

# **Creative writing competition for blind and partially blind people**

**On museums, art, or home objects**

**2024**

Supported by

**R N I B**

See differently

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Booklet designed by Dr Ellen Adams (King's College London)  
with the Royal National Institute for the Blind

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Colour PDF booklet available here:

<https://mansil.uk/writing-competition-2024>

## **Organisers**

Ellen Adams (King's College London)

Sonali Rai (Royal National Institute for the Blind)

## **Panel of judges**

Tanvir Bush (writer of *Cull*)

Rachel Hutchinson (Lecturer of Psychology at Westminster University)

Georgina Kleege (Emeritus Professor at the University of California, Berkeley)

Victoria Moul (Professor, poet, critic, and translator)

# Introduction

## By Ellen Adams

This competition arose from my research project, which aims to dispel the myth that people with sensory impairments experience a deficit in perception and art appreciation: humans are much more versatile and resourceful than that. Blind and partially blind (BPB) people appreciate visual art and museum objects, and museums' access programmes have long offered alternative ways to support them, such as audio description and touch tours. What is less well recognised is that these 'alternative ways' of engaging are not second-rate and inferior, but can contribute to general understandings of art appreciation. This competition offers the opportunity to explore what these contributions might look like.

Georgina Kleege, one of the judges, has described sighted people as 'visually dependent'. This counters the commonly held belief that BPB people are lacking in sensory experience, by pointing out that they draw information about the outside world by other means, without this heavy reliance on sight. Or, in other words, they 'See differently' (RNIB motto). It was fantastic to partner up with Sonali Rai and the RNIB for this project, with the shared aim to give more voice and agency to BPB people, and many thanks to all of the wonderful judges.

This booklet presents many of the pieces submitted in the 2024 competition. The collection begins with the winning three, followed by four 'special mentions'. We are incredibly grateful to all who participated.

Our winner, Ashley Ford-McAllister, combines history, multisensory experiences, and the theme of fragmentation and reconstruction to explore beautifully how we engage with objects.

Some pieces applauded the stimulating events that museums put on for BPB people, including our second prize winner, Caroline Mawer, who wrote an entertaining and insightful account of two of the Royal Academy's exhibitions, and our third prize winner, Steph Cutler, who produced a vivid account of a theatre trip to Warhorse. In this group is also Michael Hughes' celebration of his lifelong relationship with the Kelvingrove Museum. We hope that all involved in museum access work can see not only that their efforts are appreciated, but also that these activities stimulate fantastic creativity in those attending as well – there is a two-way dynamic here.

Highlighting the diversity of experiences that BPB people bring to art appreciation prompts us to reconsider the diverse nature of being sighted as well. Traditional, and arguably ableist, ideas of art appreciation, where sight is assumed as a necessity, often labour under the belief that ‘the sighted’ all see the same. There is, in fact, no such thing as ‘objective’ sight; memory plays a disconcerting role in helping our brain decide what we are experiencing. That is why eyewitnesses are known to provide unreliable evidence, and our brains can refuse to process data that they do not expect.<sup>1</sup>

The feedback loop between visual data and memory is a powerful force, and some of the pieces in this collection compare art before and after sight loss, or explore the role of memory for those who have lost sight (for example, the pieces by Jonathan Abro and Wendy Roberts).

Unsurprisingly, many pieces here explore multisensory approaches to artworks, objects, and museums, such as collections of musical instruments and the sounds they make as in Sarah Oakes’ piece, or Jan Scott’s celebration of the ‘multimedia mind’, or Amy Stannard’s account of touch combined with audio description. Some submissions embrace the concept of ekphrasis in a creative audio description – for example, Joe Rizzo Naudi’s translation of a complex series of paintings, or Parminder Kaur Sihota’s poem based on her painting.

Other pieces celebrate household items – we were keen that this would be an accessible competition, so people did not need to travel to museums to participate. In this group, we have Persi Parkinson’s piece (can you guess the object?), Hilda Hill’s poem to her cutlery drawer, Joanna Proctor’s story of spoons, Margaret Holvey’s consideration of what a special ornament means to her, and Edwina Millis’ engagement with compost – a foundation for all life.

There are also pieces on the challenges of new environments, where everyday items, such as light switches, need to be relearned (Peggy Bloom). Julia Springer relates how her hobby, crocheting, has provided not only a lifelong hobby, but also a means of producing crafts that all can appreciate.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://qbi.uq.edu.au/brain/brain-functions/visual-perception> has a fun explanation of this (accessed 24 April 2024).

We intend to run this competition again in 2025 – and hope very much that this booklet inspires other BPB people to submit a piece. These creative writings have certainly given the panel much food for thought, and we have included a couple of the panel’s comments with the pieces. The competition was open to individuals, but it’s great if writing groups also take the opportunity to send in individual pieces, as the Coventry Resource Centre for the Blind did for this year (special thanks to Jessica Eastman and Hugh Sorrill for facilitating this).

Some participants filled in an anonymous survey after the competition finished. The process of writing about art, objects, or museums was felt to be stimulating: ‘Writing gives you the chance to filter and focus your ideas’, while ‘prompts for creative writing/poetry helped me imagine much more vividly’. Input by BPB people into audio description was felt to be vital (‘nothing about us, without us’), and this shift would make audio description ‘more relevant’, and help people to ‘gain confidence in themselves, especially if their blindness had come on suddenly’. Others said: ‘thank you for giving me the opportunity to partake in this project, being invited to do so has helped me to believe in my capabilities’; and ‘long may the competition continue’.

For more information on Ellen Adams’ project, which also covers British Sign Language tours for Deaf people, please see [www.mansil.uk](http://www.mansil.uk).

## Winner: Ashley Ford-McAllister

### Goldless Kintsugi

Perfectly fitting the hollow  
of both hands held together, as though welcoming a gift,  
which it is, despite the grit-smooth rift  
where fragility cracked, and was helped  
to hold itself together.

Fingertips trace a history, follow  
a tale; that first trial by fire –  
the subtle almost-chips where the kiln grips  
too close in its fierce desire  
to create its own phoenix.  
Firing lines showing  
a different way of seeing.

Triangular taken-aways,  
the story of frantic days  
in busy lives. Accidental happenings,  
rough handling. Mad moments,  
rages,  
and children whose ages  
put curiosity before caution.

Cautiously I replace it,  
listening for the sound of stability,  
feeling out the space  
to either side,  
a glimpse of goldess kinsugi  
safely returned to its place  
of quiet pride.

**Panel comments:** an 'enchancing short poem mingling touch, curiosity and fragility';  
'I love the way touch opens up a sense of history and proximity to those who created  
and handled this object. The writing is rich with imagery and resonance – not a word  
wasted. For me, a beautiful poem that I would like to read again and again.'



## Second Prize: Caroline Mawer

### Head, shoulders, knees and toes ... and eyes and ears and mouth and nose

It's Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy.

Crammed full with people.

Crammed overfull with too much art to take in.

Our Audio Description (AD) guide has a voice which means that - even in the cacophony of the crowd - if I've stayed behind looking at something super special, I can always find him when our group moves off.

I've got a helper. A personal helper. Carrying one of those folding stools specially for me.

She seems scared we're going to lose the AD guy. Shoos me away from the jewelled chimp. Too vulgar to value, but too extraordinary not to stop at.

I trot on. And when I catch up with the group, they're part way through looking at a shield, laid flat on the floor, with two spears crossed over it.

"It's made from lots of different woods", the AD guy explains. And now I squint and peer and can almost see some different colours.

"Even the spears?", I ask. "Surely the tips are metal?"

"All of it is just wood", he says.

"Woods", he corrects himself.

"From Australia. Properly jointed. No glue", he adds.

And as he starts to list the names of the trees, I drop to my knees to look closer. A lot closer.

I start to see how very beautiful this shield-and-spears is.

I start to notice the wild wood fragrance.

Fragrances.

What a ...

At which point my personal helper turns up. She's smaller than me. More polite than me. So she got much more stuck in the crowd than me.

The next thing I know she's squealing. Grabbing my arm. For a few seconds, I actually fight back, while also trying very hard not to roll down onto the wooden wonder.

But I quickly work out that she thinks I've collapsed.

She's doing her health and safety thing.

I shake her off, almost shouting: "No, no, no!"

I'm quickly calmer and quieter. "I'm fine", I say. "I'm looking. And scenting. It's great. What a ... masterpiece".

And it truly is. I'm back on my knees. Leaning over and down. Still trying very hard not to roll down over the wooden wonder.

Since I can't quite see the subtly different colours and wood grains, I can't quite count the little pieces of wood. Not well enough to be certain, anyway.

I set out to try to count the smells.

Which is ridiculous since I'm quickly getting an audience. Mainly of women who, that morning, washed in scented soap, or used scented deodorant. Some of them are even wearing actual clouds of actual scent.

I shake my head. Blow down my nose to try to clear my nostrils.

And concentrate.

Next time I'm at the Royal Academy it's an Anthony Gormley exhibition.

I don't even like Anthony Gormley.

More accurately, I don't know anything about Anthony Gormley other than his standing men. But it's one of those special, early opening private sessions that you'd be a fool not to go to. Since we're visually impaired, we're even going to be allowed to touch some of the sculptures.

So, of course, I turn up.

I can't see, don't find the sculpture baby that's famously in the courtyard.

And when I get into the first room, there are lots of blocks laid down on the floor.

What? I don't get it!

But if the Academy thinks these blocks are exciting enough to fill a room the size of a football pitch, there must be something to them.

I'm not sure if they're made of something fuzzy. Like rough concrete. Or is that just my eyes?

But as I let it all wash over me, I start to wonder if, well, maybe that set of blocks is a figure lying down?

One small block for the head, bigger block for the torso, skew block for legs.

And when I lower myself to the floor, I exactly fit.

Or maybe it's that the blocks exactly fit me. They're smooth and slightly shiny. Just like skin.

What I first thought was an abstract set of static blocks is actually a just-posed, ready-to-spring human.

Gormley's a genius!

I crawl across the floor, shove myself to not-quite-spoon front-to-back with another Humanoid / Gormleyoid.

Splay out to play at being another.

There's surely much more here about being-with than looking-at.

I love it!

And as I stand up and disengage with becoming an actual Anthony-Gormley-sculpture, the same helper-woman who thought I'd collapsed arrives. With another folding stool, just for me.

"It's you!", she laughs. "On the floor again!"

"Of course!", I say. "I'm being properly physical this time.

With more masterpieces!"

Afterwards, I internet-researched Gormley - and he says:

"In the end the viewer (singular) will be the subject of this show."

So I got it! I truly got it!

**Panel comments:** 'I like the humour and the way she shows us how having a multisensory or embodied experience in a gallery is not always straightforward;' 'this is an exuberant and immersive short piece full of humour and wonder.'

## Third Prize: Steph Cutler

### It Takes Two Months

I like the experience, the atmosphere, and the sense of 'event' that you get with a trip to the theatre. I like the history of the spaces, and the spirit of passion that surrounds the storytelling. I admire the creativity that has been channelled to transform spaces into scenes and scenarios. I am amazed how lighting can be engineered to speak, and I love the costumes.

I am interested in the ingenuity that led to the curtain rising. I also admire the dedicated performers who give their all in that theatre-land time, between the anticipation of curtain rise and the applause at its fall.

I love all that it takes to bring theatre alive. So, when I enter the theatre ahead of sighted ticket holders, it feels like a VIP event. It provides an insight into everything I love about theatre, even though it remains a largely visual art form.

It was negligent that I enter the touch tour having not read the book, or even the preshow notes provided... I've heard good things and there is a puppet, but this puppet is no Pinocchio!

Anatomy and psychology are brought together to create a believable, incredible, monumental creature who deservedly owns the show title. Created by emotional engineering and brought to life with emotional energy, War Horse tells a multi-faceted, touching story.

Joey is a towering, formidable force of ingenuity. His woven canes create a muscular form that so impressive, and to touch them feels phenomenal. I found myself in awe.

The privilege of the physicality, up-close-and-personal, is palpable. It transcends full sight. It is one of those scarce occasions where we get more and better. We get a rare insight, rather than the usual oversight.

I learn that the location of horses' eyes on each side of their head means they can't see straight ahead well. The puppeteer tells me he consciously takes into account Joey's peripheral vision when navigating. Being queen of utilising my peripheral vision, this needs no further explanation.

At first, I feel disappointed the puppeteers are visible. I want this magnificent horse to move by magic, or at the very least invisible threads. I am soon sold on the Head, Heart, and Hind puppeteers being seen. Their roles are essential. Their discreet passivity fuels the nuances that depict vulnerability, strength, and love. It is these kinetic gestures, which when witnessed and described, truly tell a story. It's not just the big movements that tell a story, it's the subtle, small ones too. These are the unspoken moments we'd miss – were it not for the describers.

Can these subtle, small moments and movements be observed in row P, seat 26? Perhaps they can, but I doubt it and I like to suppose they can't. I like to suppose it's the pre-show demonstrations we are privy to, and the mysterious describers talking to us via their vantage points, that single us out for a deeper dive into the play and the production.

The three puppeteers have no contact throughout the performance. They share a bond akin to one of those rare best friend relationships, just like the friendship at the heart of War Horse between Joey and Albert. The kind of friendship that transcends generations, gender, or even humans. If you've experienced a bond like this, you'll know what I mean – words are not needed.

A tiny gesture between puppeteers becomes as perceptible as a horse's ear twitch... the voices in our headsets makes this known and understood. Ears are a vital indicator of how Joey feels. Horses are adept at fully utilising their available hearing - just like the majority of us feeling props and touching costumes.

I'm so engaged, I find myself asking the Hind if I can experience his role. I take touch tour to another level and physically form part of War Horse. He gives me the bike brakes, which ingeniously operate Joey's tail, and I experience first-hand the

complex possibilities of tail movements. Never before has any access provision been such an immersive experience.

Access provision is usually about levelling the playing field. Audio description and touch tours frequently go beyond this, as we get nuggets and nuances not known or picked up by our sighted peers. We get the behind-the-scenes chat from the creators and performers, sometimes whilst behind the scenes! We get to sense the space, and feel the props, and live and learn in a way that goes beyond access in its conventional guise. Even the best access in any other service or space cannot come close. In reality, it inadvertently becomes priority provision, as when done well it becomes an advantage, albeit born from disadvantage. Whatever the positions of equity, it feels like a wonderful gift that succeeds in making a largely visual experience something that can be witnessed and wondered.

The Hind tells me he is a dancer and no stranger to the West End stages. This leads me to ask, how long it takes to train to be the 'arse end of a horse'. Suddenly Joey's ears shoot back and his tail whips in my direction. His front hooves irritably scrape the west end floorboards.

'It takes two months' says the Hind. No audio description required to narrate Joey's disdain at my inappropriate, crass likening to a pantomime nag!

**Panel's comments:** 'A lovely personal and humorous reflection on the 'privileged' access that comes via touch tours'; 'moving, well-paced, well-structured... Great ending!'

## Hilda Hill (Special mention)

### The Cutlery Drawer

I arranged my cutlery drawer long before I lost my sight.  
It has been the way I like it since the 1940s.

The front section runs horizontally:  
It should contain teaspoons – and a pair of scissors.

Behind that are four vertical sections.

Far left: tablespoons and soup spoons.

Mid-left: the knife department –

Steak knives, ordinary knives, cake knives

And a butter knife I now can't spread with.

Mid-right: my favourite drawer – forks!

Different sizes and weights. The weight

Tells me which one to use.

Far right: spoons, including dessert spoons.

I like to feel each piece when I remove it from the drawer,  
Particularly the heavier forks.

They make me look forward to my meal:

I salivate.

If, by chance, I pick up a lighter fork, I put it back.

It's not appropriate.

A serious knife and fork is part of the enjoyment of the food.

I love the depth and rounded feel of a soup spoon:

Why do people put them in with dessert spoons when they have no relationship  
with each other?

One piece of cutlery I could not live without is my slotted spoon.

Without it, it's hazardous to strain veg from boiling water.

Twice I've put the colander into the sink upside down,  
And said to myself: "whoops, there goes my dinner".

All I ask is that everyone else puts everything back  
Exactly where they found it.  
Then I'll know where it is.

**Panel's comments:** 'I love her multisensory description of the cutlery drawer, and the humorous warning at the end'; 'satisfying, tongue-in-cheek and multi layered with form and memory and the profound connection to ritual and memory'.



## Sarah Oakes (Special Mention)

### My Favourite Museum

I've been to many museums. But that one was my favourite. For it was musical, and that means more to me than old statues or ancient paintings. The halls of music have always been my home, and their instruments my dear friends.

It was unplanned, and I wonder if old gods smiled down on me, preparing a special treat for my birthday. We'd travelled to Forest Hill for a dinosaur exhibit, and had a lovely time. We were leaving, when I walked the wrong way, following a sign I thought was the exit, up some stone stairs. And as I passed through those doors, I gasped in wonder, accidentally finding paradise.

In glass cases, the instruments shimmered like jewels, and I didn't need to peer at signs or strain at small print. For I know instruments better than my own name. I know their shapes, their keys, their strings, their souls, their sound. And so I discovered guitar and sitar, marvelling at organs that octopuses might learn, or flutes carved from ivory, or pianos made from ancient trees, older than time, and I delighted in tubas that were larger than possibility, pressing buttons to hear their sweet songs.

But my favourite part was around the corner – an entire wall of woodwind. For it took my breath away, with its beauty, its magic, its wonder.

My soul has always been made of woodwind, from the moment I first fell in love, bought my clarinet and began to play. It has shaped my life, taken me on adventures, helped me make friends, and never minds my dwindling sight. I've never seen so many together, every make, every model, every size, every colour. And my heart swelled with joy. For here were my friends, my family, my home, welcoming me to this pocket paradise.

First were the flutes, horizontal rows of wonder, of wood and silver and gold and glass. Next came the oboe, standing tall in its glory, and for once it wasn't ignored, or left standing alone. Instead, it made up a whole section of the wall, its song stretching wide, an entire company in its ensemble, and I was glad, for this is how it should be.

And then, I saw them, my friends. A whole case of clarinets, smooth wood shining in the sun, keys, glimmering, obsidian wood glossy, beautiful and bedazzling. And I knew that just a lick of the reed would summon their caramel voice, that golden timbre that makes the sound of my heart and soul. I marvelled at the collection for a while, happy to see my friends in all their shapes, made of comfort and childhood, of familiarity and strength. And in their cases, they smiled back, and I knew here I could stop and stay, finding pure peace, truly at home.

Next to them were the bass clarinets, in large number, this unappreciated instrument glowing in glory. For they are mistresses of mystery, with voices deeper than the earth, oozing like Belgian chocolates, mellow and rich, but barely heard. I played them once long ago, and I know it takes the strength of gods to play, but done right, works magic. And they have had a home in my heart ever since.

Next to them, was an array of saxophones, those sumptuous souls who create a bridge between woodwind and brass, made of two halves, of reed and sunshine. They finished the woodwind wall, dear friends, whose songs serenade and soothe and save, always sumptuous on the senses, glimmering in gold, almost brass, living on the edge. I gazed in wonder, at those vessels of jazz and soul, the ones whose glorious voices echoed behind me in band, and wondered what it would be like to play one. Perhaps one day I shall.

I wandered long beside the woodwind wall, wrapped in joy and wonder. For once, I was glad my sight had led me the wrong way. If it hadn't, I wouldn't have uncovered that treasure trove, that secret kingdom of song, that hidden haven of instruments, where all were welcome.

This unexpected museum is my favourite, for music has always made my heart and home, and here was a haven more than any other. I enjoyed it much more than halls of dusty scrolls and ancient bones, for it was made of wonder and beauty, of instruments I have long called dear friends. And when I start to feel down, I remember the woodwind wall, and recall joy.

**Panel's comments:** 'A lovely piece about how a wrong turn can lead to an unexpected connection, and how a museum can suddenly have meaning'; 'uplifting hymn to an exhibition of musical instruments, stumbled upon in a Museum in Forest Hill'.

## Persi Parkinson (Special Mention)

### Awakening

'Cheryl'. That's what I call you. Only in my head of course, people would judge if I said it aloud, but an object deserves a name if it is loved.

You are beautiful. I can't see you, but that doesn't matter. You can't see me either. You don't have eyes; it would be incredibly disturbing if you did.

The way you look is not important. You're no different from any other of your kind, nothing special. We have that in common.

Your beauty is in the way you change. In the morning you are alert when I am not, cold and shiny, all clean steel and promise. In the rushed breakfasts overshadowed by impending meetings, and through the leisurely brunches in the company of pyjamas and loved ones, you are always there.

You warm to the day much faster than I do, your cool exterior softened by the rising heat. You may be burning on the inside, but your outer curve has the warmth of a living, sentient being.

As the steam rises, it brings with it the smell. There is nothing else in the world like it, at once bitter and sweet, crisp and soft, light and dark. And while we wait together, I breathe it in, luxuriate in it.

Sometimes I talk to you for those few, tantalising minutes, though you have no ears with which to hear me. You help me prepare for my day; I talk to you when the rest of the world sleeps, because I need to know that I am awake.

And then the wait is over, and you are ready. Ready to give me your warmth and your energy, ready to bring me to life. You are the Lucy to my Dracula, the Louis to my Lestat, the Michael to my David. I made you but, in this moment, you make me.

Within minutes you are cold once more. Your job is done, and we will not speak again until tomorrow. I take the time to relish your lingering scent for a moment longer, then, as your day ends, mine must begin.

**Panel comments:** ‘Cheryl-a riddle of a poem – can you guess what it is?’; ‘I love this! Witty. Great writing. And kudos for using an everyday household object as the inspiration, as invited by the brief.’

## Joe Rizzo Naudi (Special mention)

### 445 MILLION YEARS AGO TO TODAY

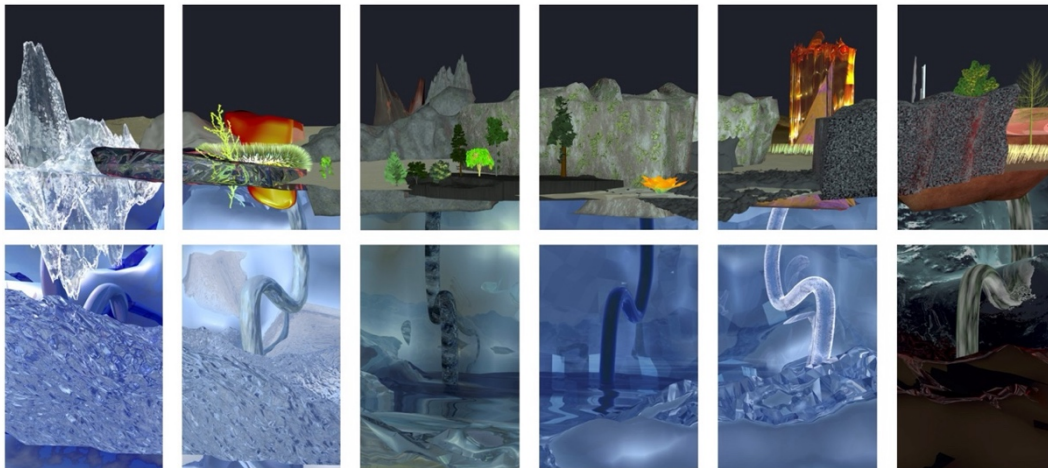
A translation by Joe Rizzo Naudi of a visual artwork by Sabīne Šnē, exhibited at To Be We Need To Know The River, curated by Nastia Svarevska (August 23rd - 29th 2023, Lot Projects, 2 Broadway Market Mews, London, UK E8 4TS).

Written following descriptive conversations with the artist and curator, the text aims to translate the artwork into language, providing exhibition visitors with a parallel experience in a non-visual form.

[audio versions [here](#) for reference]

Visual artwork: digital drawing mounted on honeycomb (images with permission)

No additional AltText descriptions are supplied as they lie in the panel text.



**Panel comments:** ‘I think the form and the delivery are really clever. The exclamations and questions give me a sense of discovery and wonder’; ‘excellent response to this call out mingling audio, AI, visual art and poetry. To me this showed a very high level of creative ingenuity and imagination’.





the velvet sky a black  
void where ragged white  
lines chalk a single ice  
mountain a stalagmitic  
iceberg etching the velvet  
cragged in frost a swirling  
shard penetrating the void  
& whitening the scene  
alongside a portioned spit  
of plain brown beach  
a sandy shore & look!  
sliding in at sea level a  
kaleidoscopic invader a  
brownish sludge a cosmic  
soup psychedelic  
like swirling ink



a clay pipe submerges in  
water! water! water! water!  
bright freezing fresh  
enough to lie in a filigree  
from blue mountains like  
ice but liquid like feathers  
but water pushing from a  
pipe! above! below! &  
skimming on the surface!  
askance and plane! from  
all perspectives! electric  
blue water! & in the depths  
(look closely) something  
there (is there?) like  
microscopic life?

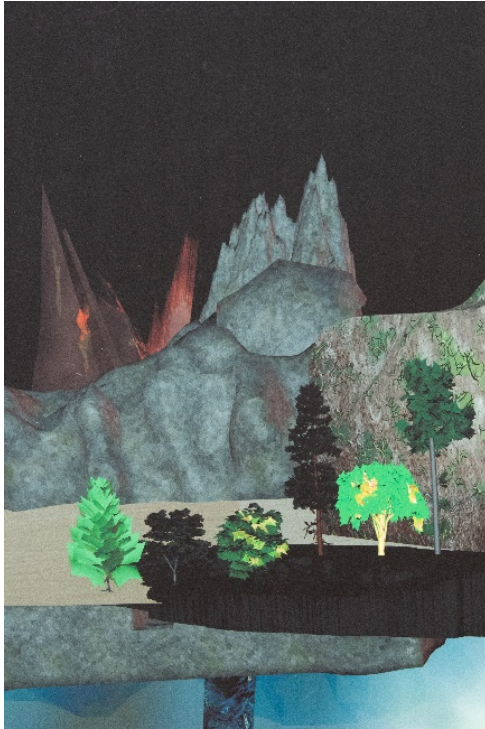


remember the sky? the  
black velvet void? red  
blooms like round sunset a  
blood-hot jet melting rock  
a lava pulse through strata  
spawning a horizon ranked  
with grass their urchin  
spines still dewy white  
nearby a branching of leafy  
yellow stems weed strong  
the first teetering thrust of  
something new reaching  
past the sunblood bubble  
toward the cosmos  
on the sandy shore a petite  
green cousin roots alone



the waters are plural  
they are brimming white  
blue frond swirls switch  
they could be teeming with  
something swimming  
with green potentiality a  
bacterial blush of  
kaleidoscope chaos  
gifted by the porcelain pipe  
the flowing limb dipping its  
godhead into the whirlpool  
its hard stem a scythe  
slicing continents massing  
land in tectonic  
motion rumbling  
the waters





trees! firm roots in coffee  
 soil rich like the violet sky a  
 treelet parade here a  
 conifer here an oak or call  
 it quercus supple &  
 shrubby one so new the  
 trunkwood is white the  
 canopy lime green a prim  
 bouquet next door a tall  
 sibling stretches like a  
 teenager in front of the  
 rocks massive craggy as  
 mountains earthy with  
 lichen yonder two  
 peaks rumour volcanos



silence  
 a shrouded ocean  
 a blue sepulchre  
 through which the  
 pipe grieves  
 dark & sclerotic  
 its flow extinct  
 in the gloaming  
 could they be mollusc  
 husks? shades of  
 ammonite? an arthropod  
 invertebrate cemetery  
 where only trilobites scull  
 the seabed filtering silt  
 sinking yet alive in two  
 washed out pools of light

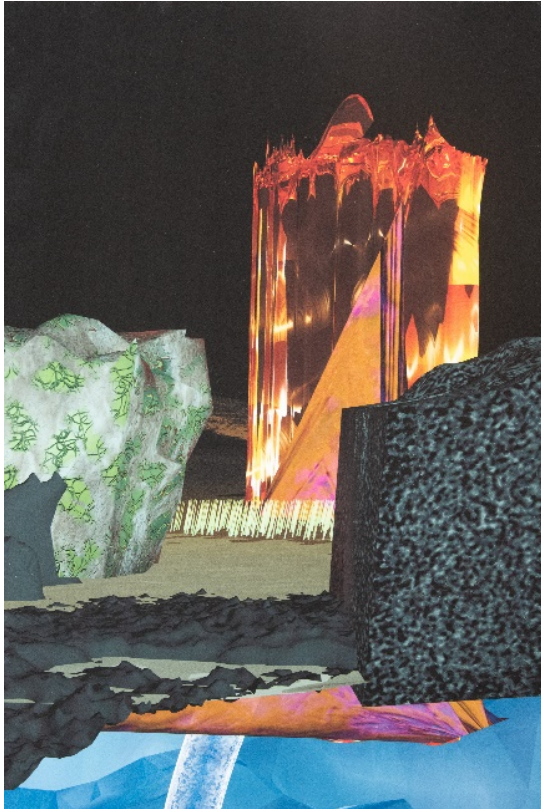


a flower a light-filled lotus  
beaming yellow orange it  
is sunburst-busy in deep  
banks of mineraled soil  
fecund across what? a  
reflective pool where an  
upright redwood stands a  
grand trunked sequoia  
framed by green  
mountains see the sides  
etched in leaves & stems  
like runic formulae  
ice constructs the floor  
overarching all the  
steady black  
matte sky



a new blue order a palisade  
polygon phalanx where  
the pipe snakes  
in womb shadow  
in viscous aqua  
where three silver  
quadrilats conceive  
themselves where  
two platinum angles probe  
the shallows  
ice again  
its white blue freezing  
its space between  
where shimmering  
substrates nurture  
something crystal





orange blasts the sky  
 a fire prism of liquid gold  
 scorched velvet  
 eruption or meteorite?  
 terrible geometry! white  
 the grass! melt the trees!  
 sublimate the hills with  
 diamond light! the rocks  
 convert to softer  
 compounds mottle them  
 brown green purple grey  
 a living for all sorts of  
 tendrils to inch their way  
 across the earth below  
 the sand the umbilical pipe  
 persists in ice blue seas



from above white light  
 clear as blue winter day  
 the pipe is glass  
 an ice condenser tube  
 suspended in  
 alchemical seas  
 it hums  
 it sings  
 sweetly diaphanous  
 white wisps waltz with  
 amoeboid forms they  
 consort around the pipe in  
 pseudopodic bliss  
 lucid structures  
 fragment freeform  
 above stoney blank beds



## Jonathon Abro

### A blind man in front of a painting

As a sighted man, I used to enjoy going to art galleries and museums. I would not say that I am an art aficionado of any sort, nor particularly knowledgeable, just someone who appreciated the beauty created by artists of various genres.

In 1992, I was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa. This was before the Internet, so understanding what the future held was not easy to research. I did not look into it much, nor dwell on it for very long. In retrospect, I am thankful for this, as I wonder how my life would have been different had I known. Possibly and probably the poorer for experiences, as my time may have been taken up with worrying about the “what ifs”.

Around 2010, I recall paintings becoming difficult to see. I have two memories of paintings that my wonderful partner, Annie, who has been on my entire sight loss journey with me, described for me.

The first was in the Tate Britain. It was on the Thames with bridges and boats, but what is so memorable is the atmosphere of the painting, created by the mist and light captured by the artist. It conjured images of early morning or evening out of the pages of a Shakespearean play or Dickens novel.

The other was in 2012, in Bogota, Colombia, while travelling on a grownup gap year from Antarctica to Los Angeles. Fernando Botero was known for painting and sculpting in exaggerated sizes. We first encountered his giant outdoors sculptures in Medellín. In this gallery there was a painting of oversized bananas in a bowl. Just for fun, Annie gave me a made-up story about what the artist was thinking at the time. We noticed some people started listening. We had to stop ourselves falling apart from laughter!

I have so many incredible memories from when I had some vision, not just of the art, but where I got to see it. These include Kandinsky in the Courtauld in London, Miró in the Miró Foundation in Barcelona, vast collections in Washington DC, being allowed to touch vases in the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, standing in the Musée Marmottan in Paris surrounded by Monets, and so much more. I particularly remember standing really close to Van Gogh's painting 'The Bedroom' in Amsterdam. I marvelled at being able to see each brush stroke.

With all of this in mind, it is easy to understand why I started to say, "why would I stand in front of a painting I can no longer see?" I stopped going to museums and galleries for a number of years. Of course, I missed seeing the art but, I thought, if I cannot see any of it then there is no point going to stand in front of it.

In 2017, there was an audio described event of the Matisse exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art. I decided to find out what they did, and whether this was a way for me to find a new way to appreciate art.

I was amazed, enthralled and delighted! I learnt how beautiful a painting or sculpture can be when described through the eyes of an art expert.

The first painting was of a vase on a round table in front of a window. I remember that the most exciting part of the description of this painting was how the art expert used so many different varieties of the colour green that I found myself smiling at the pleasure of imagining how this painting looked. After hearing about more paintings and sculptures, we were invited for tea to continue the conversation. We were presented with small models so we could feel what had been described, while listening to more fascinating explanations on the works of Matisse.

I was hooked! I knew I would be going back to galleries and museums and that was a wonderful thought. Since then, I have been to a variety of audio described art events, some major exhibitions, some sculptures, all amazing. Living in London with so many audio-described events means that, rather than going to everything being described, I can choose the ones that interest me, no different from when I could see, but now I listen.



What I appreciate is that the art expert chooses just a few, three or four, paintings or sculptures to describe in great detail. Both what they look like and whatever fascinating information, history or stories they share with us. That can take anything up to two hours, and, personally, I do not think I could take in much more. This way I seem to remember so much about each piece of art or painting that I have been able to describe them to someone over a coffee, and have them feel like they have seen the painting themselves.

Another fantastic benefit of these audio described events is that they are usually at a time when the general public is not in the gallery or museum. Rather than the up to 500 people passing through every hour, there are just a handful of us in the entire gallery for the duration of the event. Annie accompanies me and has the pleasure of being in a room full of paintings from artists such as Van Gogh, Picasso and Cezanne. At times the only other person in the room is me. What a privilege!

While I will never give up hope of a treatment or cure for my eye disease, Retinitis Pigmentosa, I know I am unlikely to ever see painting or intricate brush strokes again. With the beauty of audio description, I can still appreciate them while painting my own version of them in my imagination.

I urge any blind or visually impaired people who, like I did, have given up on art to go and try an audio described art event. I hope you will find the same beauty in them as I have and do.

**Panel's comments:** 'this is a lovely and important call out for the power of excellent audio description and how it can transform, even in some ways enhance and inspire the experiences of art, art galleries and museums'; 'I very much like this account of Jonathan's engagement with art both with and without sight, and how his memories of audio described art are rich and emotive. His delight in audio described events is infectious and I think this piece would encourage others to give it a try'.

## Peggy Bloom

### Holiday apartment

Meeting the holiday rep who is taking me into the apartment.

Opening the door - what with? A key or card? Please tell me. She didn't realise that I was partially sighted.

Does the door open inwards or outwards?

We go into a large room straight from the front door. I smell the sea - why?

I'm shown the sliding doors.

Smells! Petrol fumes from the boat engines.

Back to the kitchen - where are the plug sockets for the kettle? Don't just tell me where the plug sockets are, show me!

The fridge is already plugged in. I think the rep thought I was a mischief or a dozy old lady.

Please show me the bathroom, down a small corridor. I feel the wall, found the light switch. But in the bathroom, what sort of a light switch is it – a cord or a switch?

Does the loo flush with a lever, a button, or a chain?

So many things to consider.

**Panel's comments:** 'I liked the immediacy of this and the way, even in a short piece, the whole frustrating and confusing 'unknown space' anxiety is brought across'; 'real time experience of learning new environments'.



## Margaret Holvey

### The Silver Cat

A small, heavy cat ornament,  
round, smooth to the touch,  
its body depicting the soft  
feline-like features.

I gently hold it in the palm  
of my hand,  
etching the shape of its tail  
around its body, curling  
as if poised to flick away  
any insect that may  
bravely fly near.

The cat's small sharply pointed  
ears are in stark contrast  
to its round, smooth body:  
touching them you flinch from the  
pain as the sharpness penetrates  
your skin.

They look so soft and smooth  
yet are so sharp:  
a lesson to take heed of.

**Panel's comments:** 'A tactile exploration of an ornament and how the imagination responds'; 'a poem that evokes our tactile experience of the world'.

## Michael Hughes

### **In defence of the museum: random memories from a blind perspective (and also sighted once)**

They say a picture tells a thousand words, but what if you are blind? Does an image mean anything if you have never had sight? If you have seen in the past, there might even be a sense of amplified loss when you stand in front of a painting and can't enjoy its awesomeness. It's rather ironic that I've been to more museums since I fully lost my sight. Glasgow's castle-like Kelvingrove museum stimulates the senses. Sure, most things are behind glass, like the time they had the Kylie exhibition and the gold hotpants Kylie wore in 'Spinning Around' were under lock and key. Were they really authentic? I vaguely remember that the museum curator who guided me round the exhibition had sourced itchy gold-wire material to give blind people an idea of what they were like. Nice touch, but they could never compete with the real thing.

I was oblivious to the Spitfire that hovered above the stuffed mammoth; emblematic of the quirky and random nature of the exhibits. The Friends of the Kelvingrove were on hand, however, with a touch tour. My mind raced back to the time I visited the museum as a sighted eight-year-old. It had a gloomy mystic air, but I was more interested in the gift shop that strategically sat near the foyer. My gran bought me a Brontosaurus; an 'educational toy' you could call it, a detailed hunk of solid plastic with sharp horns. My love for museum gift shops stayed with me, and I confess that they're often my first port of call.

Throw forward and totally blind, the Dr Who exhibition time-travelled to the Kelvingrove; first stop gift shop (in the oily basement this time). I was only interested in one thing, the collectibles in the glass cabinet rather than the toys. A chrome Sonic Screwdriver pen and salt and pepper pewter Daleks equaled mission accomplished; but not without visiting the exhibition and sitting inside a full-size Dalek with voice box.

'E x t e r m i n a t e.'

I hiked up Kelvingrove's plush-carpeted central staircase and stood in front of Salvador Dali's Christ of Saint John on the Cross. Even though I could not see it, I touched its frame and got a sense of its colossal nature. A Friend of the Kelvingrove did her best at describing the painting and why it was so controversial. If I had sight,

and had looked at the picture, would I have noticed that Christ didn't have a crown of thorns? From when sighted, I remember Dali's melting clocks, but can't recall if I saw his interpretation of the crucifixion. It was the second time I had seen it blind as it were, as it used to be in Glasgow's Saint Mungo Museum of Religious Life, where the hush-toned American curator told me that you can still see the mark where a man had once thrown a brick through it as he deemed it blasphemous. The scar is now part of the painting's story, but only relevant to blind people if informed. Do sighted people even notice the damage?

The Friend of the Kelvingrove handed me a metal toy plane. 'That's what the Spitfire hanging from the ceiling looks like.' I said that I knew what a Spitfire was, and had played with them when I was a child. I suppose she tried, fine for those who have never had sight, but not for those who had.

'Where did you get it?

She paused. 'The museum gift shop.'

A century of dust flew up my nose. It had never left since I arrived. The hall filled with music. A Friend of the Kelvingrove organ piped out the sure-fired crowd pleaser that is Adagio with Strings. The day that David Bowie died they played a shaky rendition of Life on Mars. You can arrange an organ on demand, but you can't ask a lion to speak. I heard Royal the Asiatic lion at Edinburgh Zoo let out an earth-shattering roar after the birth of his two lion cubs. I asked if I could pat wee Kyra and Kumar, but the curator said that mum Gita would tear my head off. Poor show, a Blue Peter presenter got to play with lion cubs at London Zoo once.

Kelvingrove had its fair share of animals too, the stuffed variety that is, including a polar bear, a relic of the Victorian age no doubt. And where was the Dodo? They didn't have Dolly the sheep, she was in the National Museum of Scotland. They wouldn't let me touch their stuffed animals; they said that not only did the fur have arsenic, but also that my fingers would ruin it. I said I could wear gloves, but they still said no. I suppose they wanted to preserve what they had, unlike the poor worn leopard in Paisley's town museum, who I patted in-between university mathematics lectures. I could see at the time, were the cat's deep-yellow eyes real? Most likely glass.

My sighted niece and I went to an evening exhibition at Kelvingrove. 'Museum in the dark', they called it. I laughed; I did not need to pay for that. One time we went during the day, and she placed her finger up to the polar bear's mouth. Luckily it was

behind glass, not to mention stuffed. Poor thing, how did it die? Museums document the past, however good or bad, and one of the aims is that we learn from them. I suppose I've learned more about exhibits through live audio description than when I wandered about museums alone when I was sighted. I do miss, however, the freedom to roam and interpret the artefacts in my own way. I have carried this on somewhat, I touch objects in the first instance if I can, then, if I need an explanation, I ask for one. Museums can indeed be an open door for blind or partially sighted people: don't pass them by.

The end.

**Panel comments:** I like the observations about detail and associated narrative that are brought to people's attention during AD/touch tours but might be missed altogether if sighted'; 'lively!'.

## Edwina Mills

### Compost

So familiar to me, an avid gardener.

It was dry

But straight away

I felt compatible with it.

I go round checking pots.

If watering or rain has dampened them

I feel the moisture

And now and again the feel of a slug.

**Panel's comments:** 'Using touch to nurture her garden. Short but sweet!'; 'Compost as a sensory experience – brief, but vivid'.

## Joanna Proctor

### Spoons

Cornflakes prepared, and armed with my spoon, I sit down to enjoy them before my hectic day begins. However, each mouthful is making me more and more anxious, as I think my mouth has shrunk overnight. How has this happened? Being honest, I have waited fifty-two years for my mouth to shrink and, now it has happened, I am concerned and worried. How small is it going to end up? Will I be able to fit my food in my mouth to survive? What makes your mouth shrink anyway? Does everyone's mouth shrink with age? My friends have already prepared me for all the things that age will bring, and is this something else NOT to look forward to. Well, with all this worry, breakfast has become a very stressful time; with each mouthful, I am becoming more and more anxious. I now have milk trickling down my chin, which in turn is beginning to feel sticky and uncomfortable. My chest is getting wetter and wetter with each mouthful I take. All because this spoon will not fit into my mouth like normal. I am only managing to eat half of the spoon's content; the other is cascading all over and down me. Therefore, instead of me relaxing and enjoying my breakfast, the whole experience has been awful, and another shower is now needed.

It is not until I take my bowl out and wash it up that I realise I have used my tablespoon. Relief, my mouth has not shrunk; I have just used the wrong spoon. This is a regular occurrence, as spoons are the hardest piece of cutlery for me to differentiate between. I must think of some way to stop this happening, but on a positive note (for me, at least) my mouth has not shrunk.

**Panel's comments:** 'I like the use of an everyday object (spoon) as a way into the practical difficulties of blindness, approached with humour'; 'a vivid little vignette'; 'spoon-in-cheek!'

## Wendy Roberts

### THE CANYON CALLS

I was ecstatic to revisit the Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona, a road trip that I had saved up for, for many years. But was I ready to accept that what my eyes see now would be vastly different to when I first visited 7 years ago? Anticipation was building as we drove into the parking space just outside the visitors' centre. I could remember walking across the car park last time, to be met by the most spectacular view I had ever seen. However, as I approached the rim on this occasion, my heart deflated, the colours of the plateaus merged, no discerning ridges stood out, no river to be seen, no trails. Then, when I strained to focus, an ambience enhanced my senses, awakened by my emotions, rose to the surface and I cried. Although I could no longer see the detail, I could feel the splendour, albeit my memory helped, I was again in awe. Myriad colours ranging from yellow to pink, purple to red, green to blue, filled my limited vision. There was an echo in the abyss, a silent call that alerted me to another beauty, the beauty of being at peace and at one with nature and its unspoilt grandeur. My senses were heightened, my sense of smell acknowledged the freshness of the air, the afternoon sun created shadows that even my failing sight could see. The condors were screeching, I could even hear the beat of the mules' hoofs as they ascended the trail back to the rim, heavily laden with full saddlebags and weary wranglers.

I reached the upper portion of the South Kaibab Trail and my imagination soon took over. In my mind, I could hear the chatter of indigenous peoples as they traversed the rocky outcrop, navigating well worn trails, the smell of the campfire, sounds of children playing, the chanting of the medicine man as he prayed for rain in this inhospitable high desert. My hands explored the various rock formations as I dared to ascend further into the canyon, my feet registered the uneven trail reminding me of the sheer drop should I lose concentration. Yet, despite my sight loss, as I turned to ascend the trail back to the rim, this magical geological wonder, lifted my spirit and reminded me that I still have some useful sight, I just need to learn to embrace my other senses and open my mind to the beauty that surrounds us, whether we see it, or not. THE CANYON CALLS

**Panel comments:** 'short memoir that resonates for many of us returning to places once seen differently sighted'; 'I like the way the multisensory experience unfolds in this piece as she experiences the Grand Canyon in a different way to the prior (predominantly) visual experience.'



## Jan Scott

### The gallery

The place, this one of creativity,  
of artefacts and objects, molded, crafted,  
with skillful hands that carve and paint,  
faceless forms, commissions drafted.

The atmosphere of energy:  
gasps of wonder  
and mentions of the genius,  
of artists who weave and brush.

Blended on sheets,  
of textures, smooth and round and rough,  
with feet upon the floor, shifting  
and unseeing minds drifting.

No need for seeing,  
just feeling, hearing, being –  
and a brain inside the human skull,  
lighting up like the summer sun.

And ears like a crystal radio search,  
tune, until echoed voices ring,  
with 'ooh's and 'aah's that resonate,  
within the watchful souls that see.

Then energy, somewhere within,  
touches, senses, chills and warms,

while those who see with eyes that glow  
and others don't, yet, still they know.

Hands, touching textures, cold and warm,  
imagination making anything;  
searching, sensing, form and fold,  
the old, the new, the big, the bold.

No restrictions of the seeing view,  
making of it something new,  
drift to unseen possibilities:  
senses, honed, renew ability.

Still the sound, the gallery echoes,  
With flocks of folk like sheep in meadows  
and the stillness of their awe,  
resonate in senses raw.

While we, unseeing with our eyes,  
give thanks to the multimedia mind,  
equipped to feel what other see  
using sensors that are free.

**Panel comments:** 'I like the emphasis on a range of multisensory experiences and how these provide a way in to experiencing art in a different way'; 'some lovely passages about absorbing atmosphere'.

# **Parminder Kaur Sihota**

## **Beauty of Abstraction**

As the world around me starts to fade

And disappear

Inside I've become afraid

Full of fear

So I close my eyes

And visualize

A tiny little dot

A teeny weeny spot

A solitary point in infinity

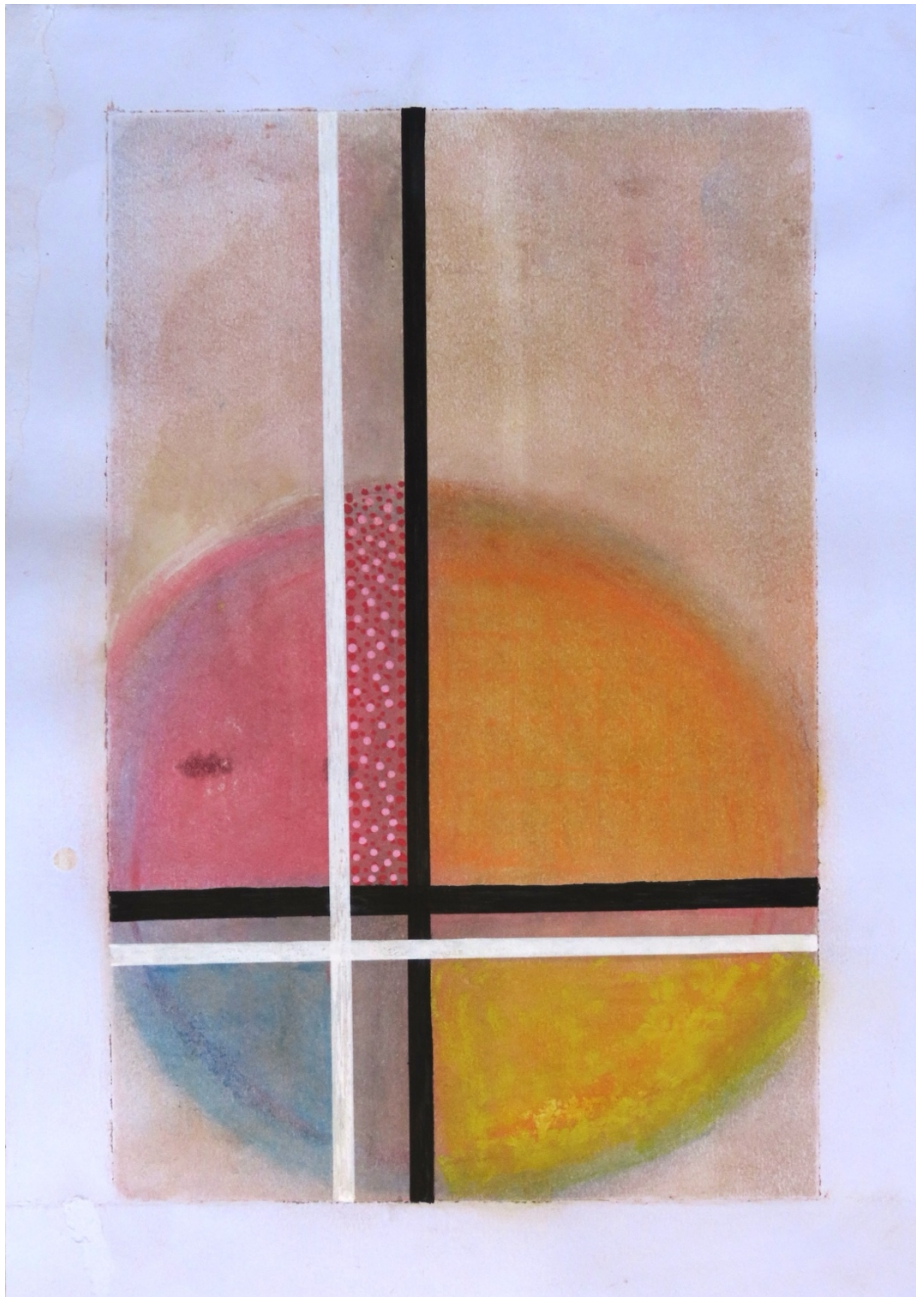
Exploding into a musical tapestry

A symphony of lines and shapes and colours

Dancing in eternity

There is nothing one cannot see

Once imagination is set free



Accompanying artwork by Parminder Kaur Sihota: 'Everything Starts From A Dot' (with permission).

**Panel's comments:** 'short and sweet poetic response to the call'; 'moving and evocative'; 'heartfelt'.

## Julia Springer

### They say it's 'a piece of art'

I know that this writing is not about a museum piece of art or a painting, but I thought I would share my crocheting experience with you. When I was about twenty years old, I wanted to learn how to crochet. My Mum's friend and a member of my family said they would show me, so I gave it a go! This was around 1979, and I had my sight at the time. To begin with, I was only crocheting squares as I was learning how to do the different stitches. As time went by, my sight began to deteriorate and, by 1986, I had lost all my sight, but I kept on practising.

It is important what size crochet hook to use. A small hook, such as two millimetres, would be very small stitches, and, as the numbers go higher, the stitches would be bigger. I usually use a number four. To begin with, you start with your crochet hook, the wool, and what is called a 'loop'. You make a loop with the wool and knot, put the hook in then twist it round, you then pull it through. Then you begin what is called a 'chain', make another loop, put the hook through, and so on. Keeping a bit of room in the loop then a chain will begin, by picking up the stitches you start to make a square made of four sections. You add to this, and this is how you make a square blanket. Care must be taken not to 'drop' or miss any stitches. Being visually impaired, I continually feel with my fingers as I go along, to make sure that there is no hole in the row. If so, I put it right straight away.

As a visually impaired person I identify colours of wool and cotton using a colour detector. This is a fairly small battery operated machine that is pointed towards the wool or fabric, and it tells you what colour it is; it even knows if the colour is light or dark. If it doesn't know the colour or if a button or gem is in the way, it just makes a beep.

I enjoyed crocheting some red poppies for Remembrance Day for the Coventry Resource Centre for the Blind. I did forty-five and they were all different sizes, small, medium, and large. There were single poppies or double and even triple ones. They all had a black button in the centre, with plain wool and glittery red wool. It took a bit of time to sew the buttons on as it was a bit fiddly. When I took them to the resource centre the group sewed them on to some netting that would cascade down the front of the building. Lots of other people contributed poppies for the cascade, some in satin, silk, velvet, and wool. After that I got cracking on making some

poppies for my local community. I made twenty four in total and the money I collected from them was donated to the Royal British Legion.

I have made lots of different things: baby blankets, adult blankets, cushion covers, and tissue box covers. I have made doily sets in different patterns, one in silk and the other in cotton. These are usually round and for dressing tables and are very delicate compared to crocheting a blanket. I make up my own patterns and stitches to make them a bit fancy, and usually as a set of three, one large and two smaller. You need to use a small crochet hook to make them delicate. They are not so popular these days, but some people still like them.

I have done two demonstrations about crocheting, showing some of the items I had made and explaining about the different types of stitches that are used. I have entered four crochet competitions and came first in all four.

Being blind and crocheting can be a bit frustrating sometimes too. Dropping a needle and not being able to find it, if I accidentally pick up the wrong colour wool and do a few rows then a person tells me that it's the wrong colour, I have to unpick it all! You need a fairly good memory to remember how to do the stitches and patterns; instructions in Braille can be quite difficult to understand too. You need patience, determination, and good dexterity. It is a horrible experience, having no sight, but you have to get on with life and find things to do that you enjoy.

People think my items are professionally made or from a shop, they do not believe a blind person has made them. They say they are a piece of art! I have been crocheting for forty-five years now and have loved every minute. I find it very relaxing and never get fed up with it, if anything I get fed up if I've got nothing to crochet!

**Panel's comments:** 'She crochets using innovative and ingenious ways to mitigate her lack of vision, such as touch and colour detector'; 'Very moving and clear, and a vivid and authoritative voice.'

## Amy Stannard

### Looking Up At Durham's Heights: Two lofty stands of heavenly authority

One older, more splendid, taller than the other; the second, no less awe-inspiring in its slighter stature. Side by side in Durham's great cathedral, two pillars of its Christian past. Stone of mottled grey and browns in marble imitation, flattery of Italian greatness. Gilt gold against the purity of white stone. Festooned in gems, doing justice to each bishop or priest who has proclaimed gospel words.

On the left, the pulpit book rests upon its stand of a lofty bird, an eagle by its appearance, while at its base many lions lie in repose. Many twinkling gems nestled among flowers and foliage with amazing realism. There are garnets, not blood red, but with blue moonstones inlaid in clusters of milky white. There are drops of amethyst in the heart of the flowers, rich hues framed by gleaming gold along the carved rail. By the aid of another's eyes, the floor upon which all stood in its elaborate and mindboggling detail was described. Shape within shape, colour within colour, section by section revealed; the imitation stone around the pulpit would once have been true Italian splendour. Smooth marble before the altar, striking tiles around lofty platforms.

The arches through which all march in solemn step, passing many tombs in which effigies lie in repose. Master stone masons decorated the unique pillars: diamond to strip, dog tooth to curve, no two are the same. They remain tall in their task to hold up arches high. Coloured glass shining in the images of Christian tales, shimmering in the gentle afternoon glow. Replacements made in reverent memory. The life of Saint Cuthbert and others interspersed with Christ's glorious birth.

I touched all, save the altar, and laid my fingers on these and many more wonderous marbles upon my visit. Descriptions in infinite detail from my sighted guide created in my mind's eye the chapel of this great building, stone by stone. Much of this building still to explore, again and again will I return to Cuthbert's last eternal home.

**Panel's comments:** 'Great detail and captures the emotional response (awe)', 'A richly detailed examination' and 'interesting style'.



