to learn all you need to know to enter your life  
And embrace it tightly, with a species of joy  
You've yet to imagine. But this joy, disguised,  
The painting declares, is yours already.  
You've been longing again for what you have.

## **VIEW OF THE CITY OF DELFT**

*George Bilgere*

In Vermeer's *View of the City of Delft*  
the city beckons from a dreamy void—

*but wait!* Hold on a minute.

Poems about paintings, poems you know  
were written during some kind of travel grant  
by a Guggenheim Fellow crazed with loneliness,

remind me of that moment on a first date  
when you realize it's not going anywhere,

that the slim, delicious thoughts  
you'd noticed slipping around the corners  
of the workdays all week, like sylphs  
idling in the palace chambers,

weren't looking at you after all.

They were waiting for someone  
you'll never be, so you might as well  
go back to the unspectacular  
weather of the town you live in,  
plain and steady as an old table,

where no fair creature of an hour,  
smelling of musk and honeysuckle  
will draw you deliriously down  
to the dark thunderhead of a nipple,

No. You two will be friends, and that's nothing  
to sneeze at, friendship being precious and rare.

Count yourself lucky  
that things between you will remain  
as they are, safely in their frame,  
like Vermeer's masterpiece,

in which the streets and buildings,  
in all their stolid respectability,  
are suspended forever

between an unattainable heaven  
and the silent river, wherein  
the city dreams, and darkens, and dreams.

#### PAINTING

➤ Johannes Vermeer View of Delft [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/View\\_of\\_Delft](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/View_of_Delft)

Note how Bilgere italicizes the title of the painting, which is the way paintings are usually cited in this type of poem. Note also the difference in the two poems, what capitalizing the words on the left hand margin does—for me, it stops the energy of the poem, but I know that traditionally, that's the way poems have been presented in the past. Your choice.

Approach #1: Use the arc that Dennis has in his poem. Start by describing the painting, move outward into a philosophic discussion, then bring it back to something personal in your life.

Approach #2: Use Bilgere's arc, which is to start with the painting, then move into a musing about ekphrasis, then into a musing about a relationship, returning in the end to the painting.

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## **THE LACEMAKER**

*Carl Dennis*

Holding the bobbins taut as she moves the pins,  
She leans in close, inches away from the fabric  
Fretted and framed on the wooden work board.

A young woman in a yellow dress  
Whose lighter hair, bound tight to her head  
But flowing over one shoulder,

Suggests the self-forgetful beauty of service,  
Service to a discipline. Just so the painting  
Forgets the background to focus on her.

Here she is, so close to the surface  
The painter could touch her if he stretched his hand.  
Close work in sympathy with close work.

The sewing cushion holding the colored threads  
Suggests a painter's palette. So Vermeer  
Offers a silent tribute to another artist

Who's increasing the number of beautiful  
Useless things available in a world  
That would be darker and smaller without them.

This is no time to ask if the woman  
Wishes she were rich enough to buy the likeness,  
If Vermeer can afford the lace she's making;

No time to consider them bandying compliments.  
They work in silence, and you may look on  
Only if you quiet your thoughts enough

To hear the click of her needles as you lean in close

(But not so close that you cast a shadow)  
And the light touch of his brush on canvas.

## PAINTING

- The Lacemaker [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Lacemaker\\_%28Vermeer%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lacemaker_%28Vermeer%29)

I love the commentary, how both painter and poet are "increasing the number of beautiful / Useless things available in a world (wait for it) / That would be darker and smaller without them." And I love his delicate use of sound (the silence, the click of her needles, the light touch of a brush on canvas.) And the way you, the reader, are part of the scene, but not so close that you cast a shadow.

Approach #1: Start with description, then let the painting become a living object with a will of its own part way in.

Approach #2: Look for parallels between poetry and painting.

Approach #3: Speculate on things outside the frame of the painting, things no one could possibly know, but which are plausible within the world the painting sets up.

Approach #4: Use your senses to approach the work: sight is obvious, but how about touch, smell, taste, sound, the visceral, the kinetic? Be aware of all of the details, the colors used, the slant of light. Get to the point where you can close your eyes and still "see" the painting.

Approach #5: Put yourself in the painting.

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## SUMMER IN THE CITY

*after Edward Hopper*  
*Kim Addonizio*

When he finished with her and the afternoon,  
he turned his face to the sheets.  
She sat on the edge of the bed,  
her breasts released from his hands  
that had squeezed her too tightly  
like the bra's elastic she'd unsnapped  
when he asked her. She was tired  
of saying no, those slow days waiting  
on tables, taking the plates of eggs  
from his fingers, seeing how he watched her  
while the meat sputtered on the grill  
in its murky fat, taking his eyes  
until she felt him inside her  
as she moved down the counter pouring coffee.  
Now he lies there dreaming,  
but not of her, and she  
has stepped into the red dress and pulled it

almost to her breasts before sitting back down.  
She can't decide if she should stay  
or leave, walk out into the dark  
the light comes from and put on her uniform  
for the late customers.  
She knows those faces,  
how they'll open like a row of flowers,  
drinking what she gives them. The man  
will come in later,  
trying on a fresh apron and avoiding her eyes,  
his hands clean, smelling of soap and cigarettes.

#### PAINTING

- Edward Hopper Summer in the City <https://biblioklept.org/2012/07/13/summer-in-the-city-edward-hopper/>

Look at how she lays out this dysfunctional relationship via just a few short phrases, hands that squeezed "too tightly," plates of eggs that become watching eyes, the adverb "sputtered," the adjective "murky." I love the enjambment: "She was tired / of saying no" and the lines "walk out into the dark / the light comes from" and the face that will open "like a row of flowers." This is the kind of narrative I admire, one that moves beyond the story into lyric moments that open out the text.

Approach # 1: Write from the point of view or become one of the people in the painting. Tell his/her story.

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#### MONET REFUSES THE OPERATION

*Lisel Mueller*

Doctor, you say there are no haloes  
around the streetlights in Paris  
and what I see is an aberration  
caused by old age, and affliction.  
I tell you it has taken me all my life  
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,  
to soften and blur and finally banish  
the edges you regret I don't see,  
to learn that the line I called the horizon  
does not exist and sky and water,  
so long apart, are the same state of being.  
Fifty-four years before I could see  
Rouen cathedral is built  
of parallel shafts of sun,  
and now you want to restore



my youthful errors: fixed  
notions of top and bottom,  
the illusion of three-dimensional space,  
wisteria separate  
from the bridge it covers.  
What can I say to convince you  
the Houses of Parliament dissolve  
night after night to become  
the fluid dream of the Thames?  
I will not return to a universe  
of objects that don't know each other,  
as if islands were not the lost children  
of one great continent. The world  
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,  
becomes water, lilies on water,  
above and below water,  
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow  
and white and cerulean lamps,  
small fists passing sunlight  
so quickly to one another  
that it would take long, streaming hair  
inside my brush to catch it.  
To paint the speed of light!  
Our weighted shapes, these verticals  
burn to mix with air  
and change our bones, skin, clothes  
to gases. Doctor,  
if only you could see  
how heaven pulls earth into its arms  
and how infinitely the heart expands  
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

#### PAINTING

- Claude Monet The Houses of Parliament <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.46523.html>

You'll notice Mueller doesn't reference one painting, but rather, ranges through a number of Monet's late works. Mueller explores in words what the Impressionists were trying to do with canvas and paint, to "fix" the moment, to capture the effects of light on water, on the cathedral, on the Houses of Parliament, the flux and fluid nature of our existence. In talking about this world, she references the next one. Edward Hopper said (painters can give you some really good quotes!) "All I ever wanted to do was to paint sunlight on the side of a barn," and again, isn't that what we're all about, trying to pin down that which is elusive, even as it slides through our hands?

Approach #1: Use the painting (s) as the subject of a meditation, ranging beyond the painting itself to explore a philosophical or social problem.

Approach #2: Write from the point of view of the artist.

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## **FRENCH CHOCOLATES**

Ellen Bass

If you have your health, you have everything  
is something that's said to cheer you up  
when you come home early and find your lover  
arched over a stranger in a scarlet thong.

Or it could be you lose your job at Happy Nails  
because you can't stop smudging the stars  
on those ten teeny American flags.

I don't begrudge you your extravagant vitality.  
May it blossom like a cherry tree. May the petals  
of your cardiovascular excellence  
and the accordion polka of your lungs  
sweeten the mornings of your loneliness.

But for the ill, for you with nerves that fire  
like a rusted-out burner on an old barbecue,  
with bones brittle as spun sugar,  
with a migraine hammering like a blacksmith

in the flaming forge of your skull,  
may you be spared from friends who say,  
God doesn't give you more than you can handle  
and ask what gifts being sick has brought you.

May they just keep their mouths shut  
and give you French chocolates and daffodils  
and maybe a small, original Matisse,  
say, Open Window, Collioure, so you can look out  
at the boats floating on the dappled pink water.  
So, this poem isn't so much about the painting as it is a call for beauty, and something  
surprising and needed, a true gift in a troubled life. Its approach is slantwise, a poem that  
starts in one place and then veers off dramatically by the end.

## **PAINTING.**

- Henri Matisse Open Window, Collioure <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.106384.html>

Approach #1: Connect the poem to something you are feeling now.

Approach #2: Do a dramatic monologue. Invent a speaker.

**Other approaches:**

Meditate on a color, brush stroke, or technique.

Move into memories the artwork evokes.

Enter into a conversation with the painting, one that you just can't resist continuing. Or ask the artist, "What's going on here? What else were you thinking of?"

Take the point of view of an object in the painting (a vase, a tree, a doorway) or a peripheral character (say, someone in a crowd), and use this as your point of entry

Meditate on a color, brush stroke, or technique.

Move into memories the artwork evokes.

Connect the poem to something you are feeling now.

Do a dramatic monologue. Invent a speaker.

One of the great traps, I think, of ekphrastic poetry, is if it merely describes the painting.