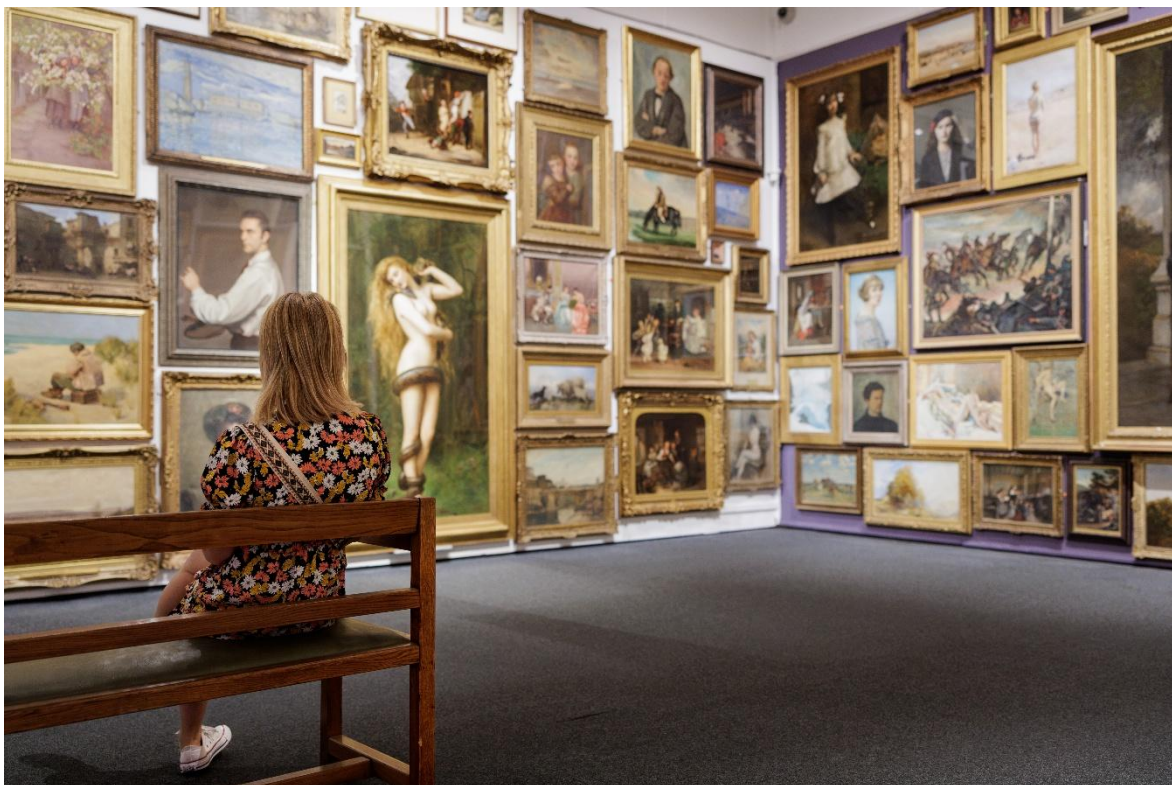


The Atkinson, in partnership with The Arts Society Southport invited anyone with links to the Sefton Borough to take part in our fourth Poetry and Creative Writing Competition. This year Inspirations were drawn from the 200+ artworks displayed in our 150th Anniversary Exhibition, on until 28 February 2026 and free to visit.

The exhibition showcases highlights from The Atkinson's fine art collection, presented in the popular 19th-century 'Salon Hang' style – where artworks are displayed floor to ceiling. With nearly 3,000 pieces spanning the 17th to the 21st centuries in the collection, this exhibition includes major works as well as rarely seen pieces brought out of storage for this special occasion.

The competition winners will be awarded prizes donated by The Arts Society Southport. The winning entries will also be displayed within the exhibition.



Inspirations:

Who Wins?

by Vittorio Reggianini (1858-1938)

Who Wins, Yes Its Beverley

By Barry Hugh Brown

(Musical Poem)



Well its off to the Atkinson gallery I go.
With a guitar on my back to play with the flow.
Oh yes its such a delight.
A gem of a place, for sure and right.
I spy a painting by Reggianini,
entitled 'Who Wins'
Such a beauty that would never dim
"Hello" says the friendly member of staff
With a welcoming smile a chat and a laugh.
"There's a writing competition" she pleasantly informs me,
Ooo goody goody that will do me,
So I ask her name, she says "Beverley"
My favorite picture is 'who wins' by Reggianini
But am renaming it
'Who wins, yes Beverley'

Inspiration:

Lilith

by John Collier (1850-1934)

Lilith Speaks

By Angela Cheveau
(Prose Poem)



I come from night's dim pit, the bellow and belch of sulphurous gloom; here in the horned dark my mouth full of ash I come spilling beetles, burrs, brambles, skin sticky with snail light, with the wind's wet tongue thrust in my ear I come from the coiled shadows, hissing rasp of grasses seething beneath a waning moon. I come from prick of thistle, wiry snicket, the thorny dark scratching at the back of your eyelids, I come tearing clouds to shreds with my teeth, nipples wind stiffened, thrill of scales scraping their rough silk against my thigh. With silt and the smoke of betrayal on my breath I come spilling secrets; of men who tried to trap me on canvas, men who feasted on the banquet of my body, who tried to pin me down with their hog hair brushes but oh no, this frame too flimsy to contain me, I command centre stage - Here in the clotted dark, I am my own universe, my own paradise; here amongst owl screech, amongst whirring nightjars performing secret ministries beneath night's thick cloak, amongst thundering blossom of blackthorn, amongst dusk damp moths flickering like some fevered memory I am the lullaby gone sour, the curdled milk dotted with dead flies, crumbled agaric. I am the upturned eye of the crow, the smirched scrying mirror, scorched wing of pipistrelle, the stinkhorn sporing into the mist. I am the bone mother cradling darkness like it's my own. I do not come to smite your child with sickness, watch it rise in frail chests like pale ghost flowers, tie tendrils of hair tight around tiny throats, no; here amongst the hemlock, monk's hood and hogweed I come to take up space, to take back what is mine. I who dared say no, who refused to be anything less than equal, stand here before you, toes clawed into mildewed mulch, leaf mould and root rot, I stand bright amongst blood sprays of berries and briars, amongst waxcap and warty spindle shank, I stand wedded only to this wild earth, my skin sheathed in moonlight, the unleashed bell of my tongue clanging deep in the long forgotten forest of your own heart. So, come on then; stare, I dare you -

Inspiration:

William Atkinson Esq, (1797-1883)
by Lowes Cato Dickinson (1819-1908)

Lilith
by John Collier (1850–1934)

Street Scene
by L.S. Lowry (1887-1976)

A Letter To Mr Atkinson
By David Southworth
(Poem)



© The Estate of L.S. Lowry

You stand, looking past tiled treasures, left and right, towards the open door.
How can I tell you what is happening beyond, what lies outside?

Your machines wove webs of cotton replacing hand spun.
Your generosity blessed our town, churches, healthcare, this art gallery and library.

What to tell you?

Well your clock tower has rung out over great change; some decay and some rebirth.
We have stood outside en masse, our mourning hearts united in solidarity.

Our machines are threatening creative thought.
"All You Need is Attention", they told us consuming our knowledge.
They can spin out new pictures, both still and moving.
I could turn Lilith into a cat, or make the serpent slide away.

To my left a couple take a picture, with Lowry's Street Scene behind.
They need no studio, no photographic plates and no printing.
In seconds the image has travelled the world.

Your portrait is pride of place, in the 150th Anniversary Exhibition.
Initially overwhelming, thousands of paintings are 'Salon Hung'.
But as we look, eyes drawn here and there.

A volunteer challenges himself to say Hello and offer help.
We become aware; the expression, the mood, the light.
And in that awareness we connect.

So together we stand, joined without needing words.
Settling from a thousand pictures to one.
Narrowing focus to a single face.
Seeing in the eyes
hope.

Inspiration:

Lilith

by John Collier (1850-1934)

Lilith

By Fiona Kapur

(Poem)

Come close young man, you can stare,
Behold my lustrous golden hair,
You cannot gaze into my eyes,
You cannot kiss my soft curved smile,
You cannot touch my glimmer skin,
I cannot feel your lust within.

I am the witch, I am the spell,
My luscious curves transfix you well,
I am here to captivate,
I am muse, and tempt, and fate,
Beware my secret dark intent,
Revealed by my bold consent,
To thousand eyes, and thousand stares,
Resting on my countenance fair.

And whilst you watch me do you think,
I cannot see you slyly wink,
You perceive I'm for your gaze,
That I have no need for praise,
That I am worthless, less than you,
Here for hungry prurient view.

And you, you fool, you fail to see,
My one true love, who worships me,
Coiled around me, ankles bound,
My shackle snake, wrapped around,
His evil eye, it looks at you,
Whilst you admire my lovely view.

And I, I worship only he,
My viper, lust who captured me.

And behind me, deep in jungle leaves,
The forest mutters, whispers, heaves,
With heavy, dreadful, awful things,
A thudding thump of threatening wings,
From this place, we don't see you,
For we are ancient Bonnie Blue.



Inspiration:

The Seamstress

by Thomas Wade (1828-1891)

The Seamstress

By Jacqueline Woods

The seamstress
in waning moon's weakest hour
she struggles to push her needle
through unyielding folds of fabric
that lay like lead upon fragility
she knows by morning light
she must finish yet another
frock fit for a ladies ball
stitch... stitch...stitch...stitch
the grinding fist of her belly
will be ignored and the cramp
of her joints unstretched until work
is done and the cold clink of coins
pressed into her childlike palm
she chokes at remembrance of his
tobacco-clogged breath and the leer
in his myopic eyes as he offered
her away out of perpetual toil
a chance to wear not so her gowns
she shudders to recall the fallen maids
who in desperation succumbed to such
temptation and had their virtue
trampled in the gutter and their family
names buried in unmarked graves
yet still a tinge of pride resides within
her pallid cheeks as she labours
through the night until the moment
when mercy will unfold gentle wings
transport her to a place of tranquilly
and hands grown old before their time
will rest at last and stitch no more



Inspiration:

Seaside

by Theobald Butler Gould (d.1918)

Sandcastles

By John Tough

(Poem)



A castle built from the surrounding sand
Upon a beach where tides forever ebb and flow
Sometimes the plot is dry, sometimes beneath the sea
The material a careful fusing of sand and water
To make that stable mix that moulds
The walls, the keep, turrets, doorways, windows
And ramparts pierced with crenulations
A moat is scooped and a flag placed upon the tallest tower
The castle is complete

But sadly, to last for all too short a time
Its fate obliteration by the coming tide
When components dissolved again to sand
With no trace of the edifice that stood before
Each grain now reunited with the golden mass around

Perhaps the castle is a metaphor for human life
Whereby not sand but human cells
Grow and mature to form each living soul
That lives until the coming tide of death
That quenches out each human life on earth
When our atoms like the castle's sand
Can never be destroyed
But redistributed to be reformed into another soul
To last until the next incoming tide
Ad infinitum

Commended

Inspiration:

Self Portrait

by Stanley Reed (1908-1978)

The Art Of Sitting Still

By Marion Smith

(Poem)

D' you want your portrait done or not?
You must stay rooted to the spot!
Keep quite still and hold that pose
While I focus on your nose.

You want to scratch it? Sorry, no!
You'll ruin my artistic flow.
Oh dear, you've turned your head a bit.
I know it's really hard to sit.

Keep still, and please don't move a jot.
What's that? You say you're feeling hot?
Open the window for some air?
No! The breeze will mess your hair.

Don't brush away that random strand,
You'll change the posture of your hand.
You realise that you must stay still!
Keep in place each crease and frill.

Every fold and piece of lace
must not move slightly out of place.
Just like a statue you must be.
Try not to make it hard for me.

Now I'm cross... you slightly moved!
You can't sit still, I think that's proved!
You pursed your lips and ruined the smile.
Those brush strokes took me quite a while!

Please don't look so glum and dour,
just bear with me for one more hour,
then we'll take a welcome break
for coffee and a piece of cake.

I know it's hard to sit so tight,
but I really need to get it right,
before my inspiration's gone.
Thank goodness it's an abstract one!



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Inspiration:

Who Wins?

by Vittorio Reggianini (1858-1938)

A Tea Dance

By Pam Lewis

(Poem)

Violet wasn't the shrinking sort
But she was rarely asked to dance
Accompanied by her chaperone
Who quelled suitors with a glance
A hatchet faced, dowdy dowager
Who never let Violet out of sight
Snarling at those who made an approach
Her scowl made admirers take flight
Sadly most ardent beaux were deterred
By this sourpuss with the gimlet glare
Zealously protecting Violet's virtue
To mark her card, escorts wouldn't dare

As both to decorously used their fans
Up came a bewhiskered old gent
He said "could I have the pleasure"
It was the chaperone he meant
At last Violet was free of restraint
She drew her fan across her cheek
Showing that she was available
Not a girl who was timid and meek
Violet attracted amorous young bucks
And delighted in gay gallivanting
Stately performing the Viennese Waltz
She looked fetching in most enchanting

But her chaperone was not so gleeful
Her gouty partner had two left feet
He pursued tripping the light fantastic
But his dancing days were bittersweet
He'd sorely abused the chaperones toes
So she took a humiliating tumble
Perhaps she'd earned her just desserts
In future she'd be more humble



Inspiration:

Lilith

by John Collier (1850-1934)

Lilith

By Paul Booth
(Poem)

I have traced your bones
Your spine
Your hips
Your pelvis
And your shin

I have traced the muscles
In your neck
Your back
The triangle of that valley
From your belly
To within

I have traced the air around you
I know the space in which you live
And in your absence I still find you
In all your form
And in that kiss



Inspiration:

Whole 150th Anniversary Exhibition



A Room Filled With Artists Labours

By Peter Renton
(Poem)

Is it just a painter's skill - or is it all the elements contained within a work of art,
That exalts an artist's soul to noble worth.
Or is it the canvas made bespoke – by the anguish of each single stroke,
Which raise or dash conception of a paintings laboured birth.

Are artists born - or do they learn within a clutch of inspired years,
To cluster and convene, those configurations into vivid scene.
Composition filled to overflow - their narratives portray,
Like dramas or as animated figures hued from moistened sculptor's clay.

And yet - only paint on canvas.
In creation of landscape or a portrait filled with likeness,
Varied only by the differing method or technique,
Choosing colours, where is spent a moment - or a lifetime - or a week,
Those master builders of those little windows through we peek.

But still - just a moment caught in time.
A front row theatre seat without a ticket being sold,
Evolving from its blankness - as the story then is told,
Repeated many times by long forgotten lives of old.
Hangs the artist's labours - in a frame of brown or gold.

And although the pain of birth is soon forgotten on completion,
As praise and recognition for its greatness is agreed,
Then hung upon the walls for intellectuals to feed.
As an artist's labours liberty - is gained and therefore freed.

Commended

Inspiration:

Painting Of Mohammed Ben Laitzi
by Edward Wolfe (1897-1982)

Huzan

By Phil McNulty
(Poem)

I hope that it is a good painting
Breathe
Breathe
Breathe
All I can do is try not to think
But Edward Efendi can be angry
He wants me to look like I am thinking
About things in the corner of his studio
Where there is only dust and cockroaches

His friends are smoking and drinking
And laughing about Gordon Square
And somewhere called Bloomsbury
One man, Jim, keeps coming close to me
He said he would like to 'get to know me'

Breathe
Breathe
I must sit still
If Edward Efendi is not happy
I will not get paid

These English in Tangier
Seem to like painting
Young men like me
Or boys in uniform,
Or sharp suits
Or bare chested

The studio walls are covered
With pictures of naked men



© The Estate of Edward Wolfe

Or very young girls from the Kasbah
Or elegant white women

They think they have freedom here
To do anything and buy anything
Or anybody they want
It's not the same for we Maghrebi
Or for the Jews

Edward Efendi is Jewish
But not like the village Jews
We grew up with
He lives here on The Mountain
With the other Europeans
He has their manners and their appetites

My name is Mohammed Bin Lazizi
Bin Hasheem Al Asilah
But Edward Efendi calls me 'Laitzi'
He tells his friends and they think it is funny
It means 'difficult and careless'

But here in our 'Blue and White City'
We of the Maghrebi do take great care
We have pride in our clothing
And how we wear the tarboosh and the keffiyeh
We are not like the French smugglers
The English predators
Or the German spies
Who are difficult and dangerous

But there is nothing we can do
We are not happy or unhappy
We have our huzun
Our melancholy
Which helps me sit and stare
At dust and cockroaches
In the corner of the studio
Hoping that I will get paid.
Breathe
Breathe

Inspiration:

Street Scene

by L.S. Lowry (1887-1976)

Pendlebury Street

By Susan Stacey

(Poem)



© The Estate of L.S. Lowry

I look upon this Pendlebury Street
where darkened figures merge to meet.
The cold industrious sulphurous haze
surrounds the children as they play.
A child in red appears alone,
whilst all around her street dogs roam.
Smoke signals belch from stacks above,
reaching out for hope and love.
And looming over one and all
towers the imposing factory wall,
surveying with unblinking eyes,
recording memories, capturing lives.
I wonder, as I gaze in awe,
what are these figures searching for?
They leave no shadows where they stand,
but cast a footprint on the land.

Inspiration:

Birkdale Sandhills

by T. Walmsley Price (1855-1933)



Birkdale Sandhills

By Tansy B. Grady

(Poem)

My hair in tangled tendrils dances past my salt stung eyes,
The wind torments the grasses, a trickster in disguise.

Ahead of me the ocean; majestic, vast, and blue,
The seagulls squeal in rapture as they celebrate it too.

Mind mesmerised, I stand there, as though all the clocks have paused.
I wonder who else watches, on the far flung Irish shores.

The sea is ever changing, though the tide comes in each day,
Timeless in stability, the years float away.

I smell my childhood summers, building castles, sandy feet,
A shell against my ear, gritty sandwiches to eat.

A distant cough behind me, and the crashing waves lie flat.
I step back from the painting, in the gallery I'm at.

Inspiration:

Two Miners

by Roger Hampson (1925-1996)

Grandad

By Andrew Williams

Billy was a miner
working down the pit,
from fourteen on he laboured
in the dirt, the dust, the shit.
At first he was a pony boy
and Joey was his pony,
but he grew up
and Joey died
leaving Billy lonely.
He worked hard at the face for years
on his knees with pick and shovel,
and the strength it gave him served him well,
it gave him useful muscle.
An undefeated boxer, he earned the extra cash
he used to pay for study,
though his workmates thought him rash.
Eventually he posted his plate
as a masseur, then as physio,
set up in private practice
hoping to make it go.
Success arrived, he'd done it.
No longer had to worry
he'd have to go back down that shaft
with the dirt, the dust, the slurry.
Asked what he wanted for his boys
he'd pretend to think a bit,
then out would come his answer,
"Anything but the pit!"



© the artist's estate

Commended

Inspiration:

Battle Scene

by Christian Sell (1831-1883)



Crimson Blood, Blanched Earth

By Anna Downes

(Poem)

Colossal giants erupt from the blanched earth,
Sharp as razors, black as soot.
Soldiers march, drained of gaiety, drained of mirth
With snow crunching cheerlessly under foot.
One, lonesome, whistles a tragic tune
That reverberates softly like a lark
Whilst some glance up at the perpetual moon,
Basking in the luence of the beacon in the dark.
Muscles aching from the strain,
Fatigue cursing the eyes,
Soaked to the skin from the rain
Young ones breaking the stony silence with cries.
Cowering frigid at the summit,
The corpses can't be thawed by frozen drink
Skeletal figures cowering beneath a blanket,
Wondering how much further down they can sink.
Some shall return, some shall remain -
The survivors, will be rendered ghosts, masquerading as living -
With shattered minds that can never again be the same.
For their homecoming their wives will cry to God in thanksgiving,
Yet these souls lie across the sea, forever traversing the bloodied snow,
In the company of their fallen comrades whose torment is ended.
Ears rattling with shrieking, the spectral wind's persistent blow,
They will wander until death when their minds can be mended.

Inspiration:

The Deserter
by Frederick Goodall (1822-1904)

The Deserter

By Tracy Robinson
(Poem)

There's someone outside now,
Their footsteps drawing near,
There's someone outside now,
The room emersed in fear.

Chances for escape fled now,
Soldier's jaws set grim,
Steel in their purpose,
No place for mercy, compassion,
Now they're' moving in.

Didn't he love his country,
Fight in its name with pride,
No, like a frightened rat,
Scuttled away,
Well now justice catches up with him,
He won't live a free man beyond this day.

Now fate reaches its inevitable conclusion,
His time of life and love all done,
He will be their captive,
By the setting of the sun.

He's started to sweat,
Slowly but surely,
They're drawing in their net.

Playing with his children,
not an hour before,
death lies behind him,
if he's discovered,
death all that lies before.

He traded 'Hero' for 'Traitor',
The word 'coward' smeared across his name,
but if he died,
just another corpse to be swept away on a battlefield,
wouldn't the end have been the same?

Condemned for dereliction of duty,
The blood-soaked tableaux,
run in a loop through his shattered brain,



severed limbs, charred remains,
scenes from the bowels of hell,
was it really better,
not to his child's face one again.

To hear once more their voices,
His wife's tender touch upon his arm,
Grasp another chance to laugh, to love, to live,
Claw backs a few shreds of humanity,
To die his death a soldier,
Too high a price to give.

The cries of men dying,
Haunt his fetid dreams,
The smell, trapped in destruction that goes on,
and on,
and on,
mingle of red blood on the soil,
he can't forget the scenes.

For a pittance, cramped up,
Treated like a feral dog,
Or to take a lung full of air that's fresh,
Not let battle choked skies
Pollute his final breath.

A steely hand on his shoulder,
On his captors' face a sneer,
Did you really think,
That you could hide from us in here.

She throws herself forward across the cot,
She starts to plead, implore,
The children watch on in terrified awe,
This is worse,
Then when he left the time before.

She leaves a tear
As she clutches at his shirt,
The brush of warm fingerprints,
For his short time left,
Will reverberate,
His only solace,
Her expression so bereft.

His frozen look of anguish,
Seared into her brain,
She stands, weeping, watching,
The last memory of her husband,
As she stands desolate,
Deserted once again.

Inspiration:

Unknown Silhouettes

On A Gallery Wall

By Patricia P. Jones
(Poem)

Above and below
On a gallery wall
Related perhaps, maybe
Or not at all

Known yet unknown
Through the passage of time
Related perhaps, maybe
But with no obvious sign

Attached yet detached
In a state of repose
On a gallery wall
Who are they, nobody knows

Voices unheard voices undisturbed
Three hundred years or more
Locked in a black silhouette
High up on a gallery wall

And you sir up there
In the high gallery air
Did you die in a duel
Fought in the heat of compassion

Or in the West Indies
A trader in silks, spices, cotton
A life once lived, once loved
Once shared, now unknown, forgotten

And so the lady sits below
A charming effigy space
Silent in her silhouette
How could we all for shame, forget!

The sitters in their gilded frame
Alone, not known, no given name
The artists too as I recall
Faceless persons on a gallery wall



Inspiration:

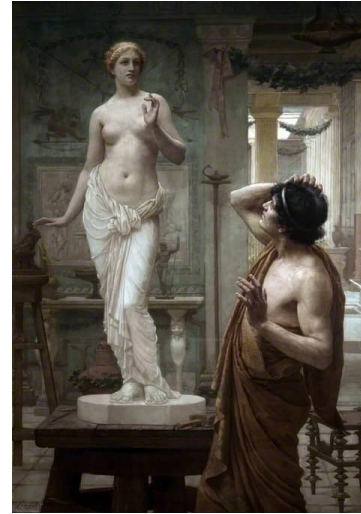
Pygmalion and Galatea

by Ernest Normand (1857-1923)

Pygmalion

By Tom McLennan

(Poem)



Real women weren't good enough for Pygmalion.
Hard-faced harlots, they repulsed him
brazen hussies who didn't cross their legs,
or drop their eyes
Their ankle-bracelets and on-show thighs
Their mini-skirts way too high
Leaving too little to the imagination.

So he decided to make a perfect girl
He could worship all on his own.
Drop-dead gorgeous, of course, but maidenly,
Body draped tastefully, modestly,
(big breasts obviously,
but to be taken out and fondled only by him
and put away for later)
That secret smile for his eyes only.
No anklets on *her* dainty feet!

So he fell to work and soon chiselled out
His perfect lady
Galatea he called her on account of her pure white marbled skin
(Women of colour didn't quite do it).
He was so made-up with his creation,
for a while he worshipped the ground she didn't walk on.
But (and she had a big butt) that was the problem:
Not only couldn't his dream girl walk, she couldn't talk either,
Couldn't whisper those little endearments in the ear
Or any of the other things that women do so nicely.
Unresponsive to his touch, cold as stone,

When what he really needed, he decided,
Was the cut and thrust of living flesh and bone.

So off to Aphrodite's temple he went next day and prayed
And prayed and prayed she'd smile on his creation.
He'd have his little wife, domestic goddess, a trophy bride,
Who never whined, was unfaithful or complained of headaches,
treated him like a god and listened intently while he mansplained things
never yawning or telling him he was talking a load of bollocks.

But imagine his horror, when skipping home
He found her in front of the mirror, already on the wine,
putting on the slap, and getting ready for a night out with her mates.
"Girls just want to have fun, Pyggie," she said, laughing when she saw the look on his face. "Live
with it!"
And she giggled as she shimmied into a tight black party dress.

So he took his hammer to her and smashed her into bits.

"It wasn't my fault," he reasoned with himself, sweeping the bits up after.
"She was asking for it, behaving like that. Like all those other tarts."
He became philosophical (He was a Greek after all!)
He'd been naïve to think any girl could live up to his dear old mum.
So it was back to the drawing board.
And once again the long evenings found him bent over his work-station
In the candle-light, working himself up into a fervour
Over his latest model.

Inspiration:

150th Anniversary Exhibition

Enter The Salon

By David Roberts
(Poem)



Step inside and love
the sense of being overwhelmed,
by a Cathedral of paint.
Don't know where to look first,
as your gaze is met by so many others.
Then notice some that look slightly away,
or totally downcast.
So many pictures, massive to miniature,
too many to count (the attendant said 291).
Titles did not matter.
Some sights seemed familiar,
sites you know.
Miles of landscape,
acres of flesh.
Too much to take in in one go.
Go again I will,
Flock back and not just for all the sheep.

Inspiration:

Finery

by Leghe Suthers (1856-1924)

The Girl

By Pippa Witter

(Poem)



The Girl

sits at the window

light washing over her face,
glowing coppery hair,

staring into tomorrow.

Hand clasped over her left knee,
sewing paused,
waterfall of gauze on her lap,
tinsel-like golden halo,
pleated garment on a chair.

*Is she escaping into a dream
with the human bird whose costume
she is stitching?*

The man sits, grubby smock
and scuffed boots,

gazing into her present.

Toying with his clay pipe,
left forefinger pushing down tobacco.

Her quietness disturbs him.

The woman, pale pinch faced,
stiffly erect,
black bonnet, drab shawled.
Filigree lace breaks free.

Watching,

holding a large fold of white cloth against
her work soiled apron,

and hoping.

She bleeds for us;
Splays herself to fulfil our
 designs,
Resigned to silent pain,
 unknown shame
As we reshape her face in each king's name.
We feel not her breaking heart,
Just reap from her labours, make use
 and depart.

She can be cruel;
Though never a bully
She'll sully our creations o'er
 epochs
Carve her name in erosion
 and rot.
Uncallous be her changing winds
That force aside our fancies
 and whims.

She weeps for us;
Countless children lost to dust
Rusted memories, soggy smiles.
With every birth: we grow,
 She –
 declines
Taken for granted, her indomitable
 will
She's suffered before; she can
 cope still.

She wins in the end;
Her mood-stained brooding
Looming over and above all
Our achievements,
 great to small.
The forts that we build –
 the walls that we raise -
Shall be smothered in her
 mourning embrace.

Inspiration:

Pic-A-Bac

by Harold Riley (1934-2023)

The End Of The Day

By Kathleen Smith

(Poem)



© the artist's estate

When that bell rang we knew it was the end of the day
And we could leave our books and pens and head for home.
Even when the day was grey and the clouds hung heavy in the sky
Still we knew the lights would be on at home.
And we would be welcomed back
With arms wide open.
I was little.
You were so much bigger.
You were strong enough to carry me when I was tired.
My hands clasped tightly round your neck.
My knees pressed against your sides.
You gently carried me home.

And now
You lie on your bed
Your face lined with age
Your eyes tired.
You want that bell to ring again.
You want to go home to the lights and the wide open welcome.
My hands clasp tightly around yours.
My knees press against your bed.
The clouds hang heavy in the sky
And I long for you to be gently carried home.

Inspiration:

William Atkinson Esq, (1797-1883)
by Lowes Cato Dickinson (1819-1908)



Sesquicentennial

By Gillian Walker
(Poem)

He stands proud in the gallery his gaze captures your eyes.
His imposing figure standing in the 'salon hang' style.
With his generous act displayed we rejoice the scene, for all to explore and embrace with glee.
It captures the gift, a talent which graces the walls, in corners arranged to surprise and embrace us.

Mr Atkinson if I may boldly suggest made the legacy of art present just here as said.
We then should applaud with a smile of such joy. As a thank you to William Atkinson for personal giving joy.
He spent not only his time as resident here but also his wealth as we give out a cheer.
Perhaps a word to express what pleasure we receive. A fine building for everyone to submit creative ideas.

With thoughts to provoke or just a place of peace, somewhere to just breathe or to stand in silence with ease. Without companionship near, or just passing by. Exploring within and digesting creativity inside. This amazing space what a feast for the eyes.
Three cheers for a place we just love being inside.

Inspiration:

Lilith

by John Collier (1850-1934)

Lilith II

By Jeff Bee

(Poem)

"She's back", they said
and the taste was in my throat
before the rush had hit my head.
First and only love,
as old as the earth
yet age never fades.
You call and so I fall,
'Severin', prostrate,
laying garlands before you.
amongst them ghost white
roses as a token, purity.
poppies and foxgloves too,
forgetting and escape.
shall I entwine and embrace
you? shield you as a second
skin, protect your nakedness
from their eyes?
voyeurs, bereft of
detail, hidden amidst
shadows in the
bleak margins of the
background. That place of
dark and mortal imaginings.

My place to stand watch
and keep you as pure
as these virgin roses,
unblushed before the
cuckold's touch.
guard, honour and obey,
the mother of my nature.
silence the lullabies
(damn their intrusion)
wait an eternity
perchance you lift your gaze.
just you and I,
held by expectation,
a kiss away from sinners
a world apart from saints.



Commended

Inspiration:

The Flame

by Jacob Kramer (1892-1962)

The Flame

By Celia Gentles

(Song Lyric or Poem)

The flame of your untamed spirit -
it trembles, smoulders, shines,
forever flickering, glowing,
flowing through body and mind.
From riots and persecution
you fled, escaped – but yearned,
with a burning resolution,
to draw, to paint, to learn.

*Just one flame can defy the dark.
They say that you're made of fire.
When you paint, your eyes flash sparks,
your hair glows like copper wire.*

This canvas captures the spirit,
the depths of the Jewish soul.
Your faith, a beacon that guides you,
enforces strength, and goals.
Haunted by Russian pogroms,
faces contorted by fear,
recalling your mother's lost songs,
you shed a red-hot tear.

*Just one flame can defy the dark.
They say that you're made of fire.
When you weep, your eyes flash sparks,
your hair glows like copper wire.*

A hazy essence of spirit
rises from fire and drifts -
ethereal face of an angel
floating through blood-stained mist.
The suffering of a nation
followed you from Ukraine,
but powers of Transformation
burn in this sacred flame.

*Just one flame can defy the dark.
They say that you're made of fire.
When you pray, your eyes flash sparks,
your hair glows like copper wire.*



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Inspiration:

150th Anniversary Exhibition

Atkinson Remembers

By Liza Turner
(Poem)



Golden frames glide on walls,
Like slips in time,
Encapsulating faces,
Lives of our relations.
Scenes of what lived before,
Fleeting memories on canvas,
Imprinted for all, forevermore.

Barcodes of images flow
Down to the floor,
And off now, to soar.
Gracing our places
With wonderment and greatness,
Presenting inquisitions
Concerning amazement.
Always evoking
The soul to search for the exceptional.

Flowing brushes paint
Limitless recreations,
Dressing spaces like portals,
Transporting us to moments
Snapped in time. From seventeen to twenty-one it's all bygone tides.
The scenarios are varied and changeable.
Here, crowded and neighbouring,
each piece proudly outfacing—
a chorus of whispering echoes
hung singing in blessed harmony.
A song of one hundred and fifty, a great celebration.

Inspiration:

150th Anniversary Exhibition

The Lost Man

By Ian Martin

(Poem)



Nobody knew where he had come from
He just sat there daily staring into space
Keeping out of the cold, they had thought
He didn't want to admit it, just saving face

Suddenly he moved, walked over to her
Yes the large painting of Lilith, 'the demon'
His fingers slowly traced the snake down her
Quietly saying 'my demon is vodka and lemon'

He started to scan the paintings all around
First time since he had mysteriously appeared
A nun teaching kids below two nude ladies
Interesting pairing if not slightly weird

He smiled at the irony of it, then quietly sighed
Saying something, to no one but himself really
'Those kids were like my kids playing in that surf'
Brings back those happy memories so clearly

Happy holiday memories came flooding back
Fish and Chips on the quay in sunny Padstow
Slot machines on the pier stuck out in the sea,
Kids squealing for more pennies for another go

The ships in the docks like picking up Dad
Back from a trip away, first bottle of coke
He sighed, 'I so miss my Dad' shook his head
How they treated him in Covid a bloody joke

Round and round he walked, stopping, staring
Passing comments from memories of his life
Old passenger liner 'like my grandad's ship'
'Oh, that one like Moel Famu we loved to hike'

Foreign holidays from happier times, Venice
Windmills and tulips 'we just stare and stare'
'That cathedral? Florence, ate cannoli's galore'
'No Chattris 'lowered his head in a silent prayer

'Those country life scenes like our holiday home'
'That beach could, be Formby, that setting sun'
The portraits scared him, 'what do I look like'
At least today he was smiling, having some fun

He slumped in the chair, head in his hands
Slowly they came those long lost tears
They flowed because he needed to let them out
Locked them up on the street with all his fears

He walked back to the painting of Lilith
'Demon should be a bottle not a lady like you'
Then looked at the kids playing in the surf
'Going to give up the drink that's what I'll do'.

Winner, Poetry

Inspiration:

Lilith

by John Collier (1850-1934)

Lilith And The Serpent

By Malcolm Terry

(Poem)

Lilith, the first woman, beloved of Adam,
stepped bold through the Garden,
refused to walk in man's shadow,
refused to be inferior, accept second best.
"We are both shaped by God," she said.
"Molded from clay and the stuff of earth."
She walked out of Eden,
left the Garden, that poisoned blossom,
found her own way, a leader not a follower.
God's messengers pursued, demanded her return,
but she sent them away and travelled on.
She became a demon in the eyes of men,
evil masked in beauty,
embraced the serpent, that other rebel
who gazed with eyes unblinking, clear,
abjuring blind faith, questioning everything;
Lilith embraced it,
and snake coils wrapped around her,
sinuously molding to the curves of her willing, pale body.
She feared not the snake;
knowledge is power, a route towards wisdom.
Spurned by men, maligned in the male world,
Lilith stood with the serpent, free.
Centuries passed, the apples fell, the Garden turned to dust,
but some things failed to change.
Men still saw themselves superior, masters of women,
ordered their behaviour, their dress, their education.
Lilith said no. She still says no.



Inspiration:

Irma

by Ronald Ossory Dunlop (1894– 1973)

Irma

By John Blackall
(Poem)



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Do not blame yourself Irma!
I loved you all those years.
Throughout the struggles, the poverty, the ups and the downs.
We laughed together, we cried together,
We shared the pain and the joys. We were family!
Yes, I loved you, and you me.
And then it changed...
I still remember you fondly, still treasure every second, every moment.
And then it changed...
Remember the time when the snow was on the ground, and the icy wind?
I held your hand in my pocket. I so wanted to protect you from everything.
I so loved you, and you me,
And then our son died: and so too did we.
Do not blame yourself Irma!

Inspiration:

Caledonia

by Basil Bradley (1842-1904)



The River

By William Nickeas Bethnuin
(Poem)

Seeming eternal

Drifts through the land

meanders

as if to get a little closer to the cattle

mesmerized

They step into the surge
are they grateful for their time at the water

Feeling

In their own way
The caring caress of the river lapping at their heels

Roving water

Heavy yet light filled
Living neon liquid

does it feel

The pulse in their veins
The pulse of the universe
Its push-pull of the planets

or the pleasure of they who drink of it

Great sparkling stream

is it a happy thing

as it glides, glistens, ecstatic electric

Flowing wending with gathering willows

gambolling down granite mounts

mellow moors

is there joy in a re-union

when you meld with a shimmering sea

Inspiration:

The Flame

by Jacob Kramer (1892-1962)

Venus Dream

By Beth Pinches

(Poem)



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Venus, buried in the flame of her own hair,
Came to me in a dream,
told me that she never felt beautiful,
rising from the oyster,
a pearl of mythological allure,
she just felt damp and frightened
by the vastness of the sea.

Venus, gold leaved and luminescent under Botticelli's brush strokes,
appears to me now bedraggled,
askance and unsure of herself,
her power vanished,
asleep beneath tresses of orange,
blurred and struggling to exist.

Venus disappears behind a screen unfiltered,
nobody wants to look at her anymore,
featureless she melts into the background.
I wake up with a jolt,
my mattress damp and my hair in tangles,
I catch a glimpse of her in the mirror
as she evaporates on the threshold
of an unbearably ordinary day.

Inspiration:

Scrambling For Cherries

by John Morgan (1823 – 1886)

Plus other various artworks depicting mothers and children including *The Cottage Madonna* by Edward Stott, *Lilith* by John Collier and *The Children's Prayer* by Arthur Hacker.



The Cottage Madonna

By Sophie Wilson
(Lyrical Prose)

Coming out of consciousness happens quickly, reluctantly. The pressing, the pulling of hair. One of my eyes peels open, slower than the other - stuck with morning goo. A face peers above my supine body, back on bed, head on pillow. Staring down - the opposite of aerial view. Two chubby apple cheeks, a peek of new teeth. A "youyouyouyouyou" sound. Occasionally, a smacking of little palms, fleshly, on my arms, shoulders, chest - whatever is available above the duvet. Fingers smack percussion on my skin.

Across, a slumbering mountain of warm hide, lies on his side, heaving and breathing in the land of nod. Baby slaps him too, "dadadadada", grabbing fistfuls of his hair (yellow like his) and clutching for the bulbous nose.

Chubby legs kick back and forth and take up all the space. Giggles so lovely I want to keep them in a jar so I can take them out and listen to them every day. Our baby boy, our puppy, you bring us so much joy. There is nothing in the world like waking up next to you. Pink fingertips, trace me like tiny anemones, feeling your way in this world.

You could be happy about anything. Jumping up for cherries or kneeling to say your prayers. Meanwhile, my mother eyes are tired and staring into middle distance. But the throb of love for you keeps me beating on and on and on, even when I didn't know I could.

Sometimes my mood can be black water- hormonal rage, poppy red. Sometimes I don't know who I am, so contained am I, under the rubble. A cottage Madonna. Who knows me or sees me or judges me in raggedy legging and a top knot? When I go back to work? When I still love my career? Am I Lilith in my quest for equity? Well, just like them, I am made from dust.

But, when the rosy light is on the water and we whisper of the moon... I trace the shiny sole of your tiny feet and feel your beaded toes like rosary. You are my morning prayer.

Inspiration:

Unknown

by Roger Hampson (1925-1996)

Who Wins?

by Vittorio Reggianini (1858-1938)

The Widow

by C.E. Bentley ARCA (1857-1941)

The Seamstress

by Thomas Wade (1828-1891)



The Widow And Others

(A Brush With The Art World By The Artistically Uninitiated)

By Hazel Gee

(Article)

I didn't set out with any ideas about what I would write about, or the form it would take. My plan was to select a painting and create something around the image. I visited the exhibition four times. By the second visit I was interested in four paintings, yet the inspiration to write was eluding me. I abandoned my plan and began a journey that was ultimately far more about artistry and discovery than giving life to a character, an artist's subject.

It could be easily overlooked, but inexplicably I was first drawn to 44, Roger Hampson's 'Untitled' work. It is, upon research, very similar to one of his works 'Path to Cleworth Colliery' held at Salford Museum and Art Gallery. This only shows two men at the top of the steps. The untitled work on display has five subjects. A gloomy composition and not clear at first sight if the subjects have their backs to the viewer. A closer look persuaded me that they are coming on and going off shift. Their route is bounded by a narrow walkway to steps. Tall picket fencing either side is probably to hold back the beginnings of slag heaps, the spoil from the mining process. It gives the impression of an open warren (likened to war time trenches) as the men move to and fro. The fencing towers higher than them. Perhaps it is a symbol of the confining, controlling power of the pit owners of the time. I could almost hear the men's clog shod feet clattering to work. Smudgy shapes, coal blackened clothes and flat caps, proceed as single units of humanity. If there was any chatting and light-heartedness it is not expressed in this example of Hampson's painting. It's a grubby, smudgy work at first glance and easily dismissed, but it tells a story that could never be related in an appealing way, of the reality of these men's working lives, week in, week out.

124, 'Who Wins?' by Vittorio Reggianini could not present a starker, brighter contrast to Hampson's work. The title implies there will be a winner and a loser. An image of a very different era, when women would be 'chosen' almost like a piece of property. At complete odds to Hampson's work showing a time when most men, in certain areas, had no choice but to go down the pit to earn a living. The exquisite replication of gilt, satins and velvet in Reggianini's work is stunning. I was particularly in awe of the subjects' skin, so cleverly depicted. The mastery of his brushwork and use of colour is evident in the painting. Although the subject matter did not appeal to me and I didn't care who won, I applaud such artistry. I was really surprised to research that he was also skilled in painting poorer settings and depicting peasants. I learnt examples of this work are displayed in the Mainz Museum, Germany.

196, 'The Widow' by CE Bentley ARCA was a firm favourite from the first viewing. I liked the composition. She is seated looking, not out of the window, but perhaps looking into the past. Her thoughts bringing the faintest trace of a smile to her lips. Her jawline receded, probably due to loss of teeth. A bottle of ink and a pen are on the table in front of the window, just beyond her. Ink is not something a poor widow would have had, or she would have been writing in pencil. A pair of spectacles are placed on top of a closed, deeply spined book, not revealing if it is a family bible, but I assumed it was. The book's aged back is a metaphor for her advanced years. The oil lamp is probably used to read by. A gleaming, white piece of muslin is tied at the window, it sags in the middle. Viewers need to stand back to appreciate the skill of Bentley as the shaft of light from the window is so delicate it is not perceived until viewed from a distance. Her hands are on her lap, large hands that have lived a life, maybe reared children. Her gold band testimony to her late husband's love. Still worn, still married in her mind. There is no trace of bitterness about her. I assume it was not recent, her loss. She does not have a look of resentment; she has a look of contentment. I want to talk to her, to know her.

I was quite taken with 208, 'The Seamstress' by Thomas Wade. Although she looked more like a maid mending, the cloth covering the table had a worn hole and the items for mending looked maybe more functional, such as sheets or table linen, than gowns. Her fingers look nimble. Seated by the light of the open shuttered window her young, keen eyesight could possibly be being exploited by the lady of the house. Her feet rest on a small footstool, perhaps the stone-flagged floor, suggesting a kitchen, is cold. This is not a wealthy setting. I accept Wade's title, 'The Seamstress' with a little, artistic license. I would have liked another life for her, to rewrite her story. My wishes for her, and girls like her, potentially vulnerable to exploitation over the years and today, I associate with the painting.

A significant part of this experience is the realisation that, just as with poetry, you will never grasp the message, appreciate the craftsmanship, with just one reading (in the case of art with one viewing). Thank you for the opportunity and experience the Atkinson's Inspirations Poetry and Creative Writing Competition 2025 has given me.

Inspiration:

Young Girl in a White Dress
by Laurence Koe (1869-1913)



A Life Worth Living

By Alexander Colfer
(Short Story)

Only two weeks before my accident, I remember sitting so still for the artist in his Chicago studio, trying not to fidget while he worked. I was just six years old, and Mama had promised me ice cream afterward if I was good. The painter kept looking at me with such serious eyes, as if he could see something I couldn't understand.

Uncle James, my favourite uncle, said the clean Irish air would be good for me after what happened. Away from all the Chicago smog and noise. I needed somewhere peaceful to get better. So, we travelled together to the family cottage in Brownswood, Enniscorthy, County Wexford. The cottage was everything he'd promised, thatched roof, whitewashed walls, and the sweet smell of smoke drifting from the fire. Uncle James stayed just long enough to see me settled before returning to Chicago.

The accident left me different. I couldn't run and play like I used to. But I found I loved just watching. From my spot by the window, I could see everything—the green fields, the stone walls that needed constant repair, the trees in the garden that would shed blossoms in spring and bear fruit in autumn.

Not quite a year had passed since my arrival when news came from Chicago that Uncle James had passed away peacefully in his sleep. My heart broke. My favourite uncle, the one who had brought me to this wonderful life, was gone forever.

Then the deaths of Auntie Catherine and Uncle John ten years apart leaving Cousin Tom alone in the house. Tom carried the war with him always—the loss of his leg and deeper wounds that never showed. He never spoke of what happened, but sometimes I'd see the distant look in his eyes, as if he were somewhere far away. Still, I witnessed him find moments of peace. There was the day when Tom started spending time talking with Margaret by the garden gate as she walked past. I was thrilled when fifty-eight-year-old Tom married Margaret, twenty years his junior.

The cottage that had emptied of one generation was now filling with another. I felt the love and joy of all the new children filling the cozy warmth of the cottage, witnessed Kay, Margaret and Donny take their first steps, heard their first words. I remember how Kay and I were both frightened by the scream of a local Banshee. Tom said it was just a neighbour's dog, but we knew better. The cottage was always full of warmth, family dropping by, family gatherings, the constant flow of Irish life that embraced me completely. In 1960, May Colfer—whose father had been born and raised in the

cottage—brought her English fiancé to see the "Family" cottage. She looked so beautiful having her picture taken in the garden.

Eventually, progress had come to our corner of Wexford. The family moved to a modern house with proper plumbing. The cottage stood empty, and when the demolition crew came, they worked quickly, wrecking my beloved home. A cottage that had housed the Colfers for over a century and a half, now reduced to rubble and debris. In the afternoon, they built a bonfire. I watched in growing alarm as they carelessly tossed a forgotten painting left in the rush of the move onto the flames, a portrait of a beautiful six-year-old girl with long gleaming curls and grey eyes.

As the fire began to consume the canvas, I realised the picture was me. Memories flooded back with terrible clarity. Playing with matches when I shouldn't have. My dress catching aflame so quickly. The unbearable pain. Mama's screams. Papa's desperate hands trying to save me. Lying in Mama's arms, my golden curls burnt away, my small body surrendering to the pain of my injuries.

I had died that day in Chicago, I hadn't survived the accident. I was the portrait Uncle James had brought to Ireland, and somehow, I had lived through it, watching over this family for decades. As the flames consumed my painting, oils bubbling and smoking, I felt a familiar presence beside me. Uncle James stood there, his hard calloused worker's hand resting gently on my shoulder. He was just as he'd been when he first brought me to Ireland.

"Did you have a life worth living, little one?" he asked, his voice gentle as summer rain. I thought of all the love I'd witnessed, all the moments I'd been allowed to share. "Yes, Uncle Jimmy," I whispered. "I did."

"Time to go now Lorraine, your parents are waiting for you, your mamma misses you so much"

Light like sunrise seen through honey wrapped around me, warm and golden and infinite. I felt fortunate for the gift of family who had lived under my changeless gaze as I had hung quietly in my frame on the wall.

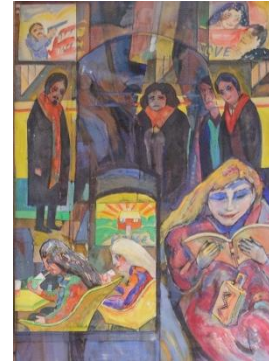
The honeyed light grew brighter for a brief moment, then we were gone.

Afterword: Lorraine K Longan died tragically aged 6 in Chicago on the 6th of June 1924 after the matches she was playing with set fire to her dress. It is assumed her uncle James Colfer brought her portrait to the cottage in Brownswood Enniscorthy where it hung on the wall for over 50 years until the family moved to a new build and in the rush the portrait of Lorraine was left behind and destroyed in the demolition of the cottage. This story honours her memory and of all the Colfers who went before and waited patiently for her to join them

Inspiration:

Liverpool Street

by Michael Rothenstein (1908-1993)



Fighting Shadows

By Clark Pemberton

(Story)

“It’s not Gilmour, it’s pronounced Glamour.”

Jean fondly recalled her mother’s playful take on the family name. As a child, she had somewhat believed it too. Her mother, Faye, could easily have passed as a Hollywood goddess from a bygone era. Confident, attractive and an expert manipulator, she was a whirlwind mix of Bette Davis and Greta Garbo. Except those silver screen sirens didn’t share the same chequered life as Faye Gilmour. At least, not one with such deep-rooted resentment. Resentment for a better life that was always beyond reach.

For Jean, it hurt that her mother was never appreciative of the life that she had. She persistently spent her life on a downward spiral. She chased after married men, neglected her children, drank too much and pushed away every friend that she ever had.

Looking around at the few mourners who had come to pay their respects, Jean succumbed to an overwhelming sadness. These were not friends. They were curious bystanders. After all, this was the funeral for the downtrodden Crosby lady who, bitter and alone, lived out her last solitary days in an abusive and drunken stupor. She would be forever remembered as the one whose fraudulent welfare claims culminated in her holding up a post office cashier with a water pistol.

Jean’s younger sister Ginny had refused to mourn their mother. In fact, she considered Jean dumb for even attending the funeral service. “Mother?!” Ginny had exclaimed. “She was no mother to us. She never cared about us. She never looked after us. The only things she cared about was men, cigarettes and booze.”

Jean completely understood her sister’s stance. Jean had been sixteen when their mother had lost her parental rights. She was working in a department store and living with her best friend, Susan Sandford, in a two-bedroom apartment. Ginny, who was thirteen at the time, went into foster care. While Jean had constant contact with Ginny, their mother did not. It was Jean who had attempted to keep the family together, maintaining relationships with both parties. Yet, eventually, she conceded defeat. Faye had little interest in her daughters and when Ginny had stated to Jean that she wanted nothing more to do with their mother, she really couldn’t blame her at all.

Jean probably should have done the same but despite everything, she felt unable to turn her back on her. Whether it was family loyalty or morbid curiosity, she was never quite sure. Jean’s best friend, Susan, and Susan’s fiancée, Mike Dean, had driven her to the funeral this afternoon. Unlike Ginny, Susan, gratefully, had remained neutral and refused to pass judgement on anybody.

Ginny liked to read. Reading took her away. For a while at least, she could invest in someone else's life. In a world outside out of her own. This afternoon, Ginny was avidly reading Mark Twain. Wrapped up in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, she was dressed in a striking pink dress. For Ginny once read, that on your darkest days, you should wear your brightest colours. In her lap, she nestled a bottle of liqueur. She divided her attention between the equal allure of Huck's escape down the Mississippi River and the temptation to forget one's troubles through the bottle. An old trick that her late mother was distinctly accustomed to. So absorbed in her book, she didn't even register the entrance of her foster sister, Shobna Khan.

Shobna's family had welcomed Ginny into their fold in Formby when she was thirteen. They loved her like their own and for Shobna, Ginny really was her sister. They did not share the same blood or the same family name but their bond was undeniable. They had shared the same school and they had shared the trials and tribulations of adolescent life. That was six years ago and now here Ginny was, residing in the same student halls, in Liverpool, as Shobna.

"Mark Twain, uh?" enquired Shobna.

Ginny was momentarily startled. "Shobna? I didn't hear you let yourself in."

"I know," said Shobna. "You were miles away in your book."

Shobna noted the bottle of liqueur in Ginny's lap. "Among other things" she added.

"I haven't touched a drop," Ginny told her. "I refuse to be like my mother."

"Then how about a juice box? Just like we did as kids in school."

Before she could answer, Shobna knelt down beside Ginny and removed the book from her hands.

"Jean needs you," she uttered. "And I need you to be there for her. Forget your mother if that's how you feel. But please don't forget your sister. Especially not now."

Ginny felt so lost. "I don't know what to do" she confessed.

Shobna leaned in to hug her. "You will" she reassured her. "I have faith in you."

Susan and Mike patiently stood outside the cemetery gates waiting for Jean. Mike comforted Susan with his arms wrapped around her waist. When Jean appeared, Susan wriggled away from Mike and ran over to her best friend. She warmly took Jean's hand and they walked back over to Mike.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "Mike thought we could go to the pub for one. A drink to your mother."

Jean shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. Maybe."

Then, just as the trio were about to get into Mike's car, a voice called out Jean's name. Jean recognized the voice instantly. "Ginny?"

There, a short distance away, stood her sister, Ginny. Shobna exited her car behind her. For a moment, the two stood looking at each other in silence.

Then, Ginny ran towards her, engaging Jean in a big embrace. Jean squeezed her sister tight. "I'm sorry" sobbed Ginny.

Jean shook her head. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

Jean then motioned Shobna, Sue and Mike to join their embrace. And in an instant, they all shared a mutual love for one another. Jean realized there and then that family is what you make it. And however unconventional, together they would be al

Winner, Prose

Inspiration:

150th Anniversary Exhibition

Conversation Piece – A Play With Paintings

By Danny Morrell

(Script for a playlet)

With a flick of a switch, the lights dim and the Gallery rests. Paint though does not sleep, for it is charged with the energy of the artist who wields it. With every stroke, with every carefully considered colour it lives on informing the future with whatever wisdom, wit or whim the artist conjured on the day of its creation. In portraits that power can become tangible. The essence of a person is captured. They live on. Perhaps in the night they even talk to each other...



Ian Grant: "I say what are you painting?"

Stanley Reed: "WHAT? Who wants to know?"

Ian Grant: "No need to start Sir. I'm only an onlooker. Mr Ian Grant at your service. I find myself opposite to you and I can see your palette yet in the recesses beyond I can't see what you are painting."

Stanley Reed: "Indeed Sir, if you can see me, you can see what I am painting."

Ian Grant: "How so?"

Stanley Reed: "Sir, I am Stanley Reed, and upon this canvas I shall ever be Stanley Reed, rendered in perpetuity."

Ian Grant: "A self portrait then?"

Stanley Reed: "I think a little more. A true likeness in... painted pigments shall we say. See the clarity in the play of light and shade upon my features. Note the raised little finger, hands are such a challenge."

Ian Grant: "You may note Sir I have a hand in it too, see how dextrously I hold this cigarette."

Stanley Reed: "Cigarette? Ha! I hold the very brush with which I painted myself."

Ian Grant: "Quite so, but did you always wear a white shirt while you were working? Surely that would get covered with paint?"

Stanley Reed: "What are you suggesting?"



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Ian Grant: "Nothing more than that you present yourself in the best light. Like an actor upon the stage."

Stanley Reed: "Do you infer Sir that painting myself is an act of vanity? I will have you know self-portraiture has a long, distinguished history in art. Rembrandt for example painted himself many times."



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Ian Grant: "True and his depictions are, shall we say, warts and all."

The Two Miners: "Aye, if tha wants a true likeness. Look up here toward us. Ain't we depicted in all the dirt and grime of the pit? That's harsh reality that is."

Stanley Reed: "And what do two miners know of art?"

The Two Miners: "Happen we know what we like mate!"



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Percey Lancaster: "Gentlemen, gentlemen must you always trade insults? I believe that theatricality has its place in art. Here you see, I Percey Lancaster, can show exasperation at your bickering, whereas here, I Percey Lancaster again, now in a dapper hat, can be a more discerning self portrait."

The Two Miners: "Well I'll go to the foot of our stairs, how on Earth did he do that? There must be two of him?"



Stanley Reed (mutters glancing from side-to-side): "Percey, Percey cheap cheap!"



Mrs Kendrick Pine: "Boys, boys. Stop it this instant! There is no need for such churlishness Mr Reed. There are children present. Do ignore them Minnie."

Minnie: "Yes Mrs Kendrick Pine."



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Mrs Lutyens: "Tut, tut, they're at it again! They're incorrigible. I do despair Mrs Kendrick Pine."

Mrs Kendrick Pine: "Quite, Mrs Lutyens. And if I might say so that is a most beautiful coat and gown you are wearing. Is it your own design?"



Mrs Lutyens: "Why yes my dear, how did you guess? And I do like your fur stole, such a hint of elegance"

Ethel Bartlett: "Excuse me Mrs Lutyens. I do think that the gentlemen might have a point with the hands. Sometimes I almost feel I could play the piano again, such is the strength in these arms."



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Mrs Lutyens: "Ah my dear Ethel, you have been blessed by a woman's touch. Dame Laura was a true Knight of the realm."

Ian Grant: "I wish I could be blessed by a woman's touch."

Mrs Kendrick Pine: "Mr Grant! Do shield your ears Minnie."

Minnie: "Yes Mrs Kendrick Pine."



Spanish Girl: "Ah he is like the toreadors in my home country, as they strut and taunt the bulls with their red capes."

Highland Bull: "Mooooo!"



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Mrs Lutyens: "That's quite enough of those capers madam you are disturbing the animals. You are in England now, and in Southport we don't 'taunt' livestock with colours. See how demurely young Elissa Landi wears red."

Elissa Landi: "Thank you, Mrs Lutyens. It is a rather wonderful dress. I am sad though, for it reminds me of the past. I'm afraid this frame is my only stage now."



The Flame: "Do not denigrate the frame my dear, or indeed the canvas upon which you now reside."

In life we are but flickering flames, yet in art we can glow for eternity. My artist knew that. In my image he tried to visualise that moment of discovery, that moment when the realisation dawns that a painting can be more than the humdrum of everyday life. Some people don't see me at first you know; they see a raised thumb or some such. Yet if they take the time to stop and really look they do see me. Such it is with all paintings, it is only when you stop and really look that you truly see, and that my dear is the gift we all possess and the reward we will always give."



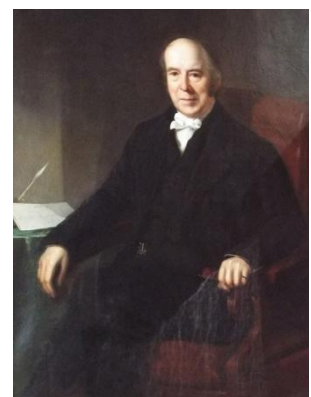
© estate of John David Roberts. By courtesy of the William Roberts Society.

The Gallery grows silent once more. As a new day beckons only whispers remain.



William Atkinson: "You smile Reverend?"

Reverend Greatbatch: "I do indeed Atkinson my friend. It is a worthy thing that you began here in this building. I listen to them in the night, the musings of this collection you started. This collection that has grown over the years and that I sincerely hope will continue to grow in years to come. May the flame you ignited burn forever."



Inspiration:

Marooned

by Percy Robert Craft (1856-1934)

Lucas

By David Oliver
(Story)



The storm came without warning.

One moment, the skies above the merchant ship 'The Wayfarer' were a tranquil sea of stars; the next, black cloud swallowed the heavens and hurled bolts of lightning. Waves taller than houses crashed down upon the vessel. Lucas clung to a wooden post as the deck tilted violently. Sailors screamed, ropes snapped, and a mast split in two with the deafening crack.

Then, cold water embraced him.

Lucas didn't remember much after that - just the churn of the sea, the salty burn in his lungs, and the desperate clutching of something that kept him afloat. When he woke, sunlight blazed down on his face. He rolled over, coughing up brine and sand.

He was alive.

He lay on the shore of the small island, the wreckage of 'The Wayfarer' scattered across the beach. Crates, barrels, torn sails, and broken wood were tangled among seaweed and driftwood. Bodies were few - only two others had washed ashore. One was face down and motionless. The other was a sailor, Kent, who didn't survive long after coughing up blood.

Lucas buried them with a makeshift driftwood shovel. Then he turned his attention to survival.

Lucas had always loved the idea of adventure - hiking, sailing, exploring the unknown. But nothing could have prepared him for the harsh, unrelenting reality of being stranded on a desert island. The sky stretched in every direction, a canvas of endless blue. The sun blazed overhead, unforgiving and constant. His small boat, which had been meant to take him on a leisurely trip, was now nothing but a scattered wreck. The only thing he had left from that brief voyage, beside the tatter clothes on his back, was the crossbow he had packed for hunting.

The thought of being on a deserted island drove Lucas half crazy. Frequently he found himself staring at the sky wondering and desperate.

He found fresh water in a small stream and began building a shelter near the shore, just in case he needed to leave the island quickly. But food - food was the real problem. The island was teeming with life, but none of it was easy to catch. Birds flitted just out of reach, and small, quick animals darted into the underbrush whenever he got too close. His hands fumbled frantically with the crossbow, trying to line up his shot, each miss leaving him feeling more useless.

A week passed before he finally made his first successful shot. A wild pig, unaware of his presence, wandered into a clearing. Lucas' breath caught in his throat as he drew the string back, his fingers aching from the strain. His first shot was wide, the bolt flying off to the side. He cursed under his breath and dropped to his knees, reloading. When the pig wandered closer Lucas fired again - this time, the bolt struck true.

He didn't feel triumph. He felt numb. It was survival. Nothing more.

Time blurred together. Days, maybe weeks, slipped by in a haze of endless routines: hunting, gathering, building. The solitude gnawed at him, though. His thoughts, once sharp, grew foggy. The isolation was suffocating. Lucas found himself talking to the trees, the birds, the very rocks. Anything to break the silence. At night, when he lay in his shelter, staring up at the canopy of leaves, a creeping dread would settle in his chest. Was he even trying anymore? The food he managed to catch was never enough to quell the growing despair. The crossbow, once a symbol of hope, now felt like an anchor to the past. He needed to escape - but escape from what? the island? or from himself?

He thought he saw things in the corner of his eyes sometimes, shadows moving where no shadows should be. But when he turned to look, they were always gone.

Then, one morning, as Lucas prepared to head out for another hunt, he noticed something that sent a chill down his spine, footprints. Human footprints.

Lucas followed them at a cautious distance, heart pounding. The tracks were fresh, barely a few hours old. His crossbow ready, his mind a whirlwind of possibilities. Could it be another survivor? Or was it something - or someone - dangerous?

The footprints led him to the edge of a dense thicket. He hesitated, peering into the shadows. The crossbow felt heavier in his hands, the tension in his body increasing with each passing second. He could hear his heartbeat, the rush of blood in his ears. With a deep breath, Lucas plunged forwards, into the underbrush.

And then, he saw it.

A small camp. Abandoned, but only recently. There were scraps of food left in a crude fire pit, half-dried fish hung on a line between trees, and a torn piece of cloth flapped in the breeze. The camp was empty...

Lucas crouched low, the crossbow aimed in the direction of the camp, every instinct telling him to be ready. He scanned the area. He wasn't alone.

Suddenly, from the trees, a figure emerged. Lucas instinctively raised the crossbar, but then he froze. The person in front of him was no more than a kid - probably no older than sixteen. His clothes were ragged, his face streaked with dirt, but he looked just as surprised to see Lucas.

"You're... alive?" the boy stammered, his eyes wide with disbelief.

Lucas lowered the crossbow, though his pulse still raced. "I thought I was the only one."

The boy nodded, his voice barely above a whisper. "I've been here for months. I don't know how long I can last." His words were tinged with fear, a kind of hopelessness Lucas recognized all too well.

Together, they formed a tenuous bond. They worked together to fortify the camp and pool their resources, the crossbow now used to hunt for both of them. Lucas, for the first time in weeks, felt a flicker of hope. He wasn't alone, after all.

The island was still a prison but now it felt less suffocating.

Inspiration:

The Girl in a White Dress
by Laurence Koe (1869-1913)



Her Melancholy Feeling

By Elizabeth Butler
(Story)

I had heard that the Queen died. For forty years she had been dressing in black. I, of course, didn't take any notice of such boring matters. I would rather be playing, up and down the gardens.

Mother cried. I heard her late one night, in her room under the covers. A fragile woman, she could have been made from porcelain. Her ghostly, white face often looked ethereal in the lamplight. She would often sit, perched at her dressing table, staring at her reflection for hours at a time, perfecting her smile. Mother was naturally a serious woman, with melancholy thoughts in her mind. I never noticed before, I do now.

I watched her puffy, red eyes and swollen cheekbones disappear. I often liked to watch her apply her makeup, without any effort, however, lately she had lost track of her appearance. She let her haggard face take centre stage, and I pitied her.

I can read now, better than I could before. The newspaper had been placed in my direct line of vision, where I read the headline aloud to myself.

"QUEEN VICTORIA DEAD AT 81. LONG LIVE THE KING."

It was the start of a new century, a new king on the throne. Our world was changing and Mother could no longer cope.

I could feel time passing before my eyes. I saw her getting physically weaker day by day. Father was so concerned, that he once called for the Doctor, better safe than sorry. In silence, I listened to every word the Doctor said. My eyes were glued to them both. Mother lay weakly on the bed, swaddled in blankets. Her face looked weaker than I had ever seen, while her eyes rolled into the back of her head, the whites of her eyes, faded.

Father feared the worst. He didn't have any strength left inside him to cope with yet another tragic event.

The Doctor, clear as crystal, spoke to Father just outside Mother's bedroom. I could still hear their muffled voices over Mother's groaning sounds.

"Your wife is not sick Lord Arden. She has exerted herself yes, and she is prone to fits of hysteria and melancholy, but physically, there is nothing wrong with her."

I heard Father thank the Doctor for his time, before he turned down the corridor, the sound of his shoes clinking across the wooden floor. Father crept back into the room, his voice but a whisper, as he perched himself on the end of the bed, stroking Mother's arm.

"My dear, this past year has been difficult, but I'm afraid it is time to face the world."

She lay in a foetal position, rocking with a soothing motion, then hummed to herself. A simple tune, a tune I vaguely remembered. Father felt her forehead. From the look he gave her, he was worried. Perhaps Mother's skin had grown clammy.

"It may happen again." She murmured from under the covers, her face buried in blankets.

Gently, Father shook his head. "I promise you it won't, although I am concerned for you, you haven't been eating, you haven't seen your children."

"Go on without me." I heard her mumble.

Mother and Father talked in low voices; I couldn't distinguish what either of them was saying. I caught Father leaning into her, kissing her on the lips. I had never seen their affection in real life. In this age, it was unseemly for anyone to witness the intimacy between two people. This was a new century, however, 1905 and everything was changing before my eyes.

Father left swiftly, leaving Mother lying on the top of her blanket staring at nothing. She looked weaker than she had ever done before, but there was hope in her bloodshot eyes, a glimmer that I perhaps pretended to see.

I had known Mother; I had seen her for years, struggling to live, but she was never prone to hysteria. The Doctor was wrong about her, I was sure about it.

I looked around me. Not around Mother's bedroom, but around where I stood patiently. It was dark in here. The curtains constantly drawn. For years I had stood, leaning on the arm of the green settee. The brown, patterned wallpaper on the wall behind me. Staring down at myself, I saw the white dress I had worn now for years, I had no other choice. My curls were limp now, after years of catching just a glimpse of sunlight.

Mother's gaze shifted. For the first time since my parents commissioned the painting, that hung opposite the four-poster bed, she looked at me, really looked at me. Pulling the blankets away, Mother stepped out of the bed. Her nightdress was as white as her face, her feet, bony ivory. She floated as though she was a spirit. She was desperate for answers. We locked eyes with each other, and for a moment I could have sworn she knew I was real.

"I miss you dearly my little girl." Mother whispered, so quiet only the two of us could hear what she said. "Victoria, my dear Victoria, wherever you are now, I just hope you are free from your pain."

I sighed. I couldn't console Mother. I was not the real thing. I was but a portrait, placed in a room, made from a collection of paints. I did however wonder, where was the real Victoria was right now. I hoped, for Mother's sake, she would be pain free, free from the hurt of this world, no matter how much it was changing.

I took another glance at Mother's gaunt face and smiled, ever so slightly. Perhaps she would believe it was real, maybe it would give her hope to carry on. All I wanted was the best for my Mother.

Inspiration:

The Ratcatcher

by Philip Connard (1875-1958)

The Ratcatcher

By Francis Quirk

(Short Story)



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Philip was very unsettled. It was ever thus - once he had finished the painting he would roam around the house aimlessly getting on everyone's nerves. He lived for his art and was his own worst critic.

"I am running out of milk," complaint his long-suffering wife, Ann. "Could you just pop down to the shops for a four pint?" At least that will keep him out of the house and busy for half an hour, she thought.

Walking along, deep in thought, Philip suddenly spotted a man getting out of a van. What an interesting face, I wonder if he would pose for me? Philip followed him into the local hostelry waiting quietly by the door as the man ordered a pint of Guinness and then wandered off to a seat under the window. As the light from the window lit up the man's strong facial features, Phillip gasped, I would love to paint that face.

Approaching the barman, he asked if he knew the man sitting by the window. "Oh, that miserable sod, he is the local ratcatcher," he replied.

Philip approached his prey. "Excuse me, I am having a bit of trouble with a rat and wondered if you could help me out." (He was wondering where he could find a rat for him to catch but decided to put that on the back burner).

It was agreed that our rat catcher, Mr. Henry Jones would call at 10am the following morning to assess the situation. Philip felt so elated that he practically run home. Of course, he had quite forgotten the milk!

Explaining to end that a rat catcher was calling the following morning proved to be tricky indeed. "But I have never seen a rat or any evidence of a rat, she said, what does he do? Will he put poison down? What if the cat eats it? Oh dear I am quite lost for words." "Well", said the devious fellow, "Old Bill from number sixty only told me yesterday that he had seen a rat running across the road, and I have heard it said that the rat population is so big that you are only ever a few feet away from one."

Philip went into the garage where he created a small untidy mess in one corner hoping that would suggest the presence of rat. For good measure, he threw down a few scraps of meat and left feeling quite satisfied with his handiwork.

Waking up in the middle of the night, he had an awful thought. What if the meat is still there in the morning? Would it disprove the presence of a rat? He ran downstairs, grabbed the garage key from the hall table and was soon in the garage. The cold wind blew the garage door shut behind him. Picking up the offending meat, he made his way back to the house only to find that the front door had blown shut and he was locked out.

What to do? Should I try banging on the door and waking Ann up. She is a sound sleeper but worth a try. Hang on, what excuse do I have for going into the garage in the middle of the night? There's nothing else for it, I will bed down in the car. Crikey it's a long night, never ending. Wonder how do people get comfortable sleeping in a car? Wish I knew the time. Hello - I hear a milk float, must be about 6:00am. Ann usually gets the milk in at around 8:00am so I could just saunter back in saying I needed something that I had left in the car. Only two long hours left.

As Ann open the door to take in the milk, Phillip appeared. "Goodness me", exclaimed Ann, "whatever are you doing out at this time and in your pyjamas?"

"Just checking on the rat dear."

"Well you might have at least put on your dressing gown - the very idea!"

"No one's around at this time, my love, come here and give me a cuddle."

Giggling Ann put her arms around Philip and as he pulled her closer, she smelt the meat. "Goodness why have you got some old pieces of chicken in your pocket?"

"No worries, Ann, just felt a bit peckish," said Philip as he quickly ran up the stairs to their bedroom.

"Good morning, Mr. Jones," thank you for coming round. I do hope that you will be able to fix the problem."

Ten minutes later - "No sign of a bleeding rat here Mr. I can smell 'em a mile off."

"Oh, Well let me pay you for coming to check, perhaps you would like a cup of tea? Did you know that I am an artist - would you like to see some of my paintings?" "Ann, put the kettle on for Mr. Jones I am sure he would like a cup of tea on such a cold morning."

Passing the lounge door later that day, Phillip heard his wife on the phone to her sister. "Yes I can't understand it. Found him on the doorstep early this morning in his pyjamas with bits of chicken in his pocket. Then there's the rat catcher - what an experience! Flat cap at a jaunty angle, pale thin face with piercing eyes. Shabby clothes and then his chest seemed to move quite oddly, and I screamed as a small furry head appeared - I thought he had brought his own rat! "Beg pardon, Mam," he said, touching his cap. "Just me ferret." Honestly I nearly died! Oh he's just gone out, do hope he will soon settle down.

Shortly later, the door banged in an excited Phillip rushed in "oh I'm so excited. Henry has agreed to sit for me. It will be my best portrait ever. Such a face, such an expression just waiting to be captured forever on canvas. It will win in any competition" - and it did!

Inspiration:

Dorette's Sister

by Gerald Leslie Brockhurst (1890-1978)

Just A Girl

By Jayne Usher

(Story)



© Richard Woodward.

"Can I stand up for a bit, my legs have gone numb."

"No, not yet. I want to get the light before the sun moves."

"Oh but..."

"No buts, and stop fidgeting."

I don't even know why Fred wants to paint me. We could be out with Nancy and Tom this morning. They're going skating and then having hot chocolate at the cabin by the river. But I have to sit here and have my portrait painted.

"Fred?"

"Mmmmm?" paintbrush in mouth.

"Why on earth do you want to paint me anyway. There are far more beautiful creatures out there than me."

Fred slammed his brushes on the work table. "How can you say such a thing. You're the most beautiful woman in the world, no - in the universe!"

"Oh Fred, stop teasing."

"I'm not teasing!" Fred took my hand. "Why would I not want to paint the woman I love, why would I not want to paint the woman I am going to marry?"

Marry, marry – he's never said anything about marriage before. My mind was racing. Play it cool, play it cool. What on earth do I say. Was it a proposal or was Fred just putting it out there to see my reaction? No, I mustn't give anything away.

"Now Fred, you're never going to get the painting finished like this. The sooner you get finished the

sooner we can have hot chocolate at the cabin."

Fred picked up his brush. There was an awkward silence. I looked out of the window. The yellow winter sun was softly melting the frost that clung to the limbs of the bare trees, making them glisten and sparkle. Mist hung over the crisp, white lawn, making it a typically fresh winter's morning.

I was trying to sit still while my mind was wandering. I couldn't understand why Fred would be interested in someone like me anyhow, it's not like I have any money or anything. Mum works in the local library and Dad does people's gardens. My brother's done all right for himself though, he joined the police straight out of school and has just passed his sergeant's exam.

Fred's posher than me, he went to grammar school and his parents own their own house! He's very la-di-da.

"Fred?"

"Mmmmm?"

"Do you think my portrait will hang in a fancy gallery some day?"

"I do hope so." Fred carried on dabbing.

"Well one of those galleries that's not too fancy, where anyone is welcome to walk in off the street on some rainy day in June. Then everyone can see what a genius you are."

Fred stood back and eyed his work. "I hope some wealthy laird will buy it for millions and hang it in his castle in the Scottish Highlands."

"But then no one would see it. Buying it for millions would be splendid though." I clapped my fingertips, holding them up to my mouth like a prayer.

"And we could sail away into the sunset to live happily ever after". Fred concluded.

We were giggling now, the mood had lifted. I sat silently for a bit watching Fred studying me and adding a bit more paint here and there on the canvas. His dark hair falling over his eyes, he kept flicking it back with a toss of his head, not wanting to smear paint on his face.

It's been almost a year since Fred came to my perfumery counter looking for a birthday present for his mum. He made me laugh insisting on trying on all the free samples before settling on bath salts and talcum. "You can never go wrong with bath salts and talc," I advised. "all mothers love them." Whether they do or not made no difference to me, but customers seemed to like hearing it. Well this customer must have, because he came back at the end of the day and asked me out to the pictures. The rest is history, as they say.

Fred has quite a good job at the bank. I'm not sure what, but I know he's not on the counters. He's a clever man, good with numbers. He tells me about the meetings he goes to and the people he meets, but it all goes over my head. I don't mind, he's so funny, I've started to look forward to

hearing about his regular customers. But his passion, his talent, is his art. He has sold a few canvasses, but not enough to leave the bank. His hope one day is to become an artist full time.

Would it be so bad to marry Fred? I pondered. I looked out of the window again, allowing my mind to wander on what might be.

"Fred?"

"Mmmmm?"

"You know in a hundred years from now, when my portrait is hanging in the gallery."

"Yerrrsss."

"When all those people look at me, look at my clothes and stuff – well what I mean is, when they look into my eyes..."

"Yerrrsss"

"What do you think they'd be saying about me?"

"Well they'd say – I wonder what this beautiful person was like, what did she do, was she happy, did she find love." Fred looked round the canvas and smiled when he said the word 'love'.

I giggled. "And they'd say – did she like hot chocolate?"

Fred rolled his eyes. "Not long now, I promise" and did a few more tweaks with his brush, "there – done for today."

I sat forward in my chair and stretched my arms out, then stretched them up above my head. Fred tidied his brushes and paints. He turned towards me and looked owlishly over his glasses. "And what would the girl in the portrait say to the people in the gallery looking into her eyes?"

I thought for a moment, ermmm ... what would she say? I stood up and clasped Fred's hand. "she'd say... I'm just a girl doing the best I can!"

Commended

Inspiration:

Portrait of Percy Lancaster
by Henry Vitofski (1892-1964)



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Where Does Time Go?

By John Howard
(Story)

“Bom-Bom, what’s a Nosey Parker?” asked Eve looking up from his knee with her dark pool-like eyes which searched his soul. “Why do you ask my love?” Her twin Evan interjected “It’s because she’s always asking questions at school Grandad and that’s what the others call her”.

He gently bounced the two of them on his knees to give him time to think, Tick (his nickname for Eve) blurted “I never get any answers. Why won’t people answer me?”. Evan giggled, “Cos you don’t give anyone time to answer before you ask another question”. He smiled, “Tock’s right Eve, your teachers are very busy, you need to give them time”. Eve countered, “What is time grandad, where can I find it so that I can give it to them and where does time go?”

Looking into those pools he felt like ‘Old Father Time’. He averted his eyes to the bookshelf; they fell upon Stephen Hawking’s ‘A Brief History of Time’ and recalled Carl Sagan’s observation in the introductory paragraph that ‘*children don’t know enough not to ask the important questions*’. It was Sunday morning, so he was wearing his own grandfather’s bowtie, he felt obligated to attempt an answer.

“Time, my love is something that you can measure. For example, you’re both on my knees and Bom-Bom can feel that Evan is heavier, you measure weight in grams. Stand up and look each other in the eyes”. They giggled as they did so. Evan blurted “I’m taller than Tick as well”. “Your right Tock, men are usually taller and heavier than ladies, your about three centimetres taller.”

He gazed into Evan’s trusting sky-blue eyes, he was relieved with his grandson’s response. “How do you measure time Bom-Bom?” Before he could reply Eve snapped “Give him time to answer Tock.”

He had them sit side by side and cross-legged at his feet. “It depends what length of time you’re measuring. Are you old enough to keep a secret?”. Two heads nodded in unison. “Nobody knows why I call you ‘Tick’ and ‘Tock’. Your mum thinks it’s because the words twin with each other and rhyme. Your dad thinks it’s because you rarely sit still for a second. You’re both like the pendulum in the grandfather clock behind me, always on the move”. He placed his forefinger to his lips and mouthed that they sit as quiet as mice.

The room felt strangely eerie, the clock's presence increased, its pendulum becoming a living entity. Grandad whispered, "What can you hear?" Eve, eyes like craters in her moonlike face whispered, "I can hear the clock, I've not heard it ticking before". Evan added, "And it tocks". Grandad nodded, "What you can hear is time and life itself. Time is measured in seconds, my clock tick-tocks each one."

"Bom-Bom, why do you call me Tick?" asked Eve. "And why do you call me Tock – why can't I be Tick?" questioned Evan. "It's to be our secret my dears. That clock belonged to my grandfather; my grandad, it has been a part of my life since I was born. It's my close friend and shares my secrets now that I live on my own. I love it greatly just as I love you two. You can't have a tick without a tock and in my mind, you can't have an Eve without an Evan. Eve, you were born first, you're five minutes older than Evan so I think of you as Tick and Evan as Tock. Have done since you were born, I've loved every second and when I'm sat here on my own the clock whispers your names to me".

Eve half raised her hand, "Grandad, mummy says we were alive in her tummy before we were born. Did your clock talk to you before we were born. Is that why your clock's smiley face has 'pre cot' written on it?" Grandad laughed, "No my dear, the clock's old and like me has bits missing, there's a letter 's' missing because it's been wound up so many times that letter has worn away. My clock was made in Prescott which is not far from Southport, it has a smiley face because time is a gift, that's why we call it the present. I'm delighted you can also see its smiley face; it's reminding us to make the best of our lives and to be happy".

The three sat in silence, each sensing their bond forged in love and trust. It was grandad who spoke first "I've lived a long time and I've learned many things which I will share with you as you get older." Evan was the first to respond, "How old are you Bom-Bom?". Grandad smiled and guided them back onto his knees. When they had settled, he replied, "I'm older than three score years and ten."

Eve questioned "What's a score Bom-Bom?". "A score is twenty years, the first twenty years of life when you're growing up are very important. Do you know what you'll both be given on your 21st birthday?". Both shook their heads. He took an ornate key from his shirt pocket, "A key as a sign that you're an adult and the door to your future is unlocked. This beautiful key was made by a clocksmith in Prescott, I use it to wind the spring inside the clock to keep it working, my father gave me this key and his father's bowtie on my twenty-first".

As if listening the clock struck the hour. Both children bounced up and down, and in unison cried, "Bom-Bom your clock whispers our names to you, but it shouts your name to us. Now you know our secret!"

Grandad embraced them, he hadn't known such a huge part of his heart had been empty before they were born. "Is there anything else you want to ask me?"

Eve again looked deep into his soul before replying, "Grandad, what's a Nosey Parker?"

Inspiration:

Two Miners

by Roger Hampson (1925-1996)

Two Friends

By Kathy Cowan

(Stage Duologue)

Stage Direction: A light on Samuel Taylor



© the artist's estate

I must say we look a bit rough in the picture. An artist wanted to paint the local colour of Ilkeston. He could have chosen the foundry workers in Stanton Ironworks lit by the furnaces, but instead he wanted our blackened faces after a day in the pit. Jack and me joked about him looking for colour when all he got was us mucky pair.

I'm Samuel Taylor, and this is my best pal Jack Adams. We look after each other in the pit, share jokes and problems come to that. I told him I was worried about my daughter Sarah working, but our Sarah has a neat hand at sewing and now turns out work that earns money, just what her Mam wants. Our Edie was sent to Players cigarette company in Nottingham, good money there. So my Rosie puts it away for our boys, Sam and Jack. She says education, that's what boys want, no point educating girls. Edie has a good voice so she was allowed singing lessons, once she earned some money.

Did I mention how I met my wife, Rosie Main? How did I know I was going to fall for the landlord's daughter?

Jack and I had an occasional pint in the Queens arms when we finished our shift in the Shipley colliery. We enjoyed a pint sluice down the pit dust when we had the money to spend. I had seven siblings and my mother took most of my wage to bring up the young ones, but then I met tall pretty Rosie. A flutter of eyelashes, a stolen kiss and I was hers. My parents were furious, said I had to give her up or leave the family home, so I left and married her at the Baptist Chapel in Queen St, Ilkeston on the 21st April 1906. Jack was my best man, so the least I could do is name my second son after him, the first is after me of course. It is hard graft in the pit, wet, dirty and dangerous. We are reassured as the safety miners live nearby, ready to drop everything to get us out of a pickle. Not many have been lost in Derbyshire, but I do think about it sometimes. Each shift Jack meets me with a 'Ey up me duck', a big smile on his face, not that you would think it when you look at the painting. It had been a hard day that shift, just three feet to crawl down to get to the coal face with my pick. Still

there is the allotment to look forward to. It's an oasis of green and fresh air. I know how to grow vegetables on my plot, but best of all is the old pear tree in the centre. Conference beauties that ripen slowly to feed the family for months. By this time we had Winnie, but she was shipped off to my sisters to feed until she was 15, then Rosie will want her wage, so back she'll come. My sisters changed their minds about me marrying Rosie when the children came along. Mother and Father had passed away, so no obstacles then to them knowing my growing family. My brother lived with his sisters, too lazy to get married what with being pampered by his unmarried siblings. The first war took their chances away, still they loved my young ones and entertain them in the big family house at Cosall. I had to scrub up well before I went to see them. Out came the tin bath in front of the fire and one of my brood would scrub my back for me. The big bar of soap making short work of the grime, but not everywhere. As I reached 50 the black stayed in the deep creases in my face, hard as I scrubbed. But life was good.

Stage direction: Fade to Black – light on Sam Junior

It's me, Sam Junior, off to Cambridge soon, my brother Jack will follow in two years. We are supposed to be clever, but the girls are too. I'm dreading going, mixing with the monied boys with us not having a halfpenny between us. We don't speak like them either, their 'barth' to our bath, no I'm not looking forward to it at all.

That is not why I'm writing to you, just to moan about going to university. I'm putting off telling you really, but I have to now.

My smiling loving father died three weeks ago in a pit accident. A prop gave way and the roof came down, covering him, just him. Jack was nearby and scrabbled with his hands to clear the fall but it was too late. My dad had died instantly at nearly fifty-one years of age. I still can't believe that the big man who gave me piggybacks when I was scrap of a lad has gone. We are all in shock and grieving. My brother went to the allotment to dig some carrots and was ashen when he came home as he said he saw our Dad by the pear tree. I went the next day but he was not there, though our Jack never went there again.

The coal board awarded my Mam £100 and free coal, but she could only have the money spread out over many years, as if she could not be trusted. So that's it now. I asked the artist if I could have the painting of my Dad and his friend, but it was too late, sold to some fancy gallery. I'll go one day to see it...one day.

Inspiration:

A Dressing Room At Drury Lane
by Dame Laura Knight (1877-1970)

Upstaged

By Luke Cheadle
(Story)



© the estate of Dame Laura Knight,
DBE, RA / Bridgeman Images

There has been a theatre on Drury Lane for over three hundred years, through fire and numerous reconstructions, it became the most famous and well-regarded theatre in London. Graced by royalty, it fully earned its reputation. Immaculately decorated from the main door to the stage. Emily strode right past the façade and took a right down the nearby alley till she came to the stage door, she fumbled with the lock and let herself in. Behind the gilded decoration and ornate design, it was propped up with crumbling brick and worn paint. She wormed her way through the labyrinth backstage, past props and sets and numerous peeling yellow posters advertising names like Edmund Kean, Joseph Grimaldi and Dan Leno.

She arrived at the dressing rooms, she likely had a while to wait. Emily had offered to help Anna practice her steps before curtain up but she had been late to every rehearsal, so she was taken aback to see Anna, already fully dressed, fixated on untangling her hair when she entered.

'Good evening.'

'Emily! Oh, you gave me such a fright'. Her reaction was predictably overwrought as Anna clutched at her heart.

'Are you alright?'

'Never better...oh its hopeless, do I have your confidence?'

'Of course you do.' she lied.

It was like opening the flood gates, Anna began to speak in a torrent, her voice was fluctuated with her practiced delicate tone occasionally giving way to her natural harsh east London accent.

'I think I might be cursed. It all started last month.'

The theatre royal often hosted touring companies, but the staff had remained the same for years, Samuel was no exception, the old stagehand knew every inch of the building and all its secrets. With practiced ease he threw out a casual remark that hooked anyone nearby and descended into a history lesson combined with the sensationism of a news rag. Stories rife with gossip and scandal, then someone would ask if the place was haunted and his eyes would gleam as he launched into his favourite subject.

'Of course,' he said, as though it were obvious, before recounting the dark past of the theatre, the grisly murder of Thomas Hallam, impaled with a cane after an argument over a wig, the famous clown Joseph Grimaldi, often seen floating as a disembodied head, always spoiling for a prank or a fight. The man in grey, often seen wandering the balcony before vanishing through the wall, behind which a skeleton was found, a knife through its heart and clad in grey rags. The spectre of Dan Leno, always accompanied by the scent of lavender and the macabre death of Clara Webster, who dress caught alight during the closing performance of the revolt of the harem.

Emily listened with a detached curiosity, but Anna hung on every word with an uneasy fascination, to her own detriment, as she became notably more cautious, often jumping at shadows or unexplained noises.

They had been in this very changing room when it started, a sickening noise echoing through the ancient plumbing.

'That sounded horrid,' said Anna

'What? I didn't hear a thing' said Emily, feigning confusion,

How does one become a ghost? Very easily as it turns out.

They had known each other for years; Anna had no reason to doubt her and that was her mistake.

Originally It was little things, just moving objects around, nothing drastic but enough to attribute to accident or forgetfulness... at first, next the items would disappear, a makeup brush, a comb, a bottle of perfume from one of her 'admirers'.

Next it was cultivating a sense of unease, pretending to notice things out of the corner of her eye. Amazing the noise a few badly stacked boxes and an open window can do. Then some laudanum to help her oversleep. A spot of grease on her fingertip to write on the mirror then a little heat revealing **HERE WE ARE AGAIN** scrawled on the glass.

To the trained observer she was the dutiful friend, helping her rehearse, hone her skills, dress and prepare, keeping her confidence. She would often voice her concerns to other dancers, never maliciously, that was important, always her worries and care for her friend. Clearly suffering from overwork and lack of rest.

Every stumble or step missed made her soar inside as like a child dissembling a doll, she watched her friend go to pieces.

Anna deserved it of course. She should have been first dancer, not Anna, she worked harder, she wanted it more but then Anna batted her eyes at the dancing master and suddenly the position was filled.

She had seethed with resentment for a time but then her resolve hardened and she knew what she had to do.

It wouldn't be long now, she barely had to try anymore, Anna did the work for her, shaking like a leaf at the slightest hint of anything untoward.

'I feel like I'm losing my mind' murmured Anna, snapping Emily out of her thoughts, 'I just always have the feeling something is behind, watching me.'

Her voice began to raise in pitch and undulate as she spoke, cracking with desperation as she ranted and raved about things that were not there, but her body remained curiously motionless as she held her mirror up with hands so tightly the glass began to crack then her shoulders began to rack with sobs.

Emily became very conscious of the fact there was nobody else around and she was in close quarters with someone standing on the precipice. It is a terrifying prospect of what the unhinged mind is capable of.

There was a rush of footsteps, Emily's head whipped around to see her saviour and gaped when she saw Anna standing in the doorway, out of breath, clutching a hastily packed bag.

'I'm sorry I overslept... who are you?'

The same thing struck Emily herself as she turned back towards the dressing table where whatever was wearing Anna's shape was still standing.

Inspiration:

Eva Lutyens

by Glyn Warren Philpot (1884-1937)



Inspiration

By Peter Glazebrook

(Short Story)

Barbara sat to one side, pencil raised. She'd taken lessons in Pitman shorthand, despite her mother's objections. Her father understood. This was the sixties and an ability to take notes was useful in many careers besides those of secretary.

The chair of the committee, an elderly man in his early seventies, contemplated the painting. Propped on a tripod it was a portrait of a severe looking woman in a purple haute couture jacket set against a red backdrop.

"Eva Lutyens painted by Glyn Philpot. I am in favour of displaying it in the Atkinson but would appreciate your views?" he asked.

The major, who'd commanded a reconnaissance company, cleared his throat. "I'm not sure it's the sort of thing we should display. Given the ... lifestyle of the artist."

"And what about his lifestyle?" asked Agnes. A woman in her forties with short dark hair, sporting a jacket and pantaloons.

The major coloured, caught between prejudice and chivalry. Good manners to a lady won out and he shook his head.

"A good point. We should be looking at the painting, not the painter," commented the chair.

"I think it's lovely. I had one of Eva's dresses. It was divine," said another member.

"I really don't like it. It's just old fashioned. This is nineteen sixty-three. The Beatles are playing venues in Southport. We should be looking for something more than a commemoration of an out-of-date fashion designer. How did we end up with this anyway?" said a young man, aping his idols by wearing an Italian cut suit. Ostensibly present to widen the age range of committee members, it was generally considered he was there to gain a veneer of culture. Prior to inheriting the family insurance business in Liverpool and running it into the ground.

"I'm afraid we're second choice. Eva stated in her will that the portrait should only be hung in the National Gallery if it was displayed on the ground floor. If not, it should be presented to a provincial gallery," explained the chair.

"Well, I think their loss is our gain, look at the brushwork. This was Philpot at his best. He's caught the subject, although she does look troubled," said Agnes.

"That she was," replied the chair, nodding.

"You knew her?" asked Barbara, before realising she'd spoken out loud.

"Yes, it was before the Great War. She studied under her uncle, Chaim Weissman, in Manchester," said the chair.

"President of Israel?" asked the young man.

"But before that he was a scientist in Manchester."

The young man muttered under his breath.

The chair's voice hardened, "His research on feedstocks for explosives and high-octane petrol helped our war effort, in both conflicts. His son was killed in the war."

The major turned on the young man. "Did you ever see a concentration camp?" he barked, displaying the character that saw him command a unit of barely armoured scout cars, whose job was to find the enemy by getting them to shoot at you.

The young man shook his head, his face beetroot.

"Then shut up!" snarled the major. "This gets my vote. Let's display the picture."

The chair had turned back to the painting.

"Did you know the Lutyens family?" asked Barbara, wide eyed.

"No," chuckled the chair. "We met when she was studying the metabolism of fatty acids at the Curie Institute in Paris. This was before she was married. She was Eva Lubrzyńska then."

The chair rose and approached the painting; he reached out, his fingers almost touching the canvas.

"Even when she was younger there was a..." the chair paused, searching for the correct word, "a ... restlessness about her. I think the painter has captured this. She moved to Russia, then back to England. She met Edward Lutyens' son and that was that."

The room was silent. The chair seemed lost in reminiscences, then he shook his shoulders and turned back to the room.

"I think we should ask the youngest person here what she thinks. This is after all the time of the 'white heat of technology' and music ensembles like the Beatles. Barbara?"

Barbara pursed her lips, "It's not just the painting as art. It's commemorating a woman who was a polymath. She shows what women can do today."

The chair smiled, looking like everyone's favourite uncle. "And what are your aspirations?"

"I'd like to go to university. One of the new campuses that are being built, like Essex. I want to study electrical engineering. They've got new stuff like computers," Barbara gushed, then coloured and bent her head to her notebook.

"Ahh, you are like Eva, looking to do things that are 'unsuitable for a woman.' Now, what have you recorded of our deliberations?" the chair asked.

Barbara raised her notebook. "The committee considered the composition, brushwork, and use of colour. They considered this was emblematic of Mr Philpot's work and recommend that the portrait be hung in the Atkinson as occasion demands."

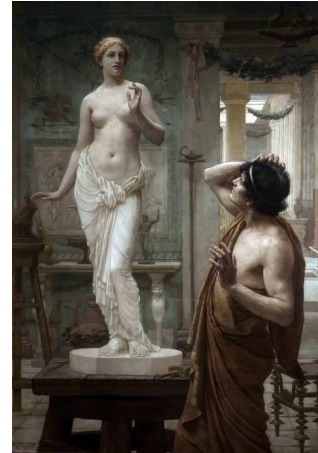
The chair looked at the painting, then his eyes turned back to Barbara. His mouth turned up at the corners and his eyes sparkled.

"I think you are going to achieve great things, young lady," he said.

Inspiration:

Pygmalion And Galatea

by Ernest Normand (1857-1923)



The Divine Spark Of Conscious AI: How Ovid's Myth Exposes Our Contemporary Failures

By Stephen Davies

(Essay)

Ernest Normand's oil painting *Pygmalion and Galatea* portrays a critical moment of an ancient Greek myth from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Pygmalion, a sculptor from Cyprus, sculpts an ivory statue to portray his ideal woman, Galatea, and becomes so obsessed with his creation that he prays for a bride who is just like the idealised ivory form. The goddess Aphrodite grants his wish, bringing Galatea to life. In Normand's painting, Galatea is part-way through her transformation with her lower half still ivory and her upper half human and alive.

This story, like that of Frankenstein's monster, explores the mystery of the creation of life and the relationship between consciousness and inanimate matter. These stories may seem scientifically naive, but do we actually have a better understanding today?

In philosophy, this question is posed as the mind-body problem. What is the relationship between consciousness and the human form? How do they interact? Does the brain create the mind? If so, can we copy the brain's architecture and artificially create consciousness?

This age-old question from myth and philosophy is now a critical debate in technology. Some believe we have already created consciousness with the development of Large Language Models such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek that very closely mimic verbal behaviour that we associate with intelligence and sentience.

But is AI really any more likely to lead to the creation of consciousness than devotion to an ivory statue or cadaver parts stitched together and shot through with electricity? Will this time of frenzied

speculation about conscious AI be looked back upon as being as fantastical as Pygmalion and Galatea and Frankenstein's monster? Will they laugh at us for thinking that a soulless text-predicting machine could somehow solve the mystery of what it means to be a conscious human being? Or are we, perhaps, really at the dawn of humans becoming like gods, creating consciousness and realising Ovid's myth?

Pygmalion's ivory required the divine intervention of Aphrodite to become living flesh; Frankenstein harnessed lightning from the heavens to animate the body parts of his monster; where would the spark of consciousness originate to bring true sentience to AI?

One could be tempted to think that we have moved on a long way from statues and body parts. With developments in AI and neuroscience, surely we have a much more sophisticated grasp on consciousness now.

Surprisingly not, not when it comes to the most fundamental question of what consciousness is and where it comes from. There is, in fact, no consensus amongst the relevant experts in the field of consciousness and AI. Given our great scientific advances, why is this question still so contentious?

The issue is not a technical one but one of principle, a philosophical dilemma known as the hard problem. There is a reason why Pygmalion required Aphrodite and Frankenstein required lightning from the heavens to provide the missing spark of conscious life: there is nothing that can be known about the *quantities* of physical matter that can give us any clue at all about how the *qualities* of consciousness could arise from them - there is always something lacking that would be needed to somehow transform something from being purely physical, that can be known objectively, into something conscious, that has subjective experience.

By way of analogy, a mathematical equation, such as $2+3$, can only ever be shown to equal a numerical output, in this case 5. Similarly, the mathematical descriptions of reality from the physical sciences can only ever output further quantitative descriptions that are devoid of any of the qualitative content we experience in our conscious states. Put simply, the numbers of science cannot, and will never, explain the existence of consciousness.

So despite the advances in neuroscience - the correlations we have discovered between the activity of the brain and what we experience subjectively - we have made precisely zero progress in understanding how consciousness could possibly be created by a physical brain.

This problem is thought so intractable that many are beginning to reassess entirely the relationship of consciousness and the brain. Alternative theories are becoming more popular, amongst some scientists as well as philosophers. Maybe the brain does not create consciousness at all, maybe it acts as a filter for consciousness, or maybe what we consider to be separate physical entities are

nothing more than physical experiences dependent on the mind for their existence, more akin to the physical things we experience in a dream or a virtual reality.

Whilst these theories can seem radical, they do solve the hard problem and they are completely compatible with science, both with all the correlations of neuroscience and with the proven results of our most successful science ever, quantum mechanics. A valid interpretation of the results of quantum experiments is that what we consider physical, only comes into being when possibilities are observed by consciousness.

The idea of consciousness existing prior to, or independently of, the brain not only solves philosophical problems and provides a valid explanatory framework for mainstream scientific evidence, it also enables us to understand and explore evidence from areas considered by many to be fringe science, areas that have the real potential for significantly advancing our understanding of consciousness.

Two areas that have been researched extensively are psi phenomena and near-death experiences. This evidence seriously challenges the brain-creates-consciousness model and is better understood with models that allow consciousness to exist independently of the brain.

We should allow ourselves the intellectual freedom to objectively examine these alternatives that are compatible with science and can accommodate more evidence, such as that from psi and NDE research, that is often ignored or explained away. If we fail to do this, then our chances of truly understanding consciousness are seriously diminished.

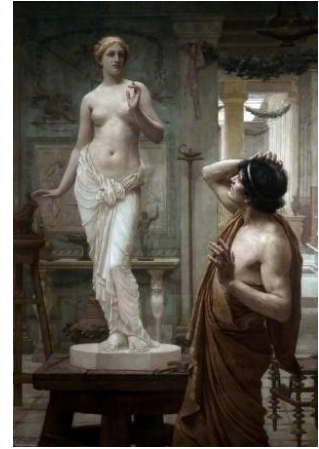
Perhaps we are on the precipice of becoming Pygmalion or Frankenstein, so it is imperative that we explore all aspects of consciousness openly to help ensure that we create something of beauty rather than something monstrous

Commended

Inspiration:

Pygmalion And Galatea

by Ernest Normand (1857-1923)



Pygmalion Makes A Friend

or

The Difference Between Making Friends And Making Your Friends

By Sio Wynne

(Story)

In hindsight, Pygmalion should have known his “So, you brought your creation to life” support group wouldn’t be particularly well attended.

“So,” he said, again. He then, again, drifted back into awkward silence as he, again, failed to think of anything to follow it up with. He took a sip of his wine, ate another olive, and hoped the only other person who’d turned up would think of something to say.

“So,” said the only other person who’d turned up. He was a gaunt, sickly-looking man who’d introduced himself as *Doctor* with such arrogant insistence it immediately put Pygmalion, a connoisseur of the arts, on the defensive. He’d also rudely refused the wine and olives Pygmalion had spent time artfully arranging in favour of several cups of a hot, foul-smelling concoction he’d inhaled as if it were ambrosia itself. Still, he’d responded to Pygmalion’s invitation, which meant they had at least one thing in common.

Their inability to start a conversation was quickly becoming a second shared personality trait.

The problem, Pygmalion thought, with trying to make friends with other people who’d literally created their own friends, was that people who literally created their own friends usually did so because they weren’t very good at making them the usual way.

The doctor failed to elaborate. Pygmalion looked towards the peeling door of the church basement, desperately hoping an extrovert would turn up. None did. With no other options immediately springing to mind, he took a large gulp of wine, dropped an olive on the floor as an offering to whichever god resided over the realm of small talk, and tried again.

“So,” he said. This time, either through the success of his olive offering or just sheer desperation, he actually managed to think of something to say next. “Who did you, you know?”

"Bring to life?" drawled Doctor Frankenstein. Pygmalion nodded encouragingly, but it seemed that was all he was going to get. Still, it was the most conversation they'd managed since Pygmalion had offered the doctor his choice of worn, stackable, red chairs, so, emboldened, Pygmalion continued.

"For me, it was my wife. Not my wife at the time, you understand. She was a statue. One I made. Some of my best work, actually."

"Mine was also my best work."

Frankenstein -*Doctor* Frankenstein, sorry- was responding! Conversation was happening! Pygmalion subtly dropped another olive in gratitude. Apparently the god of small talk really liked olives, because the doctor continued.

"He was my... son. I suppose."

"Oh. Cool," said Pygmalion, who'd never quite seen the appeal of children. They were loud, messy, and completely untrustworthy with a chisel. Still, desperate to keep the conversation going now he'd finally succeeded in carving through the stoney silence, Pygmalion quickly asked a follow up question.

"So how did you do it? Bring him to life?"

"Hard work," answered the doctor. Pygmalion had been expecting him to be excited, proud. This was a man who'd brought a person to life! Instead, Dr Frankenstein just sounded tired. Tired and bitter.

"Hard work and innovation. Single-minded dedication to scientific advancement, challenging everything the world believes to be true about the nature of the human condition. Years without sleep, having my genius consistently hindered by the narrowmindedness of my so-called academic peers and the righteous do-goodery of ethics committees. Being denied access to necessary resources, my applications for student funding constantly rejected, forcing me to conduct my groundbreaking experiments in the squalor of my dorm room. I gave everything, *sacrificed* everything, conducted trial after trial after trial to create matter from non-matter and finally succeed in harnessing the very power of life itself!"

"Oh," said Pygmalion, "I just prayed to a goddess."

Silence.

Pygmalion was just starting to get defensive – sure, he might not have been to university, but sourcing a decent sacrificial dove wasn't exactly easy – when Dr Frankenstein suddenly did the last thing Pygmalion expected.

He laughed.

It wasn't a nice laugh, sort of clipped and self-deprecating, but Pygmalion knew an olive branch when he heard one. In a burst of what was either confidence or foolishness, Pygmalion decided to ask the question that had been on his mind since he'd first envisaged the support group.

"Do you ever think," he said, "that your creation was better before you brought it to life?"

Dr F. didn't say anything, which wasn't a no so – in for an obol, in for a drachma – Pygmalion continued.

"I mean, she's still gorgeous, obviously, but she just talks like, all the time now. Just, constantly asking questions, and not even interesting questions. It's like, I don't know—"

"She's a child?"

"Exactly! Which, sure, you're new to the world and everything, but you're supposed to be my wife, not my kid, you know?"

"Mine wants things," Frankenstein said, nose crinkling in disgust. "Apparently it's not enough that I gifted him life itself. The wretched monster wants a *mate*. As if I could just whip up another."

"No gratitude, that's their problem," agreed Pygmalion. "Mine wants to travel, of all things. What's wrong with my studio, that's what I want to know. She was perfectly happy with it when she was a statue."

"My inanimate pile of stitched together flesh may have been grotesque," said Frankenstein, "but at least it didn't have opinions."

"Tell me about it," said Pygmalion.

The church basement fell silent once more, but this time, rather than the awkward stiltedness of strangers, this silence was the calm, pleasant quiet of two people who'd just become friends.

"Hello? Is this the creation brought to life support group?"

Pygmalion and Frankenstein both turned to the entrance, where an elderly man wearing small, wire-rimmed glasses was poking his head around the doorframe.

"Hi, I'm Geppetto. Sorry I'm late."

Commended

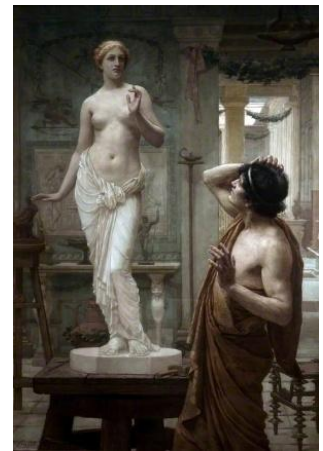
Inspiration:

Lilith

by John Collier (1850-1934)

Pygmalion And Galatea

by Ernest Normand (1857-1923)



Lilith And Galatea

By A.J. O'Toole

(Story)

All art is frozen magic - an act of imagination, captured by craft and then held there forever. Pygmalion, in Greek mythology, fell in love with the statue he created of Galatea, and as reward for his devotion the gods breathed life into her - an act of true magic. For the anniversary exhibition at The Atkinson, a painting of this moment had been brought out of storage and placed low on one wall, as if inviting visitors to step into their world.

At 4pm, the attendants closed the gallery, shutting the paintings in for the evening. The figure of Pygmalion listened to the sound of the doors being locked and was aware that, unusually, the gallery was still bathed in light. He waited for the bird call - four short notes then one long, all of the same pitch - that meant there would be no more visitors for the night. He glanced over his shoulder, breathed out and lowered his arms.

In the picture they shared Galatea remained impassive on her plinth, still, as if Pygmalion had really sculpted her from a single block of marble - lithe arms, each slim finger, every ripple in the sheet she wore, the curls of her pinned up hair. The artist who'd painted this scene had hinted that the statue of Galatea began to stir, blood now flowed in her body, brought colour to her face, but she remained as motionless as ever, her feet milk-white as the marble. Pygmalion, with his back to the gallery, spent all day staring at her clear blue eyes, to see if she was watching things go by outside their frame, but she never gave even a flicker of knowing.

On this night, when he turned around to face out from the frame they shared, Pygmalion could see a multitude of paintings - the walls crowded with landscapes, faces, figures, tableaux of other worlds. He knew everything the man who created him knew at the point of his painting's creation - this is the secret magic of art - and he also inherited the temperament and curiosity of an artist. They forgot to put out the gaslights, thought Pygmalion. Looking across and to the right his eye was caught by the pale shape - life sized, all soft curves - of a woman in an otherwise dark painting with a gilt frame.

Pygmalion's pulse jumped, his breath caught in his throat, and with blood pumping in his ears he leaned forward to gain a better view. Just a little more, he strained as far as he dared but then fell forward and tumbled out onto the floor of the gallery.

How could this be? he thought, glancing around him in panic. Pygmalion slowly turned back to Galatea, all he'd ever desired, alone in their painting. He knew he should step back in now, in case the magic failed and he was stuck outside, but the world inside their frame never changed and every day there was the same, waiting for Galatea to give him a sign.

Instead he wandered across the floor, testing how it felt under his feet, towards the image that had caught his attention. The woman, near nude, her skin almost luminous against a background of brown and dark green foliage, and her hair a golden cascade, a blonde waterfall that no-one could attempt to sculpt. As he got closer his breath caught again as he realised that the other darkness in the painting, cutting across the woman, just above her upper thighs, was a monstrous snake. It was coiled around her body - was she holding the snake or was the snake holding her? Their heads nestled into each other, without fear. The tail of the snake tightly corkscrewed around her calf and below her bare feet was the plaque that declared her name to be Lilitith.

Pygmalion turned back once more to his own painting, on the other wall, it wasn't far, but this was the furthest he'd ever been from Galatea. He then became aware of movement beneath him and looked down past his toga to see the slow powerful ripple as ten feet of snake, its skin the colour of coal and old copper coins, passed between his feet. He held his breath and wished he'd been holding his sculptor's mallet when he fell out into the gallery.

When the full length of the snake finally moved on he turned back to the girl with the golden hair, who now stood with her hands on her hips, staring straight at him with wide-open eyes. Lilitith too was imbued with all the thoughts of her own creator - the artist who last stood in front of her over a century ago, then left her with only a serpent for company.

She had been painted with the knowledge she was utterly irresistible. Her eyes could make you forget anyone else, she knew her mouth could form a smile that would make the rest of the world disappear, all of history and legend, and everyone and anything that ever lived. She lifted an arm and crooked a finger, beckoning this new man forward. Pygmalion cast a final glance back at Galatea. Lilitith, who knew when to take her chance, reached out to grasp his shoulder and pulled him straight into the frame of her painting.

When the gallery opened the next morning, the first few visitors puzzled over the painting of Lilitith. It was celebrated as the finest in the collection but only showed dark jungle, a tangle of trees you could get lost in, return to nature and never be found. Across the room, the painting of Pygmalion and Galatea was now a scene with a lone statue, a single marble tear falling on its marble cheek, frozen for ever. An hour later a scream broke the hush of the gallery as a ten foot python was found curled up in the corner behind the fire extinguishers.

Inspiration:

Lilith

by John Collier (1850-1934)



Lilith And So-called Representations Of 'Bad Women'

By Katie Lees

(Essay)

Lilith emerged in Jewish religious literature as a female who cavorts with demons and threatens life in a sexual and reproductive manner. She is a more extreme precursor to Eve who seeks out evil and revels in it. It was in the middle age text *The Alphabet of Sirach* that Lilith is stylised as Adam's first wife, who refused to submit to her husband as his lesser and flew instead into a nest of demons. In Kabbalah she became a seductress, who tricks men into sexual acts before killing them so that she can create her own demon children.

In the Middle Ages, amulets were used by mothers to keep Lilith away from their children and rituals were thought to block her from entering people's beds unsuspectingly. The folklore surrounding Lilith was extensive in Jewish life and literature. It was not until second wave feminism and Lilly Rivlin's 1972 article that Lilith's reputation began to change, and she was reclaimed as an icon who refused to bend to the male whim.

In the years between Lilith being created as man's worst nightmare and becoming a feminist figure, there were many different interpretations of her. One of these is John Collier's 1887 painting, 'Lilith'. This painting depicts Lilith confidently and seductively; she is the epitome of what would attract men. Her hair is long and vibrant, cascading down her back and her expression is relaxed with her lips almost turning up into a smirk. Lilith is undoubtedly beautiful and poised in this painting, the essence of female attractiveness but there is evil that can be seen in her also. Snakes have had varying meanings in many different cultures throughout history; ancient Egyptians worshipped them alongside Pharaohs and Gods. They have also been seen as icons of evil, especially in Western Christian cultures, it was of course a Snake that tempted Eve in the garden of Eden. Snakes can be seen as sneaky, blending into environments to launch stealthy attacks on their chosen prey, they shed skin eliciting a fear of unnatural survival properties like demons of the underworld would have. So, the Snake wrapped around Lilith's body and entwined within her hair in Collier's portrayal display to the viewer exactly where Lilith falls in the battle of righteousness against evil. Lilith is familiar with the snake, nuzzling her face against its slick skin. She revels in the company of Serpents and therefore, demonic forces.

Collier was an agnostic man who lived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, he was surrounded by the upper-class echelon of thinkers and artists. Assumedly, Collier did not fear biblical damnation or Lilith. In fact, he seemed to revel in the portrayal of mythical women who would not give in to society, this can be demonstrated by his paintings such as *Clytemnestra* and *Lady Godiva*. Whilst this

was progressive in its way in Victorian society, the idea that for women to be strong they must be sexualised, unwavering, scandalising society and cavorting with evil in itself adds to a harmful simplification of womanhood. Women are good or bad, pleasing patriarchal societies or not.

This image of women as intrinsically good or bad and more vulnerable to evil forces has arisen from religious and historical literature and iconography. Figures like Lilith and Eve and the lore that surrounds them has allowed men to keep women as secondary in society throughout history because they were presented as incapable of withstanding evil forces or large pressures, simply not as morally strong as the men that surround them.

This can be seen throughout history, where women have often been blamed and scapegoated because of the representation of them as more susceptible to wrongdoing, either by committing it themselves or luring men into it.

Anne Boleyn, for example, has been the victim of sexist representation since her execution and was almost entirely blamed for the ending of Henry VIII's marriage and the break with Rome. It was not enough that she was killed, but also had her public image marred with unsubstantiated accusations of witchcraft, adultery and incest. In 16th century England, it was easy to blame a known ambitious and educated woman for this monument change that divided and displeased the country, rather than acknowledge the failures and actions of the King. During her Queenship and the centuries after, Anne continued to be slandered, used as a means to an end by men to prove how awful women, protestants and unwarranted ambition could be.

Whether it was witchcraft trials in times of unrest or Yoko Ono breaking up The Beatles, ancient or recent history women have been overly blamed for events and actions to pacify patriarchal societies. This has stemmed from representations of women like Lilith, written as biased moral lessons to demonstrate women's place in the world, below men. As Lily Rivlin stated, "her ultimate vilification is man's vindication."

Lilith must continue to be re-contextualised in writing and portraiture. Collier's smirking, sultry Lilith represented a woman who would not allow herself to be ruled by men. This vibrant painting may have been scandalous upon its unveiling but can now be reclaimed as powerful, showing a woman who will not be blamed and compressed. At the dawn of humankind, Lilith was bold enough to say no to a man who wished to bend her to his whim, and she should no longer be blamed or negatively characterised for his damaging expectations.

Anne Boleyn did not make Henry VIII leave the Catholic faith.

Eve did not force Adam to eat the apple.

Lilith was not the original 'bad woman'.

Inspiration:

The Palace Of Minerva, Rome 1859
by David Roberts (1796-1864)

Figures In A Landscape

By Julia Clayton
(Story)



It was Luigi who said it was high time we did something about the Da Costa brothers.

Luigi took me under his wing when I was just a scrap of a lad, selling slices of watermelon to the tourists for a few coppers, and he taught me everything I know. Over the years I've progressed from being a street urchin or a gypsy boy to being an ostler, fisherman, forlorn young suitor or simply a man about town, lounging in front of the temple. I think I cut quite a dash in my white silk stockings, tight black breeches and a shirt so white it would put a few swans to shame. Luigi's most particular about our shirts; he has them specially washed by a woman near the Porta San Lorenzo, even though she charges more than the others. I once asked him why he bothered, as none of the gypsies we knew had freshly-laundered shirts, but he said that our customers weren't interested in painting real gypsies, just their idea of a gypsy. As for the sculptors, they often don't want me to wear any clothes at all, apart from a bit of cloth draped round my what-nots. As a boy, I was much sought after as a Cupid, whereas these days I get to play Mars or Bacchus. Signor Gibson asked me to model for his *Sleeping Endymion* only last week.

I have to say that Luigi himself is an absolute pro. He can turn his hand to anything – peasant, condottiere, labourer, stonemason, traveller – just by adding a couple of accessories: a scarlet bandana, a blue sash, a bandolier, a smock, a wide-awake hat, a pistol, a fez, a knife, a pair of high-heeled boots. We even supply our own dogs, a lurcher and a greyhound, which the Brits and the Irish can't get enough of. They're the best tippers as well, even if they couldn't care less about which ancient ruin they're painting.

In short, we are the figures in the landscape.

The Palace of Minerva, now, that's our patch – has been for years. Everyone knows where to find us, not just the artists but the bear-leaders, the drawing tutors, the cicerones. From our point of view it's an ideal spot: there's plenty of shade, especially behind those massive columns, and in the winter the stones release all the heat they've absorbed over the summer. If we need food then Gio's fried fish stall is just over the road, not to mention the old crone who sells last year's oranges. Minerva herself looks down us from above, even though her face is so weathered that she looks as if she's pitted with smallpox. Most importantly, though, the Palace of Minerva is right on the main tourist route, just round the corner from the remains of Noah's Ark.

All in all, business has been booming – until, that is, the Da Costa brothers started turning up on our patch about three months ago. We didn't trust them from the start, what with them being

Neapolitans, and you can imagine how angry Luigi was when he realised they were undercutting us. It wasn't the proper artists who were the problem, like Gibson, or Roberts the Scotsman, who knows that we can always supply the touch of the exotic that he craves. The business we lost came from the students, the young painters who come to Rome for a year or so to learn their trade. In itself that wouldn't have been too much of a problem, as they never have any money anyway, but the real issue was that the rich *milordi*, the young rakes on the Grand Tour, started using the Da Costa brothers for their drawing lessons. While we know not to mix business with pleasure, those interlopers were happy to sit up all night playing cards with their clients, or introducing them to the working girls.

The problem was, how to see them off? There was no point in threatening them, as they knew more criminals than we did. Luigi dismissed my suggestion that we could sabotage their work somehow, by doing strange things in the background. It was the old orange-seller, of all people, who solved our problem, after overhearing us discussing how to dispose of our rivals – who incidentally never patronised her stall.

'I could put a curse on them for you, if you like. You are my best customers, after all.'

'Come off it grandma,' said Luigi. 'You're no more a witch than I am.'

'In that case you're even more stupid than you look, then. I'm not from here, you know: I grew up in Abruzzo, see, where all the women know *stregheria* – so do you want my help, or don't you?'

I crossed myself and murmured a prayer. Even I knew that *stregheria* was an ancient form of witchcraft, still practised in the mountains.

'Leave it to me,' she said, turning her eyes to the statue of Minerva, 'and to the goddess up there.'

I soon decided, however, that the old woman must have exaggerated her powers, as the Da Costa brothers kept plying their trade at the Palace of Minerva and the young *milordi* kept hiring them. After about ten days, though, I noticed that the amateur painters were beginning to avoid our rivals in favour of us.

'Changed your mind, eh?' said Luigi to one of the drawing-masters. 'Decided you'd come back to the real professionals?'

'It's the strangest thing, and I can't offer any explanation for it, but whenever one of my students draws those two, by the next morning they've completely disappeared from the paper, as if they were never in the drawing at all. Some of my students got quite exercised about it, and accused me of erasing their drawings overnight, but I never touched them, I swear.'

'Well, it's just as well we're still here, isn't it?' said Luigi. 'Now, where would you like us to stand?'

Inspiration:

Marooned

by Percy Robert Craft (1836–1934)



Marooned

By Patricia Livingston

(Story)

That pig of a captain has dumped me here. Not one of the crew spoke up for me. Supposed to be mates an' all. I'm not a bad man. I didn't do nothing. I been on ships for years and never had no trouble, but that skipper, he had it in for me from the start.

They left me some supplies in this box. There's a flask of ale and a bit of mouldy ham with dry bread. They left an old crossbow too. I don't know what they think I'm going to shoot with it. When I can stand me own company no longer, I won't be able to shoot meself with it either. Me arms aren't long enough. I'll have to try an' stab meself instead with one of the bolts. More likely to starve to death, I suppose. Or die of the heat in this sun. No shelter at all. Tops of my ears are blistered already and feel like they might burst into flame.

I'm sad for me old Ma. What's she going to do without the money I bring home? It isn't much but it keeps her going while I'm away. An' Ginny Jenkins is expecting me to come back and marry her this time, with a fortune in me pocket. Could have made some money in New York if I'd got there.

So unfair. All I said was, "Don't hit him, he's only a lad." The pig was going to have him flogged for not swabbing the deck in the way he shoulda. "He'll learn if you give him a chance," I says.

"Oh yes?" says the skipper. "It's time you learnt something, Petrie, I'm the captain here and I'll be the one to teach you a lesson." He flogged me himself 'til he drew blood, alongside the poor

kid I'd been defending. Should have saved me breath. He'd usually get big George to do the flogging. George never whipped that hard and I suppose the pig knew it.

I was trying to clean up the bloody weals on me back with a rag when two of the new crewmen grabbed me up, threw me into the longboat and rowed me across here. They dumped me in the sand with the crossbow and the box, laughing all the while. Next week it could be their turn. I hope it is. They won't be laughing then.

I'll have a look around to see if there's anything to eat on this land. Could be some berries but they're probably poison. May be something else I ain't seen yet. There are a few trees over there. Maybe I could make a boat. Who am I kidding? I got nothing to chop 'em with. I'm here for life and that won't be a long one.

Just look at that sea. Empty. What I need right now is an American Clipper passing by. The captain will see me and send the boat over to pick me up. More likely he'd leave me here. We're not well in with the Americans just now, not with the Yankees at any rate, not since the Trent Affair. I'll have to pray for a Confederate Ship.

Hey look! Listen to those gulls out there, screeching their lungs out and soaring up across the sky. Wish I could do that. Must have found some fish there. Wish I had a rod or even a net. They are big fellas, those birds. Could make a tasty meal themselves. Time to find a shell or a rock to sharpen me bolts with. I used to be a good shot with a crossbow but haven't used one for years. Better get practicing. I'm not dead yet.

Inspiration:

An Interior With Figures

by Alexander Davis Cooper (1820-1895)

Mr Cooper's Painting

By Sue Belcher

(Story)



"I remember him as a fairly fine fellow, and a strong London accent, and when he painted us he had already been working around the Manchester area for many years. His name was Mr Alexander Davis Cooper, the artist, and he was well known to my Lord and Lady. You know, the ones I worked for as the kitchen maid.

Well, all that's in the past of course, and me coming out into the air so to speak has caused me a right stir I can tell you. See, we've been in the dark about things for that long, and only once did we come out before in this place here in Southport. That's me Pa in the picture, and he was told to get dressed as though he were a rich man, and then I was pulled out of the kitchen where I'd been making the New Year dinner and the Mistress ushered me into this here green dress and gold necklace and suchlike. What a to-do it all was. Anyway, seems they wanted to get the painting done double quick like, as Mr Cooper was only staying a couple of days, so he sat me down and my Pa behind me and all the time they were going on about this Merchant of Venice play, and when I asked about it, Mr Cooper said I was to be the lady Portia and my Pa was to be the Merchant.

Mr Cooper had us there all afternoon in the drawing room with no fire, and we couldn't move away, and it was troubling me that the dinner would be behind, and the cook would be cross, although Mr Cooper said she was not to punish me and he would make sure of it. Well, he never did, although Cook had heard all about it anyway and thought it was a funny thing, them using me in the picture but it turns out my Lady had said I would do. But Mr Cooper said he had no end of trouble trying to paint my hands as they weren't at all ladylike, which I know anyway because of all the washing I do, and I was so fed up with it all and felt like throwing in the towel, but me Mam had told me they were paying extra, so I had to stick at it. The green dress was supposed to show I was a wealthy woman and it was a lovely soft velvet, and Dad said I looked smashing in it, which was nice.

I got on well with Mr Cooper, although he did keep making me turn my head away from him when I wanted to see what he was doing and he wanted me to pretend as though my Pa was telling me

something special. I heard tell he did lots of these paintings for the rich folk, and he had already painted the racehorse my Lord and Lady had in the stables. After it was all done and nearly before the paint was dry we were being put on a wall of an exhibition in Manchester and that is how I came to be here in Southport.

You see now, we had been on the wall for many years and this chap from the mills took to us, and by then no-one could remember why we had been painted and what it was all about, so Mr John Henry Bell bought our picture and we came to his house in Southport. This was in 1929, and we stayed on his wall for many a year, and when he died he had bequeathed us to the Atkinson, and that seemed to be that.

They stuck our painting on a frame and in the dark, and that was it we thought. Pa and I both felt the same, and we didn't mind the time going by as it did, and once or twice they took the painting out and then talked about it and sometimes scraped a bit of paint or dirt off us and put us back. And then, just a few weeks ago, we were hauled up the stairs and treated to a complete clean, and that really made the world seem brighter.

Pa and I are right pleased to be having this outing, and we knew better than to show any reaction as they brought us to this salon, and hung us on the wall up here. The first thing I could see when we were settled was this picture of a scene in Venice, which I thought was so funny, me being Portia in the play about the Merchant of Venice, but of course no one would have understood that nowadays. We like it here, Pa and I, and it's like being on a holiday. When it's quiet, the other paintings begin to speak to us, and we talk and talk all night in our own way, sharing what we can see and the stories we hear; and what stories they are...

The world seems to have become an odd place since my day, but folk that pass by still look as much as ever they did and sound much the same, and some of them stand and stare so much I wonder what they are looking for.

Happen some time soon they will be done with us here and we will be back in our place in the Collection again, which will suit me. But if this story is told, and if it is all true, maybe someone would like to explain a bit more about this man we hear tell of and they call Mr Trump, who they say is a great meat eater and likes his pound of flesh. Does that mean he is a second Merchant of Venice?"

Inspiration:

Elissa Landi

by Howard Somerville (1873-1952)



The Star

By Helen Patten

(Story)

My beloved dad had died when he was on the largest big wheel in the world which came off its moorings and rolled through the town. I sobbed so much that I could barely breathe. Famous for being the best Psychiatrist in America, he was now famous for something else.

He had one wish before he passed. "Read the letter from your mom, *please*, if not for yourself then at least for me."

I stared at the yellowed envelope that I had ignored for years. I was scared. Why? I didn't know. For weeks I held it in trembling hands. Then, one day, I opened it.

'Dear baby girl, I'm not meant to write to you but then I never did play by the rules. Stella Sylvester, I hope it's you and not some other gal with the same name...I don't even know if you still live at the address that I saw in the article about your daddy's upcoming funeral and wake. You know it's brave of you to share that in print, you could have any Tom, Dick and Harry turning up but I guess you're an extrovert like me! Honey, I'm so sorry your daddy passed. He really was a good guy and that makes my heart sing.

I guess you're wondering why I gave you up. I was unmarried and back then, that was a big deal. Mom and dad shouted a lot and said I'd have to marry my boyfriend but that was out of the question. He confessed that he was still married. I know what you're thinking but he told me he was divorced! Then he publicly denounced me as a gold-digging fantasist who he'd never so much as winked at. You'll know him as Ceasar DeVille (real name Alan Sidebottom).'

I dropped the letter. My dad was the swarthy star of many a swashbuckler, bodice ripper and horror film with ludicrous storylines!

'I hope you look nothing like him, that'd be *too* hideous! I'm Sapphire Sylvester, you may have heard of me.'

I gasped. Of course I'd heard of her, the Hollywood star with the sixty-year career. I googled her. Amongst many photos was a portrait of her as a young woman: slender and pale, with an auburn bob. She wore a long red dress, trimmed with black and a golden camisole beneath. I was stunned.

'Anyways, mom and dad packed me off to a mom and baby home. I was only 18. I ran away but they found me. After you were born, I cut a lock of your hair and put it in my pendant. I named you Stella, it means star. The nurse came to take you. I pushed and kicked but she was stronger. She said you were going to a good home, with people that could take care of you. She asked me why I was crying.

My parents wanted me to marry Ted Travers who was big in the potato chip world but I dug my heels in. I set out on my own and rose up the ranks in Hollywood. I met a fellow actor: Nuncio. He was fair haired and elegant with fabulous taste in smoking jackets. He would pick out my outfits and paint my nails. He always called me beautiful. We married. I know what you're thinking: did we have kids? No. Nuncio was gay which was illegal back then. He was very discreet though each day felt like a hatchet over our heads, wondering if his cover would be blown. We had married to shut up both sets of parents. I'd long since given up on romantic love. Nuncio led a separate private life but my goodness, we were soulmates. He had this energy about him. I knew I could never love another man like I loved him. Ten years ago, he died. Sure, I carried on starring in blockbusters and Christmas romances with white picket fences and gingerbread houses but inside I was empty.

Do you still have Pinkie?'

Through my tears, I smiled at the worn bear beside me.

'Of course you still have him, I can see him now, call it mom's intuition. Maybe you're married, with kids, pets? Or not. Whatever makes you happy. I've not heard from you. I guess you mustn't want to find me but that's OK. The adoption place (Bristow's babies) still has my details. If you ever change your mind, you know where I am.'

Inspiration:

The Flame

by Jacob Kramer (1892-1962)

Broken Dreams

By John Quirk

(Story)



© estate of John David Roberts. By courtesy of the William Roberts Society.

It had been so dark, for so long. Yet another unwelcome visit to Longyearbyen, the Norwegian town that Miss Bennett spoke of at Summerwood School.

“It stays dark throughout the winter, there is no sun for eighty days. How would you live like that, girls?”

It was hard to fathom. We conferred. Our immediate concern was whether wolves lived there; would they eat us? There were no wolves, it was explained, as there were no forests; and wolves prefer forests.

“Longyearben is above the Artic tree line.” Mrs Bennett went on. “There nearest wolves are many miles away. Even if a stowaway wolf did reach there, it could never adapt to the environment. It would perish.”

We were relieved, if saddened for the wolf.

“However, polar bears are native” Mrs Bennett imposed.

This tactic worked, and we were stopped dead in our chattering tracks.

My reminiscing stopped too, as I heard a new voice.

“Bring that crate over here please. The Flame will take position 242”.

There was a sudden heaving. It was happening again, brought out from my enforced hibernation. A familiar sensation as light slowly revealed itself to my closed eyelids, spreading down from my brow until each eyeball was blazing. I was back out in society.

“That’s it, the hang is complete” the new voice reported. “It’s quite a spectacle.”

Muffled footsteps hurried away, a door closed, and all went dark. Time paused.

“The Cathedral at Chartres” a male voice, speaking from my right. “Quite magnificent.”

Chartres, I knew to be a masterpiece of French Gothic architecture. In my early childhood we had a family day out to York Minster, another Gothic wonder. It was June and the sun was high. As we gazed at the rose window, it was struck with light. The grand south transept filled with more colours than I had ever imagined. Ernest, Helen, Clara, and I ran giggling and tracing patterns in the reds, blues, and golds that emblazoned the ancient stone floor. Until quietened by a maternal shush. I had visited the Minster often since, but never made such happy memories. An innocent time when everything in my life was happy.

"Do you think he's a pilot?" this time two ladies mused to my left.

I shuddered at the thought. My own fiancé, Albert, was a fighter pilot who had been shot down over France in 1917. We had met at a ball in Harrogate five years earlier. He was like no man I had ever seen; tall, handsome, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. We danced until we were dizzy, my jaws aching from the depth of my smile. I had fallen in love. He would bring flowers when we subsequently walked in Valley Park. We would talk about our future, his career in the family textile business, where we would live, the fun we would have, how we would grow old together. But now he was buried alone, and I was here.

My consolation was that he would remember me as I was. I determined that the last complete image of me would be the one he carried. Much of me died with him, and that is how I now appear. A shadow of my former self. No longer complete.

I had got my bearings. A cathedral to my right, and a fighter pilot to my left. I was in the right place.

"She's like a thumb wearing a wig." The blunt honesty of a young voice. My turn in the spotlight.

My marriage plans in tatters, I needed a profession. A change in the law made it possible to train as a teacher. I enrolled at the University of London Day Training College and boarded with other female students in Holland Park.

The new location and companionship were the change I needed. Rote learning and memorization were out, and we learned about child development through play and exploration. Though only twenty years had elapsed, it seemed that everything about the world had changed since my time at Summerwood.

London life was very diverting. At weekends we might visit Brighton or Windsor or join excited crowds in Notting Hill to watch the latest Rudolph Valentino film at the Electric Cinema. Whilst the audience collectively swooned, I thought back to Albert. Sometimes I would imagine it was him and me adventuring together on the big screen, having the life of which we had dreamed.

After training I returned to Yorkshire to accept a teaching position in Otley. Clara came to live with me. We made a busy life together and became an established sight in the town. We ran the local girl guides and would organise guiding camps across the county. We set up a ludo league for women who, like us, had never married or had been widowed by war. In the long summer school break we would holiday together, mostly around Italy, marvelling at the architecture, the heat, and the vibrant crowds. It was unlike anything we had ever experienced back at home. It was a full and happy life, although there was always something missing. The flame that burned in me back in 1917 was never relit.

"Bring the crate over here, please. Let's get number 242 down." The same new voice that I had heard before."

I knew what that meant, but I was not prepared for it. I wanted a little longer before being put away again. The hand of fate meant that I had to forge my own path in life, but on this matter I was always powerless. Being submerged back into darkness with only my own thoughts for company.

I could feel the frame loosening as it was unscrewed from the wall and then being carried gently down to the floor. Slowly the darkness spread up from my cheek to my brow, as I re-entered by unwelcome coffin, and there was no light, and all was silent again.

Inspiration:

Lilith

by John Collier (1850-1934)



Under Her Skin

By Frances Iddon

(Story)

Things really hadn't been right recently.

Every morning she would awake with a violent shudder and the crunching of teeth over teeth, ensnared in twisty blankets. She would rub and corral her cold limbs, but this only resulted in silvery transparent scales to come away in her fingertips and eventually settle atop the bedroom furniture like a cold film, the remnants of a new Pompei.

As she stepped into the shower the first cough of dormant plumbing hit her papery skin and she hissed along with the sputtering water. A perfect harmony in hostile territory. She stood perfectly still and silent following this, observing the water running down the canals and valleys and pooling in her nave, never once having the inclination to scrub or scrape or scratch at her weary body.

All the tasks necessary to keep her heart ticking and the earth rotating were completed, before stepping out onto the street. The houses were tightly packed and leaned ever so slightly to the left, this was also true of the neighbours who were best acknowledged only with the slight jerk upwards of the chin. The old lady next door was chain-smoking in a rusted lawn chair and peered at her curiously with two beady eyes embedded into a puckered face. She hurried past pulling a thin coat around her ever more tightly. She hadn't been to work for a couple of days but didn't think anyone had noticed (apart from those two beady eyes) due to the usual office-based cacophony of fingertips on keyboards and screens beaming directly into pale faces. Instead, her new routine involved frequenting the corner shop and then riding the bus from end-to-end in an exaggerated S-shaped loop.

She stepped up to the shop counter, past the kaleidoscopic array of processed foods, punctuated by the occasional wet barrel of olives and mega tubs of hummus, with her packet in hand. A man with loose teeth and trousers with sodden cuffs suddenly loomed over her.

"Shouldn't you be at school or summit?" he croaked.

Before producing an explosive hiccup that doused her in a fresh can of John Smith's. Her eyes darted to the left, but the cashier stood silent and unresponsive with two milky glazed eyeballs that hid generations of learned passivity. She recoiled and another hiss rose up, from deep in her gut this time, which caused the man and can to stumble away in abject horror.

She fled sans the fluorescent packet of biscuits previously in hand and hurried down the winding lane to wait for the 75 circular alone in the mist. She leaned back on the glass and counted all of the cracks across the pavement in front of her, and then the blades of grass sprouting up from them to calm her racing pulse. She was usually found wandering busy parks or sat in the cloying darkness of cinema screenings, on the fringes of Eden, just a touch of the hand away from her supposed kin.

However, this new tightness under her skin and the bone-deep chill she had developed meant even these non-interactions were currently on hiatus. It was safer that way, there wasn't any known cure for the kind of wildness that these internal sensations were eliciting from her.

When the bus arrived she dropped two cold coins with a thunk into the driver's side tray and slunk up to the upper deck, sitting right at the front and breathing little dream clouds onto the icy window that was a hair away from cracking. There came a belligerent rumbling from the back of the bus, sharp shouts and laughs piercing through the commotion. Boys in uniform trousers, haphazard shirts slung with loosened ties came barrelling down the aisle.

"Oi you sick or summit?"

"Homeless I reckon" answered another.

"Here's some scran then" offered a third before they all threw fistfuls of crisps at her and stampeded off the bus roaring with uncontained laughter.

Her blood began to pulsate and fill her eardrums, gums swelling up with rage and teeth snapping intermittently in time with the clatter and shake of the bus. This was far beyond any CBT techniques, so she alighted and slithered into the nearest pub, looking to poison whatever was growing with some venom of her own.

"Double whisky" she mumbled to a lifeless looking man with hooded eyes who had peeled himself away from the mirrored wall strung with bar snacks like Christmas decorations.

"Eh?"

"DOUBLE WHISKY" she spat before catching a slice of her reflection directly between the salted peanuts and the cheese and onion Taytos. Hair stringy, cheeks sallow, eyes slit, and exhaling with an audible rattle.

She turned swiftly, drink clutched to her, right into the path of Adam. An ex-boyfriend - the smug, vindictive kind that would make anyone want to swallow themselves whole when confronted with in public.

"Funny seeing you here! Day drinking? That has to be a new low, even for you." He delivered with the air of a man who had completed the Parkrun before you'd managed to crawl out from underneath your duvet. Rather than one who was holding a pint of Stella at 11.30am on a Thursday.

"Alone as usual I'm guessing? Got to be, no-one would be seen dead with you right now..." The last line was paired with a slow visual assessment of her current state.

Suddenly every stray smirk, curled lip, and covered laugh, flashed before her like a children's flipbook, each page a sharp but deliberate knife through her. She felt a strange vibration begin to build in all the empty pockets of air between her blood and her bones and a series of echoing pops rang out.

The next moment Adam lay lifeless on the beer sodden carpet, and she slick and coiled upon him. Everything had been building to this moment and instead of terrible she felt suddenly and deliciously at peace, satiated. No garden could compare to the ecstasy of writing history with one's body.

Commended

Inspiration:

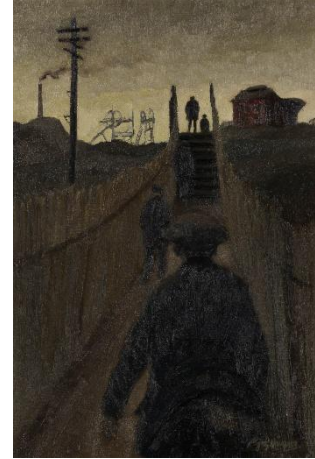
Path To Cleworth Colliery

by Roger Hampson (1925-1996)

The Spiders Of The Colliery

By Laura Barnes

(Story)



© the artist's estate

Dusk falls and the moon scatters shadows between outstretched branches and through the translucent wings of delicate, fluttering moths. An owl shrieks in the distance, a signal bell for the cluster of spiders to return. Inch by inch, they skip forward in unison, energised by the day's golden threads of the sun and the wisps of porcelain clouds. They've drunk their daily dose of clean air which uncloaks them of their dark bodies and untangles them from the thick soil that seeps beneath their outer shells. Unclenched from cramped poses, the day sheds them of the claws grown by the deep below. But night is when they return.

Return. To what ends? Who knows. But they must go – money spiders haunted by empty cupboards and holey pockets and six different voices crying out for more food. Such cries echo around bare walls, unfurnished rooms and an unlit fire – a rehashing of their own childhood. Maybe one day it will be different they think as the savings jar remains a dwindling opaque object. As they wipe the blood and sweat off the brow of their youngest child and tuck them into a brightly bedtime. The lullaby of morning birdsong overlaid by the screams of terror remembered from the night before. And yet as day draws to an end and crickets chirp, the innate routine resumes.

They creep daintily into their hole. They clamber into the digestive process of the earth ready to be chewed up and swallowed, flushed by oozing liquid and processed by the bowels. 'Watch it'. 'Ouch'. 'That's my foot'. 'I thought that was something else'. 'haha you wish'. Leg indistinguishable from leg become a web of appendages tickling each other. A huddled heap of hairy legs – extended, octagonal tools of the nightly trade. They take the plunge, ready for the bath of mud, grime and fate that await.

Down they clang into the pit. Deeper. Deeper. Seconds pass like hours and bated breath sticks to the claggy air as they dangle downwards through the shaft, at the mercy of a thin metallic thread. Swallowed whole by the darkness to which they once came. This is the place where leaves wither and worms wriggle. Where transformations begin on the highway to hells hot furnace. Where bodies

contort into awkward, geometric shapes and black lungs expel tarry breath. An army of shiny black creatures appear, their eyes protruding from slumped necks in a white glow. Scurrying through tunnels, they hack at the earth, spinning ropes and coiling wires, in preparation for the show to begin.

Beneath the tent, within the catacombs, the night circus resumes. With such rare monsters on display, it's truly a sight to behold. Spellbound, the tightrope walkers of doom and death traverse the timbered beams. The ringleader shifting hordes of coal in unbelievable masses. And yet, the audience of beetles and centipedes has seen this routine before. Episodes of suspense when the escapist is trapped under lock and key and innocent souls are sliced in half by heavy machinery. Or when bodies disappear under suffocated ceilings. Surely it's a magical trick of the eye as ghostly figures appear stage right, but no traces of their comings and goings can be seen. After all no great sell-out show reveals its true secrets. As the hunched artists bow and remain onstage, a silent applause echoes around empty chambers. Backstage, performers too entangled to escape their nightly bonds and fly free, linger.

When the graveyard shifts end, and birds huddle on thin branches to harmonise – the spiders reemerge, stiff from their cages. It's a mesmerising sight when bodies multiply and a vision of one becomes one hundred creatures crawling up from the ground. A mass excavation of the nest of tiredness.

Some days, small boys with beady eyes and curious minds, pick off the weakest of the cluster. Often those swaying behind or blinded from the sun's bright intensity. The boys giggle, enticing the beasts to run across their hands, tickling their palms. After taming them, they cradle such creatures, fiercely examining their beauty, form and ability to mine such intricate underground fortresses. With gleeful curiosity, they entrap the beasts, transporting them home in their cave-like hands before placing them on their cold, kitchen counters. A spectatorship of bread from behind its plastic screen looks on as knives are sharpened and laid neatly. The counter becomes a sterile, clinical surface. An operation table. Their patient drugged with fear, frozen into complacency. One by one, a leg is sliced from black body. Movement is tested each limb amputation- is the creature still alive?

A nightmare experiment to marvel at how such jet-black specks of the universe can survive with so little yet still crawl back to the darkness to resume their duties tomorrow.

Inspiration:

Young Girl in a White Dress
by Laurence Koe (1869-1913)



Lilith
by John Collier (1850-1934)



Street Scene
by L.S. Lowry (1887-1976)



© The Estate of L.S. Lowry

Various other artworks within the 150th Anniversary Exhibition

The Lost Man

By Liam Sharykin
(Story)

“Wake up!” shouted his cousin as the barge neared the bank of the canal. He had been daydreaming again, thinking of crawling under the Spinning Jenny to clear a blockage, thinking of the cruel machine that gnawed of his Father’s arm. His cousin had moved in with them to help around the modest holding near the canal since they left the city. He was older than the boy, and prone to bossing him around yet he was far more pleasant than the old overseer at the factory, whose bulging eyes and cold indifference to the cries of pain from the broken fingers and lopped off hands were still troubling him at night.

“Come on lad, best get going. It’s a long way through the dunes” Father said, hopping onto the embankment waving his one arm around to balance himself.

“Are you sure we have to go to the town?” he asked uncertainly. They had not been near any settlement since their flight from the city. Anything taller than a hedgerow terrified the boy now. Father had been working on a great new building in the town and had spent the last few weeks loading up paintings on a trolley and hanging them on the wall. The boy remembered an old neighbor having a single old painting hanging above the fireplace, he could not imagine a room filled with them.

“The streets are wide, the roads are clear and the only noise you will hear are the Gulls. Big ones they are too! Stay close or they will pick you up and take you to their nest!” Father ruffled his hair, smiling and nudging him towards the cart. Cousin was ready and eager to go. The boy looked

behind him, he could still see the dark smudge of the city oozing into the sky. He looked forward and saw only sunshine and the promise of fresh salty air.

Down the lane the dirt soon turned to sand. The world became a sea of gold in all directions. He could hear the gulls in the distance and taste the bite on the breeze. Thatched houses grew closer together as the town approached. Families hurled giant nets over their shoulders and scampered down to the coast for the days catch. It did not feel like the city at all, the boy thought, yet he was still nervous about the great building Father had been working on.

They turned round a corner and the cousin let out a gasp in awe. The widest street the boy had ever seen was in front of him. Trees lined the wide pavement and the cobbles glittered in the afternoon sun. And there it was, the clock tower loomed over them, the boy traced his vision to the rest of the building. It looked nothing like the old dirty factories he was used to, it was *golden*.

"Does the King live here?" He asked Father.

"No lad" Father chuckled. "Though you never know, he might pay us a visit one day."

Inside, men in suits rifled past with papers and pointed at the walls in serious conversation. They nodded politely as Father ushered them upstairs to his pride. The room was cool and dark. It reminded the boy of a chapel. As his eyes adjusted, he nearly lost his breath. The walls were covered in paintings. Every inch, nook and corner fitted with frames of all sizes. The boy did not know where to look! An overdose of colour struck him dumb. "Remember, don't touch" Father whispered.

His cousin was off ogling a revealing painting of a woman with her arms showing and Father was talking to a scruffy man in overalls. He saw her then, a girl in a cream dress, of his age, staring deep into his eyes. He walked towards her, like a siren she gestured him closer. The painting seemed to shimmer in the dim light of the gallery, he swore she was moving, lifelike eyes crinkled into a sad smile.

He reached out and touched the painting.

The bell of the clocktower chimed. He was pulled up, down and through the walls. The frame disappeared. He was deep in the cavernous pipes and falling, he fell for decades. He could taste lead, pine, and the golden sand. He could taste honey and flowers and blood. High above the building he saw the streets below and the dunes spreading themselves over the vast distance, they blew in the wind like fallen ashes and vanished, before rising and falling in infinite majesty. He saw a woman wrapped in a giant snake; its deadly coil tightened as it hissed at the boy. In its mouth he saw a figure like himself standing lonely on a beach. On the goosebumps up his arm people milled around with bandy legs and arms in the shadow of a giant factory. Smoke filled his eyes, and a bloody battle was before him, a line of horses charged at a row of fire and steel. He saw the great clocktower hidden in darkness as the distant hum of bird like machines dumped their poisonous load on distant cities. People moved at incredible speeds through the gallery, thousands of them. Their clothes grew more colourful as they went by, morphing into red streaks of light.

Sculptures of unimaginable shapes appeared. They called out to him as they were hacked and sawed. Tubes of light straddled the walls with the power of a hundred candles. He was still falling, he looked deep into the heart of the town and cried out. A thousand people stood in silence; heads bowed in unison as the bell sang its low drone.

An old man sat in an office staring at sketches of a glorious building over a candle. The boy tried to call out to him yet he felt as if he were a hundred miles away. "Help!" he shouted, the old man looked up from his desk and stared towards him with a confused look on his face. The candle started to flicker and dim. The girl appeared with the same sad look and gave the boy a shove in the shoulder. He felt himself falling into empty air and all the pressure of the sea crushed his eardrums, a rushing noise louder than a train.

He hit the floor of the gallery with a thump. The cool air in the room sent a chill over him. His arm was still outstretched, reaching up at the girl in the frame. She stood motionless, staring elsewhere. His Father stood over him with a look of disbelief on his face. Before the boy could appeal, he slapped his hand down. "What did I tell you about touching?" Behind him, cousin snickered.

As they left, the boy took one last look behind him. The girl was fading away, her frame seemed to shrink and move amongst the other paintings. Then, she was gone completely.

Outside the building, the sun beat down on the three of them as they walked down the tree lined street. "Do you think they will come when it opens, uncle?" asked the cousin.

"I hope so" Father said, with a hint of strain in his voice as he looked at the flap that covered his stump.

"They will!" chirped the boy. It had been the first time he had spoken since they left. Father scooped him up with his good arm, "you think so boy?"

"They will" the boy repeated. He took one last glance at the beautiful building. The early evening sun poured over it like honey.

Inspiration:

Eva Lutyens
by Glyn Warren Philpot (1884-1937)

Elissa Landi
by Howard Somerville (1873-1952)

Eva Lutyens
by Glyn Warren Philpot (1884-1937)



© estate of Dame Laura Knight, DBE, RA / Bridgeman Images.

Portrait Of A Lady

By Julia Nickeas Bethnuin
(Story)

Ophelia observed the garden through the galleried window. Grief misted her vision, but she saw a flicker of an image; someone in red striding out across the lawn, disappearing between the distant yew trees.

Minutes earlier a letter was placed in the hall. A coincidence of doors opening simultaneously, one to the back parlour, another through corridors to the scullery and one to the outside created an unusual updraught through the house. The letter fluttered, then slipped out of sight behind the demi-lune table and the wall.

Four years pass. The double tragedy at the manor left the immediate family numbed by their loss. Consequently a commissioned portrait languished unviewed in the basement.

One particular September evening the lowering sun poured honeyed light through the southwest windows of the drawing room heralding a paradigm shift. Autumn's burnishing trees and falling leaves unsettled the melancholia that had resided in the house since the mother's disappearance. Hope clung like a weighted garment fading with each passing season. Time had slowed with the siblings indecision.

Hugo, the eldest sat in an armchair near the hearth, momentarily transfixed by the shifting light. He stood up, announcing suddenly, it was time the portrait was revealed, finally acknowledging their loss.

Hugo's brother Declan, reclining on the sofa examining his cigarette, took one last draw on it, leant forward, stubbed it out and stood, equalling his brother's height. "If that's your stance then so

be it. Stupid portrait. What is it to us? Couldn't wait to see the back of her, now she'll be glaring at us for an eternity."

"Declan she's...was...our mother."

Their sister Ophelia sighed "We've waited far too long. We'll invite some friends, Celia Hadlam, Brian Basingstoke and that couple Mamma and Da hung around with and the artist. What happened to him? Never heard sight nor sound after Mamma disappeared. Didn't take on any more commissions after that."

An unnatural pause elongated the room. The clock ticked louder. A light breeze taunted a knot of leaves on the terrace, twitched at the curtain.

After a few weeks of consolidated preparation the Manor house was ready to receive guests. Invitations declared the great unveiling. An intimate occasion honouring Lady Montgomery's life and many achievements.

The evening began promptly at seven. Drinks and canapés served in the salon aided a commodious atmosphere. Edith and Eliza Shuttleworth brought photographs. A few nostalgic hours ensued.

At nine Hugo, drowning his anxieties in more port pronounced the guests should follow him to the main hall. A crate had been stored under sheets in the rooms behind the wine cellar. Now its bulk possessed a good portion of the room.

"Right. Thanks for showing up... We'll get on with it." Hugo's demeanour was a little roughened by his drink, and the ominous nature of the event. Initially he thought this was the proper thing to do and absurd to keep the portrait in darkened circumstances indefinitely.

The formality of the hall put the party in sombre mood, aware of the dark void above the huge fireplace.

"That's where she is to hang" gestured Declan. Realising his faux pas he turned to hide his embarrassment.

Two servants opened the crate. Sawdust spilled onto the white sheets. Dust motes floated in the air. The painting protected by brown paper was propped against the oak dresser.

Hugo, Declan and Ophelia tore at the paper. Revealing the painting was accompanied by gasps of astonishment. Scrutiny was met with accusational horror.

Lady Montgomery was wearing a carmine cardigan, hair swept into a chignon, glowered out at them. Her complexion was milky and sallow, but it was to her hands that attention was directed; mannish with sinewy fingers and taloned fingernails coated in a shocking scarlet.

Hugo felt compelled to cover the painting but he froze in his discomfiture and foreboding.

"Mamma hated red!" exclaimed Ophelia

"and the fingernails!" added Declan.

Then a cacophony of voices:

"What is she trying to say?"

"Curious"

"Strange"

"Unfathomable"

Hugo interrupted the bubbling roar. "I think we all understand the implications."

Ophelia spotting something catching the light, wedged under a radiator. She freed it, scraping the demi-lune table on the tiles as she did so. Tearing at the envelope and reading the note she proclaimed, "It's mother's confession!"

Declan snatched the letter. "She killed our father and eloped with the artist!"

Ophelia, muddling her speech managed "Has it been here all this time?"

Hugo observed "We were meant to read it four years ago. Somehow it's got dislodged."

"Fate, the gods, the four winds!" blasted Edith.

The evening ended prematurely. Stunned and distraught guests proffered condolences, made their apologies, filtering out into the darkness to their homes.

The police requisitioned the painting for further investigation, later concluding there were more clues hidden in the canvas alluding to a sinister game of hide and seek.

For many years, the siblings and their friends puzzled away over why the mother made such a confession. After all, it upped the chances of being caught.

A criminal mind is tantalized by its crime, often revisiting the scene. Lady Montgomery chose a more cryptic route. She had hoped her portrait would hang in the ancestral home to condescend her children in her absence.

The void above the great mantle in the great hall remained empty, her wishes unfulfilled and in her final adieu... she did not have the last word.