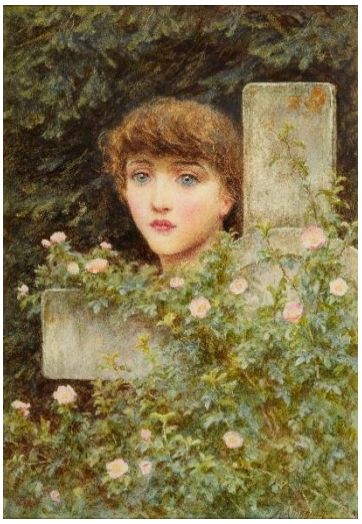
The Atkinson, in partnership with The Arts Society Southport invited anyone with links to the Sefton Borough to take part in our fifth Poetry and Creative Writing Competition. This year Inspirations were drawn from the artworks displayed in Taking Centre Stage: Female Artists In The Atkinson's Collection.

The under-representation of women artists in museum and gallery collections is a well acknowledged and deeply rooted issue within the sector. In response, The Atkinson has committed to address these historical inequities through its collecting and programming strategies. As part of this ongoing institutional reflection, the exhibition spotlights the women artists already held within the collection, celebrating their contributions while also acknowledging the wider absences that continue to shape the narrative of art history

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

Winner Joint 1st Place, Poetry



Inspirations:
Sorrow (White Rose)
by Helen Allingham (1848-1926)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

Silent Crying

by Alexander Colfer
(Poem)

They barely moved as armed men walked among them
The shells of war's children, thin and gaunt
Eyes that stare with saucer's scale
Not big enough to hide the visceral hurt
Weep, weep, weep for the displaced children
Their future sold and scarred
Why do they try so hard to kill them
How did their mortal souls get marred

The men march on to their new war
Leave children living in the cordite spoil
They'll keep that look for all their lifetime
Big eyes, with distant hurt filled stare
They'll silent cry a thousand rivers
At the crosses for those no longer there

We shout, we protest, we insta, we chat
The children stain our screens then gone
But still, they starve and stare as the emotionally immuned scroll on
Why are we not rioting, screaming leave the kids alone
Why are they bombing them and burning them from each one's loving home
I post my wishes on every site; a world filled with hopeful light that brightly shines
Maybe it sounds lame, but I think of it like practice, for hopeful better times

Inspiration:

Rest
by Helen Kathleen Shaw (1864-1949)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

The Sound Of Stillness

by Ebtisam Elghblawi
(Poem)

Life in the air
All quiet,
In the freckled cloud,
Crystal clear.
No one around
Just me.
And
The trees sway in harmony,
The birds and the ground
Holding me in symphony.
I look up at the sky.
We are healing,
Like nature during COVID,
But
Stillness in place,
Rejoicing in nature.
Seasons change,
Yet solitude keeps me company
A world of dreams.

Winner Joint 2nd Place, Poetry

Inspiration:
Various Flowers
by Bessie Downs (1860-1920)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

Various Flowers

by Lois Kennedy (Dedicated in memory to Simon Kennedy)
(Poem)

I picked these for you.

While you sleep, I walk
West, towards the setting sun,
Around the gull hung lake
And over the dunes.

Turning north I tramp along the marsh,
Gazing at geese
In the purple haze of sea asters,
Endless, until Blackpool Tower.

I'm back!
I saw the Marshide fog bell
And paused with sorrow
At lives lost, long ago.

Now you too have gone
But still I walk,

And I picked these for you.

Inspiration:

Meadow
by Lisa Cole Kronenburg
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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Walking With Clouds

by Malcolm Terry
(Poem)

I walk these hills, the clouds my companions,
and the air tastes like freedom.
My boots tread a path beside grasses and heather,
while a breeze whispers over the moorland to the reservoir,
whispers in the silence on the surface of the water,
causing the spread of long ripples, glinting with silver
and making reeds and grasses dance in a desolation of gritstone,
rambling walls and farmhouse ruins.
The wind brings rain pattering, and mist rolls over the moor,
cloaking the hills but not the valley
where light, slanting through the cloud, illuminates the old mill town
with its long-terraced houses and tall chimneys
and the dull green distances of the Lancashire plain.
The rain becomes sleet as it falls,
and I shelter, seated on stone by a broken wall;
snowflake melt on my skin
while my thoughts drift, scattered like sheep;
I gaze at the clouds remembering Lisa Cole Kronenburg, a painter of light
whose bright soul embraced the blue skies.
She lived in the American mid-west, painted what she saw,
herself half afraid of the immensity of those spaces,
but my feet are rooted to quiet earth,
the peat-rich loam of the Pennines.
I hear the song of the skylark and watch
where ribbons of grey drizzle from a dark mass of cloud
that contains a promise in the west, limned in white, shining,
layered to the break where the clouds curl on themselves,
glowing supplicants reaching for the sun;
pale mountains, vaporous, huge, rise with the innocence of these shadows,
white upon blue.

Winner Joint 1st Place, Poetry

Inspiration:
Nomad Patterns
by Livia Marin (b. 1973)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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Willow

by Jacqueline Woods
(Poem)

As her cuff snags the teapot's jutting handle,
dreams of escape fracture before her startled eyes
and the delicate thread of hope unravels.
Breath and time suspended as she waits for the gush
of scalding tea and porcelain smash on unforgiving tiles.

Hears the angry bark of her father, summoning servants
to kill her lover as he approaches the bridge of their tryst
where whispered promises were made mere days ago
beneath the bending boughs of weeping willow.
The blush of his first kiss still warms her cheek.

But instead of fierce shards and shattered futures,
a river of blue and white unspools before her,
weaving and winding, like a mermaid's tail,
revealing a fishing boat to deliver her
to the anchor of her lover's arms.

As she glides shadows of the past recede,
all the anger and angst, the greed and gluttony
of her despot father begin to dissolve
into shimmering crystals of sunlight
carrying her towards the river's bend

where her true love waits, unaware
the whip of malice crouches close,
until compassion cradles their fragile frame,
lifts them beyond scars, wings unfurling
as turtle doves in an eternal spiral of grace.

Inspiration:

Girl In Red Jacket
by Margaret A. Berry (b.1908)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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Red

by Pam Armstrong
(Poem)

A non verbal presence:
shouting out for your attention
with the bold pride of Chanel
I am an excitingly fashionable
red jacket

of cheerful fabric and style
that would chase the gloomy
grey Great Slump days away
as fast as a thoroughbred
chasing the finish. In fact

if I could I would slip you into me
and take you to the races,
such an excitingly fashionable
red jacket as I fitting the vibe
of many vibrant places

where socialite invites might
offer opportunities beyond your
everyday choices. Of course
your need needing to match theirs.
As busy bees drawn to a honeypot

heads would turn as you walk by
my allure strong enough to attract
the media, reporters buzzing for an
interview about a coveted jacket as I.
But how you would be noticed.

How you would be noticed but
don't go into my silken pockets.
Let's agree not to go there where
the dark truths of a Mother's Clinic
appointment slip for a rubber cap fit sits

and sits neglected: A non verbal presence.

Inspiration:

Belle Of The Village
by Alice Mary Havers (1850-1890)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

Gypsy Life

by Pam Lewis
(Poem)

Joey's vardo trundled along
At a steady plodding pace
Rattling with kettles, pots and pans
Hanging from his treasured space
Meandering down country lanes
Drawn by a placid shire horse
kept reined in and well-blinkered
to lead the vardo a smooth course
They halted a while at the river-bank
Where the horse could drink and take rest
Welcoming the chance to forage for food
Joey put his survival skills to the test

His food was cooked on an open fire
A skinned rabbit for his blackened pot
Practice had given him a keen eye
When hunting with his old sling shot
Mushrooms thrived, waiting to be picked
he tickled for trout in a cool spring
Served with nettles and watercress
It was a meal fit for The King
The hedgerows were richly abundant
Wild berries and nuts had their worth
Joey's appetite was well sated
From fine dining off Mother Earth

He roasted a roadkill hedgehog in clay
This delicious delicacy was rare
As he played his fiddle at sundown
Of his good fortune he was aware
Living off the fat of the land
Joey had no need for much money
Proudly content as a Romany
In his land of milk and honey
He took his vardo to village squares
Where he tinkered to make a few bob
But he was carefree as a bird
Not needing a soul destroying job

Inspiration:

Girl In Red Jacket
by Margaret A. Berry (b.1908)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

© The copyright holder

Girl In A Red Jacket

by Fiona Kapur
(Poem)

You look like my sister, I think.
Cheesed off.
Surly.
Aggressive.
Somewhat disapproving.
You vibrate with impatience and restlessness.
You cannot bear to sit still can you?
Teeth gritted, and hands clenched.
You really don't want to be here,
And yet here you are.
Conjoined by insolence and defeat, inseparable twins.
I'd like to meet whoever made you sit for this,
Another formidable women I would wager.
I wouldn't like to be Margaret, withering under that admonishing stare.
You would shoulder others aside on pavements,
And fail to give way doing laps in a swimming pool.
I can imagine you in a black swimming cap actually,
And a sporty costume, in an outdoor lido.
Somewhere like Hampstead Heath.
Dashing off somewhere glamorous with your men friends, all vying for attention,
And you treating them all very badly, and them loving it.
And yet there's more to you than a spoilt little rich girl.
There's strength, and stamina in that stubborn look.
When the War came you're the kind of girl that knuckled down.
Land army probably, I can see you under a tractor in filthy dungarees.
I expect you knew Noel Coward; he probably wrote a song about you.
Later, I hope you didn't marry and have children,
And lived with a close female friend and held creative salons.

Margaret had her revenge for that expression didn't she?
Those hands!
I rather like you now.

Winner Joint 3rd Place, Poetry

Inspiration:
I Promise To Love You
by Tracey Emin (born 1963)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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A Mother's Touch

by Kate Proctor
(Poem)

Both friend and foe over the years,
My mum was the force behind smiles and tears.

I sometimes longed for a softer mother,
One who soothed away fears and provided succour,
For childhood sadness and silly mistakes,
The daft kind that every child makes,
But instead, I had the Northern sort,
With no patience for mithering or colds that were caught,
From Gareth Morgan, who also shared warts from his fingers,
When lined up in pairs by Mrs. Millins.

Hoping for a day spent at home with a cough,
Sent off with a flea in my ear and snot in my nose,
No time to fuss with cuddles that smother,
'And just because so and so's on the sofa,
That doesn't mean you'll get to watch Pebble Mill,
Or Paint Along with Nancy - you're not that ill'.

'So blow your nose and get dressed,
Your pressed skirt is on the chair,
You'll be fine once you get there.
Here, let me brush those rats' tails - you look like a street urchin',
And lurching towards me with the brush,
'Oh hush and keep still', tightening bunches with bands,
Knocking my head with her hands if I moved an inch,
My God that pinch of elastic pulling hair from its roots,
'Go on, you're done - a little smile wouldn't go adrift'.

I miss her now those rats' tails are grey,
And the hairbrush a distant memory.

Inspiration:

Going Home Through The Park
by Helen Bradley (1900-1979)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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A Creative Day at The Park

by Marion Smith
(Poem)

Last Saturday morning at daybreak
I was up and about with the lark;
I gathered my paints, brushes and easel
and made my way to the park.

When I reached the front gates, they were open.
I walked down the path by a hill,
until I came to the boating lake.
It was empty, quiet and still.

By the lake were trees and houses
where people were starting to stir;
I could see some curtains twitching
as they looked out on the fresh morning air.

I found a discreet place to settle,
erected my easel and chair,
arranged my paints and brushes
then sat quietly waiting there.

At first, it was eerily silent,
just me and the morning breeze;
I sat in my chair with patience,
my paints upon my knees.

Then people started coming
along the lakeside path,
some in groups, on their own or in couples,
I could hear them all chatter and laugh.

There were some on the way to their workplace,
two chaps in red spotty neckties,
carrying their lunch, walking briskly
under the brightening skies.

A mother and children walked past them,
The oldest girl carried a baby.
Another child carried a hoop to roll
on the nearby field.....well, maybe!

Some ladies passed by giving greetings,
"Good morning, what a nice day!"
They were joined by a family of ducklings.
To the lake they would waddle their way.

It was there that I saw the first rowboat,
two people enjoying a sail,
and on the path a lady pushed a pram
and a little dog wagged its tail.

As these scenes unfolded around me,
I quickly picked up my brush
to capture events as they happened,
but I had to work in a rush!

A quick sketch, a squiggle, a brush stroke,
I painted these passers by
in a vignette of time as they ambled past,
and the hours began to fly.

I stayed there through the afternoon
'til the sun was setting low.
The early walkers had long since gone.
I knew it was time to go.

I picked up my canvas and easel,
paints, brushes and palette knife,
but I will come back here tomorrow
to capture another snapshot of life.

Inspiration:

Going Home Through The Park
by Helen Bradley (1900-1979)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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Winter Reflections

by Susan K. Stacey
(Poem)

Reflections of the past shine through our children's eyes,
captured in a moment beneath clear winter skies.
I imagine myself walking through this twilight zone,
passing leaf-green trees and rows of brick-built homes.
I wonder who these people are, and where they may have been,
Living in this fantasy, just soaking up the scene.
They stand in silence, these treasured souls, dressed in Sunday best,
maybe they've been out for tea and are heading home to rest?
Still water calms my soul; in the distance there's a boat,
I'm tempted to swim out to it, but would I sink or would I float?
Amongst these ghosts of yesteryear, a flock of ducks appears,
with open beaks they try to speak, but alas no one can hear.
As I leave this wintry scene and return to the present day,
a glow of warmth envelops me as I recall our yesterdays.

Inspiration:

Ethel Bartlett
by Dame Laura Knight (1877-1970)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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Lady In Red

by Aidan Howard
(Poem)

The years pass by, as they always do
And the lady in red, still waits for you
Forever elegant, forever poised
She awaits a response, through all the noise

How many crimson dresses have been worn
How many musical compositions written down
All lost and never known
How lucky to be preserved in this gown

What an honour to be suspended in time
With light hitting perfect velvet hair
With small buds of pearl and a dress like wine
With such delicately placed hands and stoic stare

How many dresses of rich crimson
How many carefully chosen notes
Until her song is heard and that of all women
Leaning against a piano, now and forever she floats

To be seen is fine
With that dress like red wine
But when will we know what she wants to say
Will she receive a response one day

Inspiration:

The Doges' Palace
by Mary McCrossan (1865-1934)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

The Doges' Palace

by Ian Martin
(Poem)

The list was long and famous
Monet, Renoir, Canaletto
To name but a few who
Had painted the Doges Palace

It was a daunting task to succeed
A simple shape, an oblong building
Frontal arches from Mary's view
Some windows and a central tower

This painting was not about its likeness
No, this painting was all about its colours
Textures and Mary's balanced brush strokes
Giving the impression of a shimmering, Doges Palace

The sky had to sing a Venetian summer
It's blues, whites and greys giving atmosphere
Of movement and maybe a threat to come
Of an evening shower in beautiful Venice

The reflections on the water must feel like
Gentle waves caught by a light summer breeze
Flicks here and flicks there adding depth
And a laziness that hung in the air

With sky and water captured scene expanded
As St Marks Campanile sliding into view
A larger sailing boat plus clever dabs
Bring the waterside bustling into life

I can imagine Mary standing back
Smiling, yes, I think I have caught it
The Doges Palace in her own style
Drawing us back to our honeymoon there.

Inspiration:

Taking Centre Stage: Female Artists in The Atkinson's Collection
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

We – Have Only Just Begun

by Polly Gibson
(Poem)

We - would like to add a million noughts
Why stop there, why not billions
Of noughts
To us, magnificent fifty-four.

Each a voice, each a vision,
Each a heart, connecting to
One hundred and eight hands.
Hands - that spend trillions of hours, caring,
Giving birth, changing nappies, washing,
Cleaning, cooking,
It's true, a "woman's work is never done".
But - we ask, how many
Women's artist lives have never even begun?

So - here we are, Us fifty-four
Covered in paint, glue, clay, sari silk
Today - we speak to you in neon words
Words that say,
We - are waiting
There is space here, for you.
We - have only just begun.

Inspirations:

The Path Of Roses
by Ethel Wright (1866-1939)

Business As Usual
by Alberta Whittle (born 1980)

Self Portrait With Pearl Drops
by Chila Burman (born 1957)

12 Objects, 12 Etchings
by Rachel Whiteread (born 1963)

Flowers Of Eden
K.B. Cussons (active 1882-1887)

All Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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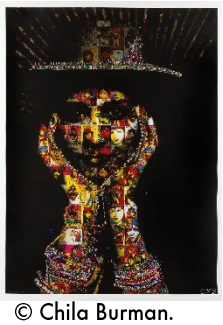

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© Rachel Whiteread. All rights reserved.

Mummy Takes Me To The Art Gallery

by Jayne Igoe
(Poem)

Mummy, Mummy quick come and see
There is a naked lady looking over at me
She has petals in her hand, in her hair, by her feet
She must have had no clothes on because of the heat.
(The path of Roses – Ethel Wright)
Mummy, Mummy I am really confused
Is that the same lady who is showing her boob?
With rockets and crystals, an orchid, some hands
Shells, insects, pineapples, I do not understand.
(Business As Usual – Alberta Whittle)
Mummy, Mummy that art is amazing
The jewels and the beads make the face of a lady
The colours and glitter are so bold and so bright

Set against the background the colour of night.
(Self Portrait with Pearl Drops – Chila Burnham)
Mummy, Mummy are these pictures a trick?
I can see an ear, some string and a stick
Maybe a ball, a bottle, a brain for sure
But as for the others I could not be sure.
(12 objects, 12 Etchings – Rachel Whiteread)
Mummy, Mummy that piano is so small
The woman is dressed as if going to a ball.
The music she plays would gently flow
As the gold in her dress does subtly glow.
(Rest – Helen Kathleen Shaw)
Mummy, Mummy are those flowers real?
The yellow, the orange and even the teal?
Teal is green and olive is too
I love all colours but my favourite is blue.
(Flowers of Eden – K.B Cussons)
Thank you for bringing me to this exhibition
Even though getting here was quite a mission
A bus, then a train and quite a walk too
All whist I complained that I needed the loo!
The art in this gallery is made by someone like me
And for children and girls it's important to see
Taking centre stage, the female collection
I just love it here at the amazing Atkinson!

Inspiration:

Ethel Bartlett
by Dame Laura Knight (1877-1970)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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Calpurnia (An Aside)

by Victoria Kenyon
(Poem)

With care and grave concern
I turn to look to my husband;
"Think you to walk forth?"
(I, the aside)

Pressed against the coldness of blue
I am dressed in a red hue
(it is blood red)
Mistaken for passion.
My fingers lightly touch my palm to feel the warmth from my own skin
(I exist for him)

"Call it my fear"
Yet resting the world on my elbows I am strong;
I hide myself as long tresses under a scarf,
Last on the list of players.
(Take heed though the knowledge I hold!)
I shall be bold –
"Do not go forth today"

He humours me; he will stay.

Though my ides leave no trail;
His comet blazes forth.
(Caesar shall be no more)

Inspiration:

Sorrow (White Rose)
by Helen Allingham (1848-1926)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

Sorrow Be Vanquished

by John Howard
(Poem)

Look at her, in the bloom of youth, amidst the briar rose

Eyes, glazed in sorrow knowing that the splendour of her beauty

like the petals will soon fade

Speeding, left to right, conception to demise

Time the Conqueror will steal her sunrise

Hour, minute hands, two scythes, Tick-tock, da-Dum

The Grim Reaper moves with the pendulum

Sunset each day portends inevitable death

Her heart will stop, she will draw her last breath

Day after day her future passes away

It's in her eyes, she foresees her demise

But, she should be cheerful, be grateful for life

Vanquish her sorrow and enjoy herself

Be happy and grateful for each passing day

For Tick-tock, da-Dum is time and life itself

coursing opportunity through her veins

Appreciate life at whatever age

Life is a gift, that's why it's called the present

Vanquish sorrow, rejoice, put sparkle

in those eyes, delight in each passing day

Vanquish sorrow and sing Hineni – Hineni.

Inspiration:

I Promise To Love You
by Tracey Emin (born 1963)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

© Tracey Emin. All rights reserved, 2026 DACS

My Love

by Susan Fullerton
(Poem)

I promise to love you
more and more
my love to you
will always find its way

I promise to love you
for who you are
I will love all your imperfections
every lump, bump and scar

I promise to love you
through the joy of pain
whatever happens
my love will always remain

I promise to love you
in all that you do
my heart and my love
will always belong to you

Inspiration:

Sorrow (White Rose)
by Helen Allingham (1848-1926)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

Named

by Dave Roberts
(Poem)

Face pale as the stone,

white as the rose.

Peers above the grave,

a cross wreathed in the rambling shrub.

Sorrow for her father,

she eldest of seven, thirteen when he died.

The loss of independence,

leaving her livelihood as an illustrator behind.

Marrying a man near twice her age,

yet more time for her true love watercolour.

That she was the first woman to become

a full member of the Royal Watercolour Society.

Not recorded, but his fame,

as part of the Cheyne Walk Set.

Her name not recorded.

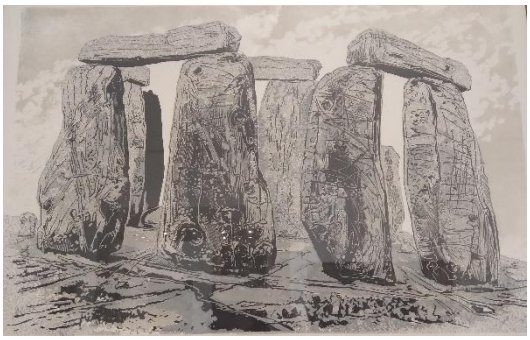
Searched for,

found.

Helen Mary Elizabeth.

Inspiration:

Stonehenge
by Gertrude Hermes (1856-1924)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection



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Between The Cracks

by Tracy Robinson
(Poem)

Bleak and dark,
The ring of stone looms
Black, hard stone,
Time has cut it's way in
Lines and pock holes,
Echoes of enchantment
What mysteries weave between them?
What secrets,
Pulse through their stoney vein,
Those who built them lost to time,
But still the stones remain.

The spirits dance somewhere in the sky,
What ancient wisdom dwells hidden here,
incantations whispered,
A shrine to the sun?
Did sacrificial blood taint this ground?
Bleached with a blood red sun,
Lashed by a driving rain,
Through storm and fog,
Through peace, through war,
Times of love,
Times of hate,
Still these stones endure.

Generations of Rulers, Beggers sinners, saints,
They have come and they have gone.
Here upon the plain
The ancient rites live on.

Things beyond the comprehension
of modern men.
Spirits ancient and primeval,
They may yet rise again.

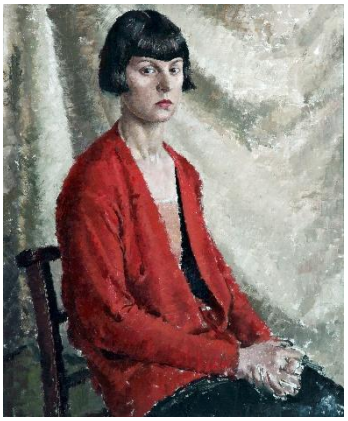
Wood nymph, air nymph,
Did they look on
Bathed in the rays of a younger sun,
Ritual and ceremony,
Where the spectres run.

We will rise,
And we will dance
and we will sing,
children of the light.
At the zenith of the summer,
As we head into dark night.

Here at your birth,
Here at your death,
Still the circle stands
Cooled by the Old God's breath.

Winner Joint 3rd Place, Poetry

Inspiration:
Girl In Red Jacket
by Margaret A. Berry (born 1908)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection



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Across Time And Space

by Kathleen Smith
(Poem)

Sausages for tea
Car in the garage
Dentist for me
Clean the bathroom
Packed lunches to make
Buy new school trousers
Bake birthday cake
Pick up prescription
Go to sports day
Parents' evening
Costumes for school play
Got to do big shop
Where's the book bag?
Take the cat to the vet.
Stop being a nag
Arrange a play date
Reply to letter
Send condolence card
Hope Mum gets better
Order new dress
Renew train pass
Make hair appointment
Book ballet class
Change swimming lessons
Fix broken chair
Paint front room

Organise childcare
Mop kitchen floor
Buy headlice shampoo
Bleed radiators
Bleach the loo
Renew passports
I'm trying to sit still
But look at my face
I've too much to do
I'm all over the place
Preserved in paint
No-one will know
My spinning thoughts
Will never show
From one woman to another
I thank you for today
You've allowed me to sit
You've allowed me to stay
Respite in a busy life
Art allows us to share
Our thoughts and our feelings
As we stand and stare
Take time to breathe
To look around you
To see one another
To question and learn
My face comes to you across time and space
But my thoughts are universal and exist in this place.

Inspiration:

Multiple works including:
Nomad Patterns
by Livia Marin (born 1973)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

Infusions

by Jane Eckford
(Poem)

Tea pots – porcelain, earthenware or pewter
hold in scalding water don't they?
Careful hands control each measured cupful
in delicate acceptable performance.
What is expected? What's allowed? Who performs?

Drinking ceremonies are forms of prestidigitation
They break new ground decorously and everyday.
Overlooked these women move china cups in open view
orchestrating change they want to see
infusing their lived experience to let spill fresh tea.

Inspiration:

Maternité
by Julia Beatrice How (1865-1932)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

Me Oul Segotia

by Pippa Witter
(Poem)

As one entwined
Love indecipherable
Let nothing disturb us

Me oul segotia - Dublin slang - term of endearment

Inspiration:

The Path Of Roses
by Ethel Wright (1866-1939)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

Kintsugi

by Celia Gentles
(Poem)

You're someone easy to fall for.
I'm dark and damaged and old.
But if I were the cracks in a vase
you would be the gold.
Somebody smashed me a long time ago -
I was broken, now I am fine
I wish I'd known someone like you,
gentle, caring and kind.

Kintsugi, kintsugi – you make me shine.
Life would be golden if you were mine, golden if you were mine.

I delight in sculpture and paintings,
love portraits pretty or plain.
But if I were a goddess in oils
you would be the frame.
Intricate carvings adorned with gold leaf
would enhance my form and soft hues.
You'd warm my palette's cool pinks,
creams and greens and blues.

Kintsugi, kintsugi – you make me shine.
Life would be golden if you were mine, golden if you were mine.

You say you're frayed at the edges,
falling apart, slightly foxed.
But if I were an old tarnished ring
you would be the box.
Beautiful casket of velvet and braid
to protect and keep me secure.
We could be each other's muse,
soulmate, or more.

Kintsugi, kintsugi – you make me shine.
Life would be golden if you were mine, golden if you were mine.

Inspiration:

Guardian II
by Claire Curneen (1934-2023)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

© Claire Curneen

The Perfect Woman

by Molly Osbourne
(Poem)

She was born into an era of fire,
moulded by her mother.
If she were his artwork,
he would control her shape, her making
a quiet life on a shelf.
But she was made by her mother.
Not her father.

She was made to be perfectly imperfect.
Terrifying.
Made to be ugly, cracked,
and neatly woven together.
Her hair does not block her brain,
her pouch is small.
Full of food, empty of child.
Her cellulite is etched with gold,
her skin tattooed with blue botany.
She moves with ease,
inquisitive behind hidden eyes.
Her breasts are not for the male gaze.
Her tattoos bleed down between her legs,
onto her feet, onto her pedestal.
A goddess in her own right.
Her nails, lips, and skin,
broken by men,
fixed with a golden love.

She is as fragile as a bomb.
Be careful.
For if she breaks, and you pick up the pieces,
you will cut your hands.

Inspiration:

I Promise To Love You
Tracey Emin (born 1963)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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Diagnosis

by Stephanie Foster
(Poem)

Dementia, they said and my husband agreed.
I felt some relief, confirmation indeed.
My wonderful husband with his wonderful brain
Had been so forgetful again and again.

It's really quite hard when your loved one can't see
All the gaps and the holes in once strong memory.
An engineer once, with a good degree
In electronics. Then an MSc

Now can't retain and can't recall
Where we are going and what for,
Our daughters' ages, and what they've just said.
Too much is lost inside his head.

And people they say 'How do you cope?'
And I reply 'We still have hope.'
We still have us, we still have love
When the chips are down and push comes to shove.

My husband will always be there, somewhere
And for him I know I will always care.

Winner Joint 2nd Place, Poetry

Inspiration:
I Promise To Love You
Tracey Emin (born 1963)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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Soulmate

by Helen Patten
(Poem)

I promise to love you
although you no longer hear my voice,
and your eyes, like searchlights,
in midsummer's dusk,
cannot see me anymore.

I stroke your soft hair,
though the sunlight of your smile
no longer warms my face
and I wonder if the shooting stars of your soul
still tremble between us.

Your heartbeat thuds in time with mine,
even though
I no longer dwell on this plain.
I caress your fair skin while you sleep.
I kiss the tears from your eyelashes.

To break the barrier between us
I would walk to the furthest oceans of the moon,
even if your love,
that fed my ravenous heart
has melted into mist.

Your hot breath, as you dream,
stirs the tiny hairs on the backs of my fingers.
Your voice, as sweet as sun warmed honey,
calls out but I can't hear the words,
as I thread my fingers through yours.

I promise to love you,
though we may always be apart!
I lived in a wasteland, a wilderness
and it was you who led me to Paradise.

Inspiration:
Rest
by Helen Kathleen Shaw (1864-1949)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

Unrest
by Joanne Ledbetter
(Poem)

Dress
Refined, artfully arranged,
Fulsom clouds of lustred cloth
Gathered around her body -
a calculated armour of distraction

Skin
Flawless
Masks the coursing blood
Channelled from a
Defiant, unruly, striking heart

Fingers
Poised purposefully upon the keys
May well unleash
A form of betrayal
Conducted by her very being

Music
A force which cannot be denied
Self-expression
Here, a wily eclipsing of
Repression

Notation
From another's imagination
Transcribed
Described
Through her most singular interpretation

Few
Could perceive
Beyond the frame
The hours of toil and wrangling
Leading to this moment

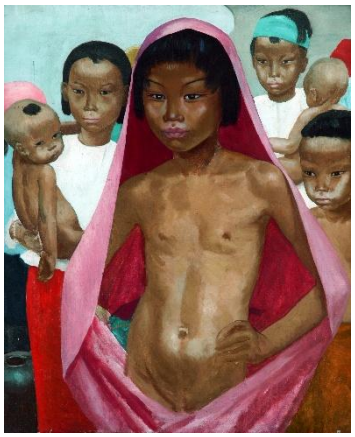
Search her gaze!
It is not fixed upon the monochrome
Sheet of staves ahead
But set, resolutely, beyond -
towards a more colourful soundscape

Licence (poetic)
Prevails
For now,
Sees her modest, gilded enclosure
Relegated to that far corner

Justice (poetic)
Somehow
Finds the means
To rail against this banishment
And envision her,
More fully,
Centre stage.

Winner 2nd Place, Prose

Inspiration:
Sketch Of Burmese Children
by Dod Proctor (1892 – 1972)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection



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The Cigarette Lighter

by Carole Wragg
(Story)

A bitter night settled over the last day of the year as the shutters of the High Street shops clattered down one by one. Above the cobbles, fairy lights and gaudy festive decorations glittered while music spilled from warm pubs and bars. People poured into the streets, eager for fireworks, cheap champagne and linking hands to sing Auld Lang Syne.

Down a narrow side street, a small child crouched beside a wheelie bin behind a restaurant. She shivered violently. Her hair hung in limp strands across her shoulders and her fingers and toes were chalk-white with cold. Her stomach cramped with hunger: She had eaten barely anything all day.

The backdoor burst open, releasing a wave of heat scented with sizzling steak, garlic and crispy chips. A large man in a white tunic stepped out, pulling a gold packet of Sovereign from his pocket. He tapped out a cigarette, wedged it between his lips and flicked his lighter. Once. Twice. Three times.

"Shit." He hurled the lighter onto the pavement. Only then did he notice the girl huddled by the bin.

"Still here? I told you to clear off home."

She stared at him wide-eyed. How could she explain that home meant her father's drunken fists and boots? That the care home meant to protect her had offered no sanctuary either, only hands forcing her legs apart in the dark? Running away had been the only choice left.

Her silence irritated him. "Bugger off," he barked, slamming the door.

Too cold and too weak to move, she reached for the discarded lighter. She curled into herself for warmth and flicked the catch.

A tiny flame bloomed.

She stared, mesmerized. In the orange-blue glow she imagined her mother – wearing her candy-pink jumper, purple leggings and fluffy slippers, arms wide open for one of her perfect cuddles.

The flame died. She blinked hard, wiped her nose, and flicked again.

This time the heart of the flame glowed green and yellow, and she saw a towering Christmas tree hung with baubles, golden stars and chocolate treats. Beneath it, shiny wrapped presents waited just for her, and somewhere someone was laughing as cinnamon and roast turkey filled the room.

Again and again she flicked the lighter. Each flame revealed another memory: her Barbie Doll in a silver ballgown, the swings in the park, the candles on her birthday cake. She was so absorbed that the stench of the bin no longer bothered her, the skittering rats no longer frightened her and the bitter cold no longer chilled her.

Sleep tugged at her, but she flicked the lighter one last time. A final image shimmered in the flame - her mother and grandmother, smiling, arms outstretched, ready to welcome her home.

She held the flame as long as her numb fingers allowed. When they finally loosened, the lighter slipped from her grasp and her eyes drifted closed.

Morning came.

The back door opened and the man stepped out again, cigarette ready. He froze. By the bin, a small body lay slumped beneath a soft shroud of snow. His throat tightened as he brushed the snow from her smiling face and recognised his lighter cradled gently in her hand.

Inspiration:

Tiksi
by Evgenia Arugaeva (b. 1985)
All Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

© Evgenia Arugaeva

Eskimo Doll

By Jean Howley Foster
(Prose)

A GIRL FROM TIKSI BY RUSSIAN PHOTOGRAPHER EVGENIA ARBUGAEVA.
Hangs on the wall of the Atkinson Gallery, in Southport. Depicting a girl from Tiksi, the town where Evgenia was born in 1985.

The message to the onlooker, is that imagination outlasts decay. Tiksi is an arctic port town that suffered massive population decline, poverty and isolation after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

By framing the town through Tanya's young eyes, the photographer speaks of a child's imagination transforming a cemetery of rusted ships, and endless expanse of sub- zero tundra, into a wondrous fairytale playground.

Tanya the charming pony tailed girl, in her bright pink Jacket and red cap, contrasts against the stark white snow, and the neon green of the Northern Lights. Tanya sees past the harshness of the Arctic Climate, treating the tundra as her playground rekindling thoughts of Evgenia's own childhood, with memories of human warmth, and curiosity, played a part in her unique photographic works.

On arriving at the Atkinson Gallery one Saturday afternoon, I find myself standing, gazing into this unique exhibit. Remembering, I'd succumbed to the magic of the arctic tundra as a young girl of Tanya's age. I lived on the outskirts of Liverpool in 1955, a city on the cusp of major social and structural change, transitioning out of post war austerity. My home was set back off a main road, a five-minute walk from a row of shops.

Saturday, was pocket money day, two shillings and six pence, putting half of it into my piggy bank, to save for Christmas and birthdays. Spending what was left in Mr Bromley's sweet shop, with shelves laden with large glass jars filled with lemon Sherberts, Pear drops, Rhubarb and custard, Aniseed Balls, and Uncle Joes Mint Balls.

One Saturday trek to the sweet shop, was to buy a box of Cadburys Milk Tray. A token of remorse, after my dad, forgetting my mother's birthday. I grabbed my coat, and headed for the front door, crossed the road, and into Mr Bromley's sweet shop, hearing a familiar voice.

"Well, if it isn't Janey," said Mr Bromley, being his usual chatty self, and was just about to reach for the jar of Sherbert Lemon's, when I said, "No Mr Bromley, not this time, I need to buy a large box of Cadburys Milk Tray, it's my mum's birthday."

He stood on tip-toe, taking the chocolates from off the shelve, and slid the 1lb box of Cadburys Milk Tray into a large crisp white bag. Glancing into the glass display counter, my eyes, widened with a sense of wonder, at seeing an Eskimo doll. A reminder of me poring over vivid illustrations of Eskimo's, building igloos from blocks of ice to stay warm, and setting up fishing holes, by chiselling through crusts of thick ice.

When I said, "Mr Bromley I'd like to take a look at the Eskimo doll? With a warm knowing smile, he reached for the doll, and placed it down on the counter.

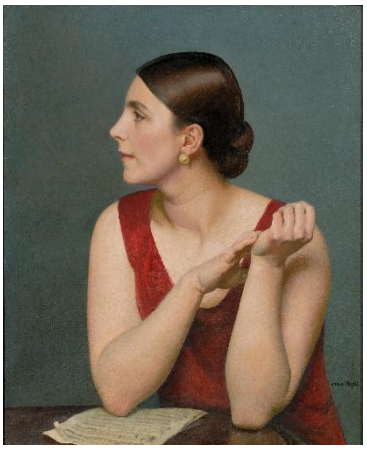
I picked it up and said, "she's got pigtails, like me, I love her white fur coat, it's got furry edges to keep her warm, she looks so snug". Mr Bromley replied, "Yes, Janey she's an Inuit doll, she's quite unique. Glancing down at the label, he said, "and she's all yours for five shillings." I tipped up my purse, a cascade of silver coins, struck the glass counter, with a deafening clatter, and I counted 4 shillings and sixpence (4s6d).

"But Mr Bromley I've only enough money for the chocolates, I'm sure I've got more than five shillings in my piggy bank. I can run back home and bring it right back to you." Mr Bromley known for his generous spirit, said, "no need Janey. You and your family are good customers of mine, bring the five shillings with you next Saturday, with a little extra to buy your Sherbert lemons.

And before I could answer, he popped the doll, inside a white paper bag, offering it to me. The following week, and as good as my word, I went back to Mr Bromley's sweet shop, paid the five shillings I owed him, and asked for a quarter of Sherbert lemons. My Eskimo doll, re-ignited my childlike imagination, and I began reading about survival in the Arctic wasteland. My unique Eskimo Inuit still stands on my bookshelf, a reminder of happy carefree, childhood memories, of Mr Bromley and his Sweet Shop. Served not only sweets and toys, but an abundance of hearty local community spirit.

Inspiration:

Ethel Bartlett
by Dame Laura Knight (1877-1970)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection



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Rewriting The Rules

By Lesley Viner
(Story)

It was the late spring of 1926.

Ethel Bartlett the pianist was struggling to retain the pose her friend Laura Knight the artist, had decided on for the portrait she was painting of her.

The studio smelt of the resinous tang of oil paints.

Outside the London sky had turned to a slate grey.

Both women were acutely aware the light to allow Laura to continue to paint was dying.

Ethel knew she had to maintain her pose. She must not falter now, even though the muscles in her neck, and arms ached. She had to keep her chin raised, her neck turned, and her arms positioned, all at the precise angles Laura demanded.

Laura Knight was known for the rapidity with which she worked, but Ethel had been enduring this sitting for over two hours now. She was desperately hoping this would be her final one.

She had her eyes locked firmly on a crack in the corner of the studio wall. She refused to look down. Although the muscles in her neck throbbed in agony, and begged her to.

“Don’t soften your throat Ethel,” Laura called out from behind her easel.

“Remember the critics from the Times, and the Telegraph are already poised with their pens to critique this year’s Royal Academy of Art Summer Exhibition.”

“I’m getting cramp” muttered Ethel quietly. Her lips barely moving for fear of losing her pose.

“Don’t drop your chin. We are almost finished” came Laura’s stern reply. “We can’t let your portrait

be reduced to the status of merely decorative."

Laura's words carried a desperate weight, both women were acutely aware of their meaning. Ethel stiffened more in her pose.

The establishment, and society of 1926 as a whole looked upon women as merely decorative, domestic creatures, and the bearers of children.

They would seize any excuse to dismiss women's talents, and stamp on their ambitions to step outside the roles society had predestined for them from birth in order keep them in the place they had been regulated to for centuries.

Laura herself had felt an anomaly when she had first tentatively tried to enter the male dominated artwork as a woman painter. She had felt she was tolerated as long as she was prepared to paint harmless images that met with the approval of society.

Her first submissions to the Royal Academy of Art had been rejected based on her choice of images. Mostly famously her Self Portrait with Nude, also known as The Model in 1913. It had been regarded as subversive. She had produced it at a time when female artists were barred from life drawing classes.

She was determined her portrait of Ethel titled "The Pianist's Pause" would not be rejected on any grounds.

It was due to go before the Royal Academy committee in three weeks.

Both women understood only too well that a woman must work twice as hard as a man to secure wall space at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.

Ethel also knew both herself, and Laura, and many other women were engaged in a constant battle for all women against an establishment, and society that wanted to lock women out.

In that moment Ethel felt she shared a manifesto of defiance with Laura, and all women who felt trapped by a system that penalised them merely for their gender, born female. A system that felt justified in diminishing, placing limits, or completely writing off any talents they may possess.

Laura was determined she would not compromise her art, or her friend's musical talent in her portrait of Ethel to satisfy their misplaced desires.

She wanted to force the establishment, and society to look at a women's mind, and her abilities, not just her aesthetic, and reproductive abilities.

She was determined to display both her own, and Ethel's genius, and ambitions in their chosen fields via this portrait, and to challenge society to look again at the place of women in it.

Laura spoke again, "The light has gone. I've finished. Come and see the weapon we have created Ethel," Laura exclaimed.

Ethel stood up, and shook the stiffness from her body, before crossing over the room to stand next to Laura to gaze upon the completed canvas.

She was momentarily dumbstruck by the portrait of herself Laura was presenting to her.

The woman in the painting was definitely her. Exposed for all to look upon.

Her face, a side view, seemed to be illuminated with a self possession.

Laura had painted Ethel's undeniable beauty, but more importantly she had captured the essence of her being perfectly. She had painted her as lost in a moment of comprehension of her own talent, and captured the power her talent gave her in a patriarchal society.

Ethel could not help but be captivated by her own presentation in oils. It was a visual display of her potential in the world, but it didn't last long before the reality of the times she and Laura lived in as women invaded her mind.

"Will they hang it?" Ethel asked softly, her speech laced with a tinge of anxiety.

"I will make them" Laura replied defiantly," and at eye level. I won't allow them to bury this painting, or with it a new future for women in society," she added, looking directly at Ethel. There was fire in her eyes to match her words.

"And let the critics try to diminish it in the reviews they write."

She paused, before continuing, "I would like to believe our work here today will still be hanging in an art gallery somewhere forever for future generations of women to gaze upon long after we are gone." She was smiling now, "and any unfavourable reviews it may garner have been used to light fires, and then extinguished, but the fires that have been ignited in the women who gaze upon it gain belief in their talents, and their true value in society which will burn bright and long into the future."

Inspiration:
The Little Wine Shop
by Margaret E. Marshall (1906-2004)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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The Little Wine Shop

by Marion Kockelbergh
(Story)

The little village had hardly changed. It was early afternoon and the air felt heavy and thick, slowing time down to a lazy saunter. In the distance she heard the laughter of children drifting towards her, she smiled. She was close now; it was just around this corner.

The courtyard came into view and caused her to momentarily take a small intake of breath. The sunlight flooded the little square like liquid honey and made the faded, pastel, houses shimmer in the heat. A small murmur escaped her lips as she saw that the familiar green shutters were open and recent items of washing had been hung from the balconies. She took an old, worn photograph from her bag and held it up. It was just as it was. Tucked between the houses, holding its own proudly, was the little wine shop. The washed out, cherry red, livery declared its intention with a single word 'Vins', in flaky gold paint.

Memories flooded her mind. They were married on the 'glorious' 12th August, 'the beginning of grouse shooting season', he always added, although as an accountant he would not know one end of a gun from the other, she happily thought. They had honeymooned in France. His family had holidayed there year on year, all of them, they didn't seem to want to go anywhere else. Grace had joked that they had crème fraiche in their veins. Still, she had agreed. A few days in they had stumbled on the sleepy, quiet village and wandered the quaint little streets, hand in hand.

She could see them now, standing where she was stood, she could almost feel his warm hand in hers. 'Savon?', she had asked curiously, staring at the advertisement panel to the left of the door. 'It means soap', he replied confidently, 'Let us hope they do not mix it into the wine, come on'. He had tugged her hand playfully and led her through the door into a dimly lit room. As their eyes began to adjust, they could see neatly arranged tables and cane chairs placed in front of a small bar. The only other person was an older man that sat nursing a half-drunk beer reading a newspaper. He gave a courteous nod as they sat down. Grace was just about to speak when her husband's mouth fell open, he was staring intently behind her.

'Bonjour', she turned in the direction of the voice and stared. The man now stood behind the bar was wearing a bright white jumpsuit with a large collar and an unmistakable large American eagle in red, white and blue sparkling rhinestones emblazed on the front. He was wearing a jet-black wig. 'Are those sideburns put on with shoe polish?', he had whispered and she stifled a giggle.

'Two red wines please, you look great', he added.

'You are English?', the man was smiling at them. 'You like my outfit? A tribute to the greatest man of all time. But today I am a little sad, it is his anniversary. He died 18 years ago this very day.' He lifted a bottle of red wine and poured three large glasses. 'We will toast him together eh'. He came around the bar and placed the wine in front of them before reaching over and grabbing his own glass. Grace reached for her bag, 'No, Mademoiselle, it is on the house'.

He raised his glass, 'To Elvis, may you be forever rocking in your blue suede shoes', at this point he lifted his own foot, he was sporting his own cobalt footwear beneath his flares. Grace nodded at him impressively. This was such a surreal experience, she wanted to savour every moment.

'And now a photograph, to remember, Bertram you take', he went around the bar and returned with a small camera. Bertram, the poor guy who clearly just wanted to enjoy a quiet beer; nevertheless, stood obligingly and taking the camera pointed it at 'Elvis'.

'No, no, with my friends'. He gestured them to join him. They laughed as he wrapped an arm around them both pulling them in closer. It was a memory they were to revisit so many times. She had snapped a quick photo outside when they left.

It was time. Grace stepped tentatively inside, the place had changed very little. A young fresh-faced man was chopping lemons. He looked up and smiled.

'Bonjour'.

'Un verre de vin rouge, s'il de plait' she said in her best French, she sounded ridiculous.

'Of course'. He reached for the wine and that is when she saw it. She leaned closer and the young bartender followed her gaze. He lifted the framed photograph and handed it to her.

'It is my grandfather, this was his bar, he was a big fan of Elvis Presley'.

Grace nodded, 'Did you know that Elvis died 48 years ago today', she murmured. She looked more closely, her stomach fluttered, could this be the photo?

'Are you alright Madame?'

'I'm sorry, it's just that I think we are in that photo, my husband and I, with your Grandad'.

'You think so?', before she could stop him the young man had lifted the framing clips to expose the back of the photo. Sure enough it had been creased into the frame, turning it over he unfolded it uncovering two smiling people surrounding 'Elvis'. The tears came without warning.

'Oh, I am sorry, it just took me aback', she wiped at her eyes.

'Your husband?' he asked. She nodded sadly. He placed his hand on hers.

'I am so sorry, please, you have this', he placed the photo in her hands.

'Oh no, I couldn't'.

'Yes, we have many', he laughed, 'my grandfather dressed like this many times, you take and remember'.

'Always' she whispered, she was so glad she had come back. As she left, holding the precious photograph, she stepped outside into the sunshine, with notes of 'Love Me Tender' playing in her head.

Inspirations:

Belle Of The Village
by Alice Mary Havers (1850-1890)

Inside The Blue House
by Leandra Holder

My Man
by Gillian Wearing (born 1963)

Girl In A Red Jacket
by Margaret A. Berry (born 1908)

Self Portrait
by Celia Frances Bedford (1904-1959)

Self-Portrait With Sun Tan
by Cindy Sherman

Self Portrait With Pearl Drops
by Chila Burman (born 1957)

All Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

Fragments Of Femininity

by Danny Morrell
(Narrative Play)

They say you cannot hear the 'woman's voice' in Victorian painting. That depends on which painting you are listening to. You only have to look at Alice Havers, 'The Belle of the Village' and such is the skill with which the figures are rendered, such is their accurate body language, such is that telling title, that it instantly suggests the scenario, magically you can almost hear their voices…

Kathleen: "Ah you idle lot. Here's us doin' the washin'; beatin' and scrubbing, no time to contemplate the day and you, you just lie back lookin' at the sky."

Shamus: "Oh yer a red-haired dream there Kathleen O'Malley."

Kathleen: "There's no time for day dreamin' Shamus, you should try cleaning your own dirty linen, it's hard work."

The sisters whispering: "Listen to her, the 'Belle of the Village' they call her. She still ends up 'wringing' out the washing like the rest of us!"

"Aye and look at little Maisie trudging along near buried by the sheets she carries. What does the future hold for her?"

There was a time when the artist's canvas was ever cloth. It had been stone, it had been wood, yet stretched and primed it settled on being cloth. Linen, upon which each different brush in each different hand, directed by a discerning eye, could interpret life in all its many colours. It was the gentlemen who, in the main, painted the pictures on the canvas, the gentlewomen, as we see, were busy making and cleaning the cloth of our daily lives, the clothes we wear, the cloth upon the table, the sheets we sleep between. Perhaps if a gentlewoman was pretty or willing, she might find herself on a canvas, but that of course was the gentleman's decision. Only a few gentlewomen of the gentry had the privilege of access to paint and canvas, and they seemed restrained to the botanical, a suitable subject the gentlemen said. Inventively women without the 'means' used whatever medium they had for a different kind of artistic expression. So, it is through those ever-expanding unexpected mediums that we find a bold woman who defiantly picked up the brush herself to paint.

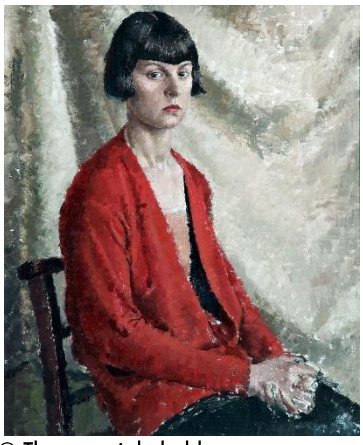
Here in the dolls house Little Frida paints. It can be hard for Little Frida; she suffers terribly with the pain in her back and legs. In the mirror she sees her true self, unencumbered by straps and corsets. There within the glass she seems to move freely, she is truly alive. Poor Little Frida often finds herself so alone. On the worst days when her legs will not carry her to the vibrant jungle just beyond the door, she turns to her reflected sister and says, "Today little sister we wear flowers in our hair, we wear the beads and such a colourful dress I have made, we will blossom, then I will paint us." In Mexico even the spirits of the dead are colourful, waiting they watch her, peering over her shoulders grinning their rigour mortis smiles. Little Frida knows that they are there waiting; she catches glimpses of them out of the corner of her eye. Oh, Little Frida where is your husband, why is he not here to drive those spirits away, why does he leave you so alone?

Frida Khalo: "Ah the Toad, he toys with me. How I hate him. No… I, I cannot be without him."

Many miles away across the broken waters another young woman sits alone, gazing at the sea.

© Gillian Wearing

Tina Jane: "I know what you mean Frida, they leave you all at 6s and 7s don't they? I always 4give mine, no matter what he's done; he's so important 2 me. When he beggared off to Spain for 10 weeks I didn't **half** miss him, but I could never 8 him. There's no accounting for how the numbers add up is there? Mind you love, yours is hardly a looker is he, right bit of a Diego that 1. Still, I suppose it takes all sorts."



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Lady - Cardigan Red: "Celia, did you hear what that young woman just said?"

Celia Francis Bedford: "Oh she's forthright all right that one, but too young if you ask me. I'm not sure I'd trust her bow as far as I could throw him. Let alone in Spain? Ha! I doubt he was alone for long. And as for that philandering Diego Rivera, I don't know why Frida put up with him..."

© The artist's estate

Lady - Cardigan Red: "I know! First, they were married, then they weren't, then they were again. Talk about tempestuous relationships!"

© Cindy Sherman

Cindy Sherman: "Now you listen to me ladies, I'm a material girl and I could tell you a thing or two about tempestuous relationships, I've had more than a few myself. It must be this Californian sunshine that does it. Mind you when I had that fling with Donald it was more like sunstroke. I must have been blind! Why do we make these mistakes? And when did they become the subject of art works? I mean, back in the day ladies used to paint flowers, now they're more likely to be telling their ex where to go with a neon sign!"

Chila Burman: "Oh enough of the blokes already! Can't you see we are all fragments, fragments of femininity. We were repressed when we only painted flowers; now art in all its forms allows us to express ourselves more freely. We can take centre stage and depict ourselves in the mediums we choose, in the way we want, not in the way that men let us. We can all be multifaceted in multimedia. So, for goodness sake, let go the bonds of our oppressors, rise above them, open your eyes, see the world beyond the veil and make it your own. Just like Frida did."

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"With the drawn line,

With the brush stroke,

With the lens, the stitch, the written word.

Shake the order,

Every daughter."

Winner Joint 1st Place, Prose

Inspiration:
Ovaries
by Michelle Molyneux (born 1966)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

© Michelle Molyneux

The Vortex "Her Own Design"

by Janet Gardner
(Story)

Alissa sat with her grandma, tears streaming down her face. Hannah wrapped her arms around Alissa and gently held her. Today had been particularly daunting for Alissa; it was the day she had been dreading. She had to choose her options at school. While her friends excitedly traded choices, she felt small and left behind. More than anything a wave of isolation washed over her as she noticed that not a single person had asked her what she was going to choose.

At that moment, even though she knew she was smart, she was mourning the difference between her intelligence and her reading speed, realizing that every exam required reading. While to her friends it was about choosing a passion, to her it had just one meaning: which type of reading assessment would hurt her the least? In that blinding panic, she found it hard to disguise her trembling hands. It seemed like she was signing up for two years of complete failure.

Being back with her grandma allowed her to release the mask she had worn all day, and that's when her tears flowed. Her grandma gently swept a tear away from Alissa's cheeck. "Alissa, I have something to show you."

They went upstairs onto the landing outside her grandma's bedroom. Hannah took down a photograph that had sat on the windowsill for years, and they sat down together on the stairs. The photograph was of a young girl sitting on a swing in the back garden. It was Hannah. She took hold of Alissa's hands. "I felt so alone that day. You see, I too have dyslexia. It wasn't given a title in those days and girls went undiagnosed."

Alissa interrupted, "I love that photo of you, Grandma. Your crisp white dress and dainty black pumps." Alissa looked up from the photograph back into her grandma's eyes, with a wave of understanding washing over her Alissa said to Hannah, "You took the scenic route too Grandma." Hannah smiled at Alissa and squeezed her hands and for the first time that day Alissa laughed.

Hannah looked closely at the photograph, her thumb gently tracing the edge of the frame. She explained to Alissa, "it was a monochrome world, one where childhood was meant to be black and white. That wasn't really me. My world was one of color, bursting to get out, a canvas of shapes, textures, words and imagination. I felt misunderstood and trapped in a world judged by black ink on white paper. Back then, there was no support. My parents didn't understand how their beautiful girl

seemed to be struggling so much. They didn't get it, how the frustration got too much for me, why I would be moody and even angry at times. They found all sorts of excuses and in the end, they gave up on me. They just hoped I would get by."

In spite of everything, Hannah grew up and met Alissa's grandad, He adored Hannah and only saw her as perfect. Her world had begun to open up and slowly her confidence in herself grew. They married, and his love gave her the freedom to become who she is today: a flourishing artist, free to express herself in every way.

Inspired and needing space to process this legacy of strength, Alissa decided to take some time out and to sit on the very same swing in her grandma's garden to think things through.

Sitting down on the swing she felt an instant calmness. She thought about the two differing worlds that they both grew up in. Education was changing in Alissa's world and it could only get better. Gripping the ropes tightly, she pushed off the ground. As she rose into the air, she was transported into a dreamlike space suspended between the past and the future.

Alissa looked up at a sky full of swirls and stresses, amidst the beauty of fluffy white clouds and deep blue hues, floated disorganised turquoise tangled and broken ribbons.

Beneath her feet lay a velvety green vortex. She gazed inside in total awe. Before her was a pathway, on it were all of the women who had gone before her, navigating the fractured, chaotic lives thrust upon them. Weaving them into poetry, art, and revolution. Now Alissa understood her own power, and the strength inside her grew as she saw a path for herself. A rainbow flashed across her mind, freedom layering a mosaic of colors far from the other worlds of broken ribbons, monochrome colors, and confusion.

Excitement rained down upon her from that beautiful blue sky. Gone was the other world of broken ribbons; confidence was replacing it and removing the barrier that had held her back. Leaving all hesitation and fear behind, she was no longer trying to fit into a landscape built by someone else's rules. Alissa was stepping into her own future, ready to paint the world in the vibrant, beautiful colors of her own design.

As the swing gently settled, the tangled ribbons of her anxiety finally unknotted. She knew that her struggle wasn't over and that her reading speed wouldn't change overnight, but she no longer felt overwhelmed. Alissa ran back inside, eager to share her excitement with her grandma; who had so lovingly instilled in her what it means to live a life independent of anyone else's misunderstandings.

Winner 3rd Place, Prose

Inspiration:
Rest
by Helen Kathleen Shaw (1864-1949)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

That's Just What You Do

by Ian Hendricks
(Story)

When his mortgage was approved, everybody congratulated him.
His mum hugged him. His dad shook his hand. Somebody bought champagne.
Nobody had ever celebrated him owing £260,000 before.
But this was different.
This was a mortgage.
This was security.
This was what you did.
You got a job first.
Not necessarily one you liked. That wasn't really the point.
You got one with a pension if you could. A decent pension was important because one day, when you were old enough to stop doing the job you didn't particularly like, you would need money to live on.
Until then, you had weekends.
And holidays.
Twenty-eight days if you were lucky.
Bank holidays too, although everybody went to the same places on those, so they mostly involved traffic.
He learned quickly that Friday afternoon was good.
Sunday evening was bad.
Monday morning was very bad.
Wednesday was just Wednesday.
Nobody mentioned that Wednesday was also a day of their life.
That seemed unnecessarily dramatic.
You couldn't go around thinking like that.
You'd never get anything done.
So he got things done.
He bought the house.
Then spent several years improving the house he had spent several years saving to buy.
The kitchen needed doing.
Everyone said so.
The old one could keep food cold, heat food up and contain plates, but apparently it was dated.
So they replaced it.

People came round afterwards and said, "Oh, that's much better."
This felt important.
Then came the holiday.
For two weeks they went somewhere warmer and sat outside.
They talked about how nice it would be to live somewhere like that.
Then somebody would say you couldn't live like that all the time.
You needed reality.
Reality was Warrington.
Reality had direct debits.
Reality had a lawn that needed cutting.
Besides, holidays were special because you had work to compare them with.
Otherwise, presumably, you might spend your whole life enjoying yourself without the proper context.
He got promoted.
More money.
More responsibility.
Less time.
Everyone agreed this was progress.
The mortgage balance came down.
His salary went up.
The years did something similar, although nobody put those on a statement.
At work they talked about retirement.
Not constantly.
That would have sounded depressing.
Just enough.
"Another fifteen years."
"Another ten."
"Five if they don't change the pension again."
Retirement was discussed like somewhere everyone intended to get to eventually, provided nothing went wrong on the way.
One man made it.
Finished on the Friday.
Retirement card.
Collection.
Handshake.
A joke, probably, about putting his feet up.
He died on the Monday.
People said it was terribly sad.
Then they went back to work on Tuesday.
What else could they do?
That's just what you do.
As the years passed, stopping became increasingly respectable.
At twenty-five, doing nothing meant you were lazy.
At forty-five, it meant you were wasting your potential.
At sixty-five, somebody bought you a present and told you that you had earned it.
Earned what?
A Tuesday afternoon?

A chair by a window?
The extraordinary luxury of having nowhere you were required to be?
Perhaps that was what all the payments had really been for.
Not the house.
Not the pension.
Not security.
Permission.
Permission to stop.
Permission to sit down without checking the time.
Permission to look out of a window without somebody wondering why you weren't doing something useful.
There is a woman resting in a painting.
She does not know about his mortgage.
She has never seen his kitchen.
She has no idea how many emails he answered, meetings he attended, Mondays he survived or Wednesdays he failed to notice.
She simply rests.
Looking at her, he feels something almost embarrassing.
Jealousy.
Not because she owns something he doesn't.
Because, for that moment at least, she appears to owe nobody her time.
He wonders when that became a privilege.
He wonders who decided that rest should come at the end.
After the mortgage.
After the promotions.
After all the Mondays.
After enough Wednesdays have passed unnoticed that someone finally tells you:
You've earned it.
He wonders how many ordinary Wednesdays he has left.
Then his phone buzzes.
Something needs doing.
Of course it does.
There is always something.
He stands up.
Because nothing strange was happening.
It was normal.
That was the strange bit.

Inspiration:
The Back Parlour, Café Loos, Étaples
by Nora Lucy Mowbray Cundell (1889-1948)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

"Une Fille Doit Faire Ce Qu'elle Doit Faire."

by Phil McNulty
(Story)

'A girl's got to do what a girl's got to do.'
We hate that.
We heard it from gossips as soon as Michelle started to 'show'.
That's her serving drinks to the cheats and thieves in the bar.

Her beau was a British officer from the camp.
He promised that he would return after the Armistice. It was the same for a lot of our girls in Étaples and Le Touquet, but all that returned was Monsieur Sir Edwin Lutyens
with an army of builders.

They came to create a grand cemetery for their war dead and with them came these bad men we call them 'les mechants.'
They have no discharge papers which means that they cannot get work in England.
So they float here as scum on the surface of La Manche.
They mix with our colonie d'artistes, who have come back to us after the war, and drink in our cafe.

I so wish life could be as it was when we were a small village with our cafes, the boulangerie, boucherie and our vegetable market.
The English artists were gentle people, bohemian, and they mixed with the fisher folk and were good for business.

And then it all changed.
The British built their camp of tents, hospitals and training grounds, right there in our sandhills, and our world turned.

We were busy, of course, serving officers day and evening with coffee, drinks and our plat du jour.
The ordinary soldiers couldn't leave the camp and, I heard, that this led to the mutiny, three years ago now.
It was during the Battle of Passchendaele, when thousands of injured men were sent to the Etaples hospitals.

Anyway, I am making myself depressed thinking about it all.

It was better when my husband, Henri, was alive. He would drink and smoke with the customers all day.
Meanwhile we women did the cooking, waitressing, child minding, cleaning and also looked after grand-pere. Ours was a hard life but we were secure.

Things haven't changed much for us, other than that my son, Louis, now runs the cafe.
He thinks he is behaving like his father but he is not.

Henri knew what he was doing, always providing friendly company for any passing trade. He was popular and he encouraged folk to use our cafe. He brought in a steady business and would never have allowed 'les mechants' through the door.

Louis is young and does not have Henri's personality. He is also a gambler and an easy target for the card sharps.
You can see them now, right in front of us, cheating him, like every day.

But this must stop. Now.
Our money has gone and 'les mechants' are bad for business. Decent customers do not like them.
Louis has had his opportunity.

Michelle and I will have to run the cafe from now on. Louis and David, his brother, can manage the cellar and help young Marie in the kitchen. We'll have to hire a childminder of course. It's amazing how much work we have been doing.

Ours will be the only cafe in Etaples managed by women. And we are perfectly capable of doing it. I'm looking forwards to making a success of our little business again. We may even be a talking point.

After all:
"Une fille doit faire ce qu'elle doit faire."
'A girl's got to do what a girl's got to do.'

Winner Joint 1st Place, Prose

Inspiration:
Guardian II
by Claire Curneen (born 1968)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

© Claire Curneen

The Tattooed Girl

by Julia Clayton
(Story)

As they lead her away from the sea, through the dunes, she stares at the familiar plants as if seeing them for the last time: sea buckthorn with its bright orange berries, good for healing wounds, and spiky sea-colly, a cure for coughs and bronchitis, especially when mixed with bit of honey. The summer has been so warm that the evening primrose is still out, the best remember for the winter sickness, when the short grey days and long nights lead to melancholy.

These are the very plants, and more beside, which are tattooed on her body, one for each completed year of her training. When she got her first tattoo, only seven winters old, she had called out from the pain of the bone needles, loaded with woad-stained charcoal, piercing her skin, but as the years passed she had come to accept, even to welcome, the prick of the needles being tapped into her skin, as a sign of what set her apart from the others.

The small procession passes through the dunes and into the forest behind, entering the sacred clearing with its two standing stones and its two hearths. There's a dense ring of people, from her village and the other settlements along the coast, standing round the edge of the clearing; they move aside to let the procession past, with the two priests and the two girls, and their two attendants bringing up the rear.

As they lead her towards one of the two stones, she looks across to Fial, her colleague and friend these last seven years. Fial, like her, is dressed in a long woollen shift, the colour of oatmeal, pinned at the shoulders and belted at the waist, with a chaplet of oak leaves, woven with sprigs of late rowan berries, resting on her thick red hair. Fial had laughed as she watched Eithne weaving teasels into her own chaplet.

'Why on earth wouldn't you be wanting something colourful, rather than those dreary brown things?'

'I would have used gorse, but there's none to be found this time of year - and I like the way they keep their shape, even when they're all dried up and they've lost their flowers.'

The girls have woven their chaplets, their laughter more awkward than before, in the knowledge that one of them will become the new Guardian, the custodian of their people's teachings, while the other will go to the gods. It's many years since the full ceremony has been held - neither Eithne nor Fial can remember a girl going to the gods, rather than being sent away to another tribe – but this year it has been revived, due to reports of the foreign invaders heading north, with their wolves and their eagles and their hobnailed boots.

The attendants bring copper bowls of water, heated on the fire, and bars of tallow. The two girls must stand before the stones while their hair is cut off and their heads are shaved smooth with a knife of obsidian, the black glass sacred to the gods. Eithne wants to cry as she watches her thick hair, of which she was so proud, fall into a shallow bowl, but she bites her lip. She must carry herself like a Guardian and show no sign of weakness. Domlach, the old woman who acts as her attendant, told her not to worry, it will grow back thicker than ever. Her scalp feels cold, even in the autumn sun. She casts a sideways glance at Fial, to see if she's crying for the loss of her gorgeous red hair, but she is defiantly stone-faced, staring at the silent crowd.

Eithne tries not to flinch as expert hands unclip the whorled brooches at her shoulders and untie her belt, so her woollen dress falls off all at once. She focuses on the tattoo on her left arm, resisting the urge to cover her breasts with her arms. The women bring more water, heated on the fire, and they slowly wash her in front of the onlookers, carefully passing over every part of her body, so the blue tattoos seem richer and deeper. One of the priests brings a tiny leather bag, filled with gold-dust from Siluria, pours a small amount onto his open hand, and blows it onto her skin, on her breasts and stomach and arms, so that it shimmers among the tattoos. Then he gets her to dip the first and second fingers from each hand, sacred to the gods of the earth and the sky, into the bag, so that her fingers sparkle with gold. She casts another sideways glance at Fial, trying to convince herself that she's been given more gold than her friend, who has now become her rival.

The two girls, patterned with blue and gold, are led towards the hearths, where the two fires have burned down to the embers. The attendants hand two shallow copper bowls to the priests, containing the hair clipped from the girls, along with the wreaths which were taken from their heads This is the climax of the ceremony, where the priests will throw the hair onto the fires, then interpret the flames rising from each hearth, to determine the fate of the two candidates.

Eithne's fire spits a little, as the hair crackles and blazes, burning with a warm orange flame, but Fial's fire begins to burn with an ethereal blue flame, the sacred colour of the gods. Her old attendant was right: the teasels are burning blue, as she said they would, and Eithne knows that she will become the next Guardian.

Inspiration:

One Of The Conquerors
by Gertrude Smith (1870 - 1952)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

1490 FM: Grand Tourney (Live)

by Sio Wynne
(Story)

Transcript begins:

Hell*llllo* and welcome back to BC Sports, where we're bringing you this year's Grand Tourney - live from the stands. You're joining us just in time for our last bout of the day, and despite the number of pennants around here, this crowd's energy has not flagged one bit. And neither has ours! We are just chomping at the bit for this next - and final! -round to begin. Our two competitors are making their way onto the field at this very moment, and by the crowd's chanting it seems they're predicting a real one-horse race. In the orange tent, weighing in at 135 kilos – the armour really does add ten pounds – riding his signature pale stallion and flying that all too familiar red flag, it's our undefeated reigning champion... *the White Kniiiiiiight*!

But! Hold your horses, because over in the blue tent, weighing in at just 110 kilos, it's this year's dark horse – a black mare ridden by a competitor that, I think it's fair to say, no one expected to get this far. Flying that distinctive pink and coming in off the back of a series of surprising upsets, it's... *the Dame Errrrrrrrant*!

Two very different approaches from our finalists so far this competition, the White Knight's physical power versus the Dame Errant's more tactical approach, and as the first horn sounds and our two riders make their way to the starting block, it looks like we're about to see which will lead to victory. Both riders being handed their lances, the White Knight hoisting an impressive length there. Visors lowered, pit crews clear of the track, and the crowd falls silent as we wait for-

And there it is! That second horn sounds the flag is up and our two riders are racing down the tiltyard, White Knight's larger mount quickly covering ground but Dame Errant looking steady on the approach, White Knight bearing down, Dame Errant tilting upwards, outmatched on power and speed she's looking for chinks in his armour- *but White Knight gets there first!* Dame Errant thrown from her saddle as White Knight's lance splinters into pieces, he's already celebrating- but Dame Errant just managing to hold on by the skin of her teeth. She's not unhorsed, but that's a point to the White Knight, and the crowd are ecstatic.

Both riders pulling in for a quick pit stop now as the ground crew clear the course. Looks like White Knight's squires are going for a full four horseshoe swap. Dame Errant's smaller crew focusing on quick repairs, that last hit leaving her with less than shining armour.

The horn sounds again, summoning our two competitors back to the track for the second pass. White Knight looking confident as he takes up his lance. Dame Errant looking just as confident despite her loss in round one. The flag is lowered, the crowd quietening once more as-

And they're off! White Knight really pushing his one horsepower mount to it's limit as he tears down the tiltway, Dame Errant with a surprising burst of speed still looking for those weak spots as she angles her lance- *OH* and White Knight suddenly lunging forward in his saddle, catching her off guard, lance splintering, Dame Errant once again thrown sideways off the saddle... *and once again* just managing to remain upright, dropping her lance to the ground as she clings to the reins. The crowd is going wild, White Knight vaulting off his horse, fists in the air. Dame Errant now down two-nil, and she has got to be feeling the pressure.

One last pit stop before the third and final pass of this grand finale. Dame Errant's crew doing their best to hammer out what is now an incredibly damaged breastplate. White Knight posing for a few quick sketches with fans as his pit crew refresh his mount. And that's the horn, White Knight looking confident as he swings himself back onto his high horse, but this is a game of three halves, and it's not over quite yet. Dame Errant looking determined as she's handed her lance. A full dismount is the only thing that can save her at this point. It's looking unlikely, but as we've seen so far this competition, nothing is impossible.

Our two riders are in position. Silence falling over the crowd. This is it. One last pass to determine who will ride away victorious, and who will return to their barony in defeat. The herald raises the horn to his lips...

The horn rings out the flag is raised and our two riders are racing down the tiltway faster than we've ever seen before, both leaving it all out on the pitch in this final chance for success, White Knight aiming his lance right at Dame Errant's heart, Dame Errant still tilting upwards needing to find those gaps in White Knight's armour, White Knight thrusts forwards- *but what's this!* Dame Errant's anticipated it, twisting in her saddle, White Knight's lance bounces off her shoulder, unbroken- Dame Errant wasting no time at all, sliding her own lance past his defences right into the gap between cuirass and pauldron, White Knight caught completely off guard- *AND HE'S DOWN!* White Knight crashes to the ground, Dame Errant's lance splintering around him, and it is all over for the White Knight. The crowd cannot believe it, Dame Errant, two points down coming into the final pass, unhorsing the previously undefeated champion to take home the win.

The cheers are deafening as Dame Errant takes her well-deserved victory lap. The White Knight on the ground, defeated and - for now - forgotten.

I think it's safe to say, no one was expecting this.

Inspiration:

Ethel Bartlett
by Dame Laura Knight (1877-1970)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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Ethala

by Naseema Makda
(Story)

Ethala's footsteps kick up a little dust from the dry warm path. She walks purposefully as the thin gold straps on her sandals catch the low rays of the orange -red sun.

The pathway is lined with sumptuous soft petals of velvety hibiscus. Their vibrant growth leads her round and down a darker undergrowth of deep green vines.

Ethala is tangled within a romance. Tonight, he awaits her hastily planned coming. He imagines unpinning her smooth oiled hair bun. Dreams of her hair coils tumbling down over her smooth brown shoulders; full and flowing.

Classical Indian instruments can be heard being practiced. The plucking of one string creates a hum of ten more to carry along the warm scented air. A melancholy tanpura drones deeper. Ethala and her lover long to resonate with each other like a duet, they long to feel the vibrations through their bodies.

Her gold jumpcas jangle gently in her ears, signalling her arrival to him. The jasmine scent seems to have got sweeter and heavier. A creamy taste tingles on their tongues as the scent hangs low and weaves around their sun-kissed, warm bodies.

Ethala's crimson red, sleeveless salwaar kameez is ready to fall into the deep green vines.

Salwaar kameez= traditional Indian dress with matching loose trousers
Jumpcas = bell shaped traditional Indian ear rings which make a sound
Tanpura = Indian instrument
Ethala= a made up Indian name to describe her sexual liberation within the confines of traditional Indian expectations in an Indian village

Inspiration:
Ethel Bartlett
by Dame Laura Knight (1877-1970)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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I Can't Help Falling In Love With You

by Lily Watson
(Story)

The French had a phrase for it. Well they would, wouldn't they? Everyone knew that the French were the experts in love. *Le coup de foudre*. Love at first sight.

It literally meant hit by a bolt of lightning. And that was literally how she'd felt, as their eyes had first connected. When they had been introduced at the village hall, Henri had bowed to her. It was somewhat surprising, albeit befitting her status as the new Duchess. The bow was very formal and very low and the thought had crossed Louisa's mind that it was almost mocking in its extravagance. Almost. But as their eyes had met, an electrifying spark of attraction had set the blood tingling in her veins and that gaze, alight with intelligence and charm, had held her captive ever since.

At the thought of it, even now, she felt a rush of heat suffuse her body and she knew her decolletage had become almost as red as her satin evening gown. She risked a glance over at Rupert, but he was as oblivious of her as ever. She regarded him circumspectly. He sat confidently on the Chesterfield, a tall, handsome man, debonair in his bespoke dinner suit, brandy and soda in hand. One long leg elegantly crossed over the other, he was engrossed in his newspaper. The Times or The Racing Post probably.

She glanced down at the sheet of music in her hand. It was now or never. She knew he was in a good mood. She'd told cook to prepare his favourite dinner: pheasant soup, fillets of sole, roast venison and spotted dick with custard. He'd been in London on business for the past few days. He saw his mistress whenever he was in town. His mother had informed her of that fact, a few years ago. She'd actually been relieved, as it meant he visited her bedroom less and less.

That side of marriage had been a huge shock. They'd met at her coming out ball, when she was a debutante of eighteen. Two months later, World War I had been declared and he'd proposed. She'd dreamed of being a nurse, of doing something useful. But it was hopeless trying to argue with her parents.

Her mother had told her that something would happen on her wedding night where she should close her eyes and think of England. Instead she'd thought of rage, tight and hard in her chest, of tigers, vermillion dripping from their teeth as they caught their prey, of the fox hunted down by the pack of riders, the soft fur spattered with scarlet as it was ripped apart by the hounds.

But she'd done her duty and provided him with an heir and a spare. George and Edward were the lights of her life. The only solace of her loneliness. Until Henri …

She gathered her courage.

'Rupert, I would like to learn the piano.'

Rupert looked up, startled.

'What for, old girl?'

She sighed. 'Rupert, I'm only thirty. And I'm bored. Henri teaches the piano … I thought …'

Although she was married to one of the wealthiest men in England, she didn't have a penny to her name. Rupert was generous and was happy to pay the bills of her dressmaker, her hatmaker, her glove maker … but she wasn't sure whether he would deem piano lessons a suitable pastime for a Duchess.

'Henri? Your Frenchie friend?'

Friend. Lover. Soul mate.

'Yes.'

'Seems an odd sort. Races round the village on a bicycle, wearing trousers. And that hair do … well, quite shocking. Though what can you expect from a foreigner?'

'It's called a bob. Short hair is very fashionable now. It *is* nineteen twenty six you know.' She touched her own hair, which her lady's maid had pinned and coiled into an elegant chignon.

'Don't even think it.'

'Of course not, Rupert.'

He paused. Then lost interest, the racing pages claiming him. 'Oh, if you want …'

She could scarcely breathe. Their plan had worked. Now they had a reason for Henri to visit. The music room would be their haven.

Henriette was French, but she was staying in the village to look after her English grandmother. She was clever and funny. Wildly beautiful and carelessly brave. She'd given a talk for the Women's Institute about her time as a nurse on the battlefields of France during the war. And with one look from those clear grey eyes that smouldered with truth and love, she'd won Louisa's heart.

Inspiration:

The Little Wine Shop
by Margaret E. Marshall (1906-2004)
Atkinson Art Gallery Collection

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The Last Drop

by Jacqui French
(Story)

The leaves from the Plane tree have fallen since the last time I was here; the air more chilled than that final evening in early April. A once white shirt hangs lifeless in the cool breeze, the cotton now almost transparent.

The flaking shutters stand open, the breeze shivers the air and you turn towards the door. I watch you- without me; the glow of your skin and your brown eyes blinking as the fading light reflects in your gaze. You make no sound but I sense a silent sigh and a darkening in your expression. I know that, for a heartbeat, you looked for me in the shadow of the open doorway. That you could hear my voice, hear the echo of my greeting and feel the solid warmth of my embrace.

I am closer, a half empty bottle of Bordeaux sits on the scuffed table. I watch you pour the burgundy liquid. Watch as you inhale the raspberry depths of it and swallow the extravagant warmth of fruits that were grown long before our time.

My memories come in disjointed, fragmented moments but here in the tender heat of the wine shop they slow and sharpen.

I sit beside you, so near that I catch your scent, a faint aroma of smoke and eucalyptus. Your hands, freckled slightly from the August days spent outdoors, are never still. I want to reach out and quiet the energy that runs through them. I want to take them in mine and tell you so much- remind you of so much.

It is the winter now, two almost three years before. It had been one of those long days with too much going on and so little time to finish. I had walked up Rue de l'Eglise hoping to clear my head. The air was cold and damp that evening and the warmth from the little shop had drawn me. At the bar, I saw you. I stamped my feet against the cold, unbuttoned my heavy coat and moved towards the zinc covered counter. You noticed me and smiled. The bartender- Gabby- poured wine into your glass and then motioned to me; a raised bottle and a raised eyebrow. I nodded and half smiled as you turned towards me. You pulled out the wooden stool besides you and beckoned me to it. I sat feeling the weight of the day fall away. In the candlelight, the room was molten amber – edges soft and fluid. The wine was rich and delicious, August heat, peppery with the memory of blackcurrants and late sunsets.

"That was all it took" you would joke, "a glass of good red, a nod and a wink."

"You were so easy" I would reply and relish the twinkle in your eyes and the blush that rose to your cheeks.

We talked late into the evening, Gabby filling our glasses over and over. Our eyes danced and our fingers found each other's.

It was only when you said "I need to close up" that I understood that you lived here- that the bar was yours, that you and Gabby were friends, that the warm, worn, easy nature of the place was down to you.

We spent the night together, climbing creaking stairs the smell of beer barrels and wine intoxicating the air.

Later, we stood at the windows, the shutters opened to the chilled night. Throwing care to the icy moon, we breathed each other in.

By morning, a headache and dark thirst had arrived and with it my fear that you would regret having me there beside you. I opened my eyes to see you, half awake, smiling.

"Well that was some night" you said and kissed my cheek.

"Breakfast?" you asked, already halfway down the stairs.

By New Year, I had moved my things into the wine shop and spent my days with you and Gabby, selling plump green olives and packing orders for Cabernet Saint Emillion. Evenings, I spent devouring camembert, soft and creamy or slithers of compte nutty and dense. Hungrily, I memorised the tastes of your world- of dark cherry; of velvet, ebony chocolate; of summer fruits and exotic spices.

I watch you now. I see you run your hand through your hair. I see the whiteness at your hairline and the way that your lashes curl. I see you are thinner your cheeks more hollow. I see the light has left your eyes.

If only I could have stayed. Oh to have been convinced that happiness could be ours; could endure beyond the warm bricks and dark oak of this tiny shop.

It is that last April evening, the music that night was melancholic. We held hands across the table and you held my gaze with yours before taking my hand and brushing your lips against my palm. We smiled in that moment and you said "If this was my last night on earth, I would be happy. I would die happy. I have everything that I have ever wanted."

I can remember the exact way that you looked at me – how I had looked away, always unable to believe in your joy. You had opened an expensive Syrah and poured the inky remains between our stained glasses. I raised my glass and you touched yours to mine. A collision; a moment; yet one more drop of crimson liquid adding to the patina of the wood.

"To dying happy" I said and you laughed – a burst of joy exploding against the sadness of the music.