



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

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

**2025**

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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## **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 ([www.mansil.uk](http://www.mansil.uk)), 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 some of the pieces submitted in the 2025 competition. We are incredibly grateful to all who participated.

**Winner: Joseph Rizzo Naudi**

## **Goose Woman Cat**

For audio: <https://youtu.be/tU4Twts9rZ8>

The photograph was in black and white, but mostly it was in shades of grey, as far as I could see.

Apart from the goose, the only other bits of white were the tablecloth, which the goose was standing on, and the cat in the bottom right of the frame. It was a white cat lying on the floor, its tail curled around something dark and perpendicular.

A chair leg, the photographer said. The cat's tail is wrapped around a chair leg. It's the leg of the chair that Cary, the owner of the goose, is sitting on, and the goose is standing on the table next to where she's sitting.

There was Cary. She was sitting on the chair, beneath which the cat was lying, its tail wrapped around the chair leg. Cary's right hand lay on the white tablecloth, close to the place where the goose was standing, feet planted, legs straight, with its bold, chunky body and white feathers, and its beak open slightly, as if about to honk.

Was this a portrait of Cary, or a portrait of the goose? Or was it a portrait of the cat, or a portrait of the cat's tail as it flicked about the chair leg?

When this image was taken, the photographer said, it was one of a series made as he and Cary moved through the rooms of Cary's house, she walking with the goose in her arms like a countess moving through her mansion with a lap dog.

She has this connection with the goose, the photographer said.

But Cary wasn't a countess, and she didn't live in a mansion. Cary lived in a former Chinese laundry. Where was the laundry? In Havana, in Cuba. Cary's ancestors were Chinese, from Canton, and they'd set up this laundry over a hundred years ago. And now that Cary's children were gone, she lived alone in this large house in downtown Havana, just by the market, just next to the hustle and bustle, just outside of it.

And in this room, the room where the photograph had been taken, there was this quietness, the photographer said. Snap your fingers. Crisp as anything.

The goose was standing on the table, and Cary was sitting on the chair, and both Cary and the goose were looking off somewhere beyond the photograph's frame, towards the place where daylight was coming into the room and playing its way across the image, picking out first the whiteness of the goose, then the woman's face, then the cat and its tail wrapped around the chair leg.

There was a kind of courtyard out there, the photographer said, and in Havana, these existed in between rooms to keep the air cool. It was an open space where, when this had been a working laundry, the clothes were hung out to dry.

Now there was none of that left, the photographer said, but still Cary had walked through the house, and he had taken photos, and they'd come to this room, and the woman had perched on the chair where she always perched, and the goose had gone on the table where he always went, and the cat had sat where the cat sat, and the moment was captured. Snap.

Later, the photographer said, he'd looked at the image and noticed these details: the tablecloth, which was as white as the goose and appeared to hover above the floor; the aforementioned cat's tail as it flicked around the chair leg; the dresser in the background, and on it a doll and a Mickey Mouse mug, and bits and pieces, and bric-a-brac. Then on the left there was the large bottle used for storing cooking oil, a daily necessity and now, because of the crisis, a daily struggle. Then he'd seen the makeshift cooking space that housed the oil bottle. It wasn't a kitchen. It was too small. And on the wall nearby were some plates, decorative, he said, and on the right there was an empty egg tray. A big tray, for sixteen or twenty eggs. Whenever Cary went somewhere that eggs might be sold, she'd get as many as she could. That was what you did in Havana these days. Everyone did it, the photographer said.

When was this photograph taken? Black and white and grey. It could be anytime, the photographer said, although the crisis was happening now, the cupboard was bare, the people were gone, there was nothing left. But this had all happened before, too. So was it then, or was it now? The bric-a-brac on the dresser. Mickey Mouse on the shelf. The doll and the white goose and the tablecloth, and below the woman's chair, the cat, tail flicked around the chair leg.

Let me tell you something about that cat, the photographer said. Because when I first met Cary, and we went to this room, I saw that this cat was sitting on the stovetop there and he had all of this dark stuff hanging off the bottom of his white fur, all along his undercarriage. And I said to Cary: look, I don't want to be rude, but your cat's covered in excrement.

No no, she said. That's not excrement. He just gets singed when he sits on the stove. It's where he likes to sit. It keeps him warm.

And it was like she lived in some kind of fairytale, this woman, her goose and the cat who singed himself on the stove.

And listen to this, the photographer said, playing a sound clip he'd recorded in the room where the photograph was taken. A gramophone, he said. Music, playing all the time I was there. And this photo here – he showed me his phone – this is one I took of Cary. That's her. She's holding a rose. Why? Because when I came back from London to visit her I'd said, what would you like me to bring you? And she said, bring me a rose.

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Written and performed by Joseph Rizzo Naudi, after James Clifford Kent's photograph "Cary, Axiuli & Haytoo at home in San Leopoldo, Havana, Cuba," part of the series "¡No hay más na'!" (There's Nothing Left, 2022–). The text is based on a collaborative discussion held on 10 December 2024 at the National Portrait Gallery in London, involving James Clifford Kent, Hannah Thompson and Joseph Rizzo Naudi—all members of the Centre for Visual Cultures at Royal Holloway, University of London. Joseph Rizzo Naudi is a Techne postgraduate researcher whose work is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

### **Panel comments:**

- I really did love this. The imagery and story woven together, the atmosphere, the multiple perspectives on the scene.
- Demonstrates the slow accumulation of details that emerge through description. It seems a prime example of collaborative, creative description.
- Beautifully written, evocative, and unusual.
- I liked how the sentences were shaped to mimic the sinuous tail of the cat with repeated phrases and an observational coolness as well as the deliberately occasional stiltedness that gave Carey her own character as separate from 'the photographer'.



## **Second Prize: Kathanne Easton**

### **Edges**

Making coffee and tea is a bit of a chore  
when you pour in the water it goes on the floor  
when the mug or the cup cannot take any more –  
it's the edges.

When you walk to the bathroom, bang into a chair  
knock your hand on the handle and try not to swear  
then smack into the basin, it's really not fair –  
blame the edges.

Press some white sticky tape on the front of the stairs  
going up is OK but sometimes, unawares  
you can miss the last one when you wander downstairs –  
blast the edges.

Going out anywhere is a bit of a fright  
from the kerbs to the crossings, although you are right  
to wait for the signal but sometimes you might  
miss the edges.

All in all it's a gamble, a risk you must take,  
after all no-one knows what comes next; have a break.  
But be careful at all times; you know what's at stake  
when you can't, no you can't  
see the edges.

**Panel comments:** This is wonderful poem which I enjoyed hugely. You have made very clever use of an immediately recognisable song form, with a brilliantly chosen refrain which starts off simply comedic and then gradually acquires a suggestive kind of broader resonance, reminding us of the 'edges' around all experiences.

- Love the humorous warm tone.
- A joyful, nicely crafted romp of a poem!

## **Third Prize: Janette Scott**

### **To Touch Ancestors**

Steps leading upward  
head into the museum  
cool, quiet, no sun

Keys are jingled,  
glass doors swung open  
ancient stones I touch

Contact with head bust  
over two thousand years old  
run fingers along.

Smooth, cool, sensual:  
a Roman nobleman,  
my heart is thumping

A leader of men  
strength, determination.  
Sensing his soul

Underneath my hands  
I smirk with surprise:  
he has a huge nose.

Through my skin so warm  
cold cream coloured stone  
to touch ancestors.

Thank security: this man  
has fulfilled the dream  
of a blind daughter.

**Panel's comments:** The main body of the poem is very carefully observed and I like how you use the constraints of the form you have chosen to suggest the constraints of the experience. It feels as if the form of the poem has been chosen for a reason, not just randomly.

- An engaging, lively piece!
- The main body of the poem is carefully observed and makes some real use of the constraints of the form to suggest the constraints of the experience – I mean it feels as if the form of the poem has been chosen for a reason, not just randomly.
- I enjoyed how the simplicity and brevity of each line worked to build up sensation.
- A reminder how positive experiences can be so reliant on goodwill of others.

## **A Splendour Beyond Sight.**

Brilliant sunlight poured through our bustling tube carriage as it journeyed to the Science Museum. I huddled up close to my sighted guide with an ecstatic smile across my face at the thought of the timeless exhibits that awaited me. Before long I was gliding through the high-ceilinged and spacious white corridors to the earth science gallery. With each eager step, I began to sense my guide's nervous panic as she frantically searched for objects that I could touch, hear or smell as a blind visitor.

Through my waning enthusiasm, I tried to capture a glimpse of the earth and stars gloriously displayed behind what seemed like the hundredth paned window. I pressed my nose hard against the cold glass and squinted until my eyes stung, but it was to no avail. The museum staff's voice became a faint distant murmur as he nervously explained that the audio handsets had not been charged overnight. Time froze as familiar tears of disappointment streamed down my cheeks. I found myself sinking into the dark lonely realization that, without sight, this joyous world was inexistent to me.

Sat in a small, intimate café, I washed down my rejection with sips of chocolate-sprinkled coffee, while my guide reminded me of the many beautifully unique ways in which I had experienced the invisible world around me. When visiting Buckingham Palace, I remembered how my fingers softly traced the golden embroidery that embellished the deep crimson curtains. In the Florence Nightingale Museum, I excitedly explored the delicate white lace accents that lined her heavy black nursing gown. I felt proud and inspired by

the lady of the lamp as I took a picture holding the iconic oil lantern. Nothing could have made me feel closer to her than the sweet, flowing fragrance of her favourite perfume. A bottle of Floris of White Rose Scent now took pride of place on her ornate mahogany bedroom dresser. The innocent White Rose fragrance was symbolic of hope and new beginnings. I took in a long, deep breath and smiled to myself; maybe, just maybe, the world beyond my blindness was not such a cruel and uninviting place.

The following week I stood against the backdrop of breathtaking wreaths and bursting colours of the Poppy Factory. Clutching the Poppy flower that I had just made, I listened to heart-wrenching stories of injured and fallen soldiers of Flanders Field. With a heavy heart, I slid my trembling fingers up the stalk and around the red, frail paper petals. Occasionally, I would gently rub the faint veins on the leaf, twirling it around and around like a weary carousel. With tears in her eyes and love in her compassionate heart, the guide's words washed over me like glistening morning dew.

Until this unforgettable moment, a wreath was just a notion in my head, and, for the first time in my life, I was going to see what it looked like. I drew near to the wall where it hung in stirring splendour and my heart started beating against my chest with anticipation. Suddenly, an explosion of rich purple, red and pink flowers flashed in the corner of my eye. My fingers danced eagerly through the mass of wispy petals that filled my hands. All are intricately woven together by long, vibrant silky ribbons.

I was mesmerised by the collage of senses that were rapidly consuming me. I closed my eyes and, in a flash, I was transported to lands far and wide. Now I was racing, racing freely through clouds of soil in Flanders Field. Foreign

winds beat across my face and Poppy seeds whirled and swirled like shrapnel around me. I ran and ran until I could run no more, across barren scarred fields and neglected cemeteries. Breathless and exhausted, I wilted to the ground beneath me. In a hazy dream I transfixed my gaze on a profusion of beautiful blooming Poppies. Swaying gently from side to side, like a harlequin of hands waving farewell to the souls on the graves they occupied.

When I stepped out of the factory to head home, I was greeted by a brilliant golden sun-kissed sky. Holding on tight to my remembrance Poppy, I lifted it up high in front of my radiant smile. The light, paper-thin petals fluttered in the warm summer breeze, like a freed bird ready to take flight. I watched it soar far into the distance, leaving a trail of hope, love and peace to all. I felt like I belonged here, as if the gateway of life was opening her arms out wide to embrace me. Today was a fine day, today I was not the forgotten one. The bountiful riches that pervade this world can be enjoyed by everyone, not just through sight but also through the gift of touch, sound, smell and taste. As I pondered on this, I could feel the spongy lawn beneath my feet, smell the sweet, freshly cut grass spread far, and hear the heavenly birdsong filling the air.

**Panel's comments:**

- This was an ambitious and exuberant piece.
- There were some lovely descriptions and powerful metaphors and a very real sense of being transported through touch and time.
- A very passionate piece. Addresses a full range of experience-exclusion and inclusion.
- Very ornate prose.

## **The Victoria and Albert Museum**

Living a short train ride away from London used to mean I could be roaming around the streets, soaking up all the sights and lights, the hustle and bustle, the excitement and weaving my way around the crowds with confidence within an hour.

I miss the spontaneity that sight provides, however, I don't let this stop me. I can guide anyone around the V&A from memory, from listening to my cane clink on the steps leading up to the main doors, hearing footsteps hurrying along to hold the door open for me, then walking into a huge open feeling space, where the air feels and smells different, the ceiling is high and the vast windows are letting in the sunshine so warm on my skin, I could be in a different, warmer, country.

In those first few moments I let my body relax, there's no rush. I allow myself to stand to one side and let the flow of people pass, the tight tense feeling that I have in my shoulders and back from travelling on the train and tube begins to melt away, and I can feel a warm cosy buzz massaging its way through my body.

I am starting to readjust to my new surroundings. I continue to stand still for a few more moments enjoying the atmosphere and the way my clever brain is already searching for clues to help me move forwards.

I know I feel safe in this building, so I wonder forward to no particular destination, just following the voices and movements of other people. When I reach a group of people chatting, I hang around, listening to what they are



saying, listening to them talking about the item they are looking at. For me, a museum is one big treasure hunt, and the first thing to do is listen for clues!

People say the funniest things without realising it, and when you are listening in on them, it's hard not to smile. They walk away, I now have enough clues to know if this is something I can touch. I know whether it's a statue or a tapestry, so I know that if I put my hand out to feel a statue, I'm less likely to get a telling off than I am if I'm touching a tapestry.

I suppose I could use the guide to help me, but this is so much more fun, it makes me feel independent and like a naughty child. Obviously, I am aware of how precious these artefacts are, and I am also aware that security is following me at a distance, mostly because I heard him talking, telling the person on the end of his radio that he was going to be there in case I needed any help. I like this because not only do I know there's absolutely no way he is going to let me touch anything too delicate, but as I am vulnerable and open to anyone who fancies trying to pinch my handbag or phone, I feel like I've got my very own body guard!

Knowing there is someone else there spurs me on, I latch myself onto the next group of people, trying my hardest not to crack people's ankles as I am swinging my cane across the hard floor, settling behind them I listen to them describing a vase with blue and green colours, Chinese they think. Someone reads out a little bit from the description card, it sounds lovely, big with lots of patterns. The people walk away, I step forward, my cane hits the bottom of the display case, I stop and lean quickly forward, wriggling my hand out of the cane strap so I can have a feel... What the people before me didn't mention was that there was a glass unit covering the vase and my forehead comes in contact with the corner of the glass cabinet a bit harder than I would have liked. My shadow immediately jumps forward and is worried I have hurt myself, I can feel my face burning; note to self: always check for glass display cabinets!

I can feel tears burning in my eyes, not because I am hurt but because I feel like an idiot, and I really wanted to feel the vase.

The security fella, James, is a kind man, helps me to a seat and someone appears with a glass of water. We all talk for a while, then James says he is just off to speak to his manager then he will be back and he will show me around a few more things then deliver me to the café where I had arranged for my friend to meet me, who is going to help me home on the tubes and train. I don't know why, but I can get to a destination on my own ok, but I just can't get back!

James is back, and he verbally guides me around the various rooms until we get to a smaller room, the chatter of the public feels far away, the room feels small and has a musty smell. I am directed to a table where a lady called Cathy is standing, she is happy for me to pick up items, feel them, smell them and enjoy them, she talks me through each item, explaining what it is, where it came from and what it looks like.

I know I've had a real treat today and, as James guides me to the café, I can't stop a big fat grin from growing on my face. My friend is already waiting for me and says, "ohh my god! What happened to your head? What did you do?" Then quietly to James, "Did she break anything?"

James tells my friend that the V&A understands that not everyone can enjoy the museum as they would like, so they want to take the opportunity to help others overcome challenges, helping everyone to see differently.

**Panel's comments:**

- I like the celebratory atmosphere and the multisensory imagery. Nice focus on the embodied experience.
- Extended narrative with lots of multisensory detail. The museum is a treasure hunt and an adventure.
- There was lots to like - the energy and pace of the writing.
- Very carefully and honestly observed, captures well the author's experience.

**Gina Giles**

## **Dinosaur in the Museum!**

Once long ago, a  
partially sighted and partially deaf person  
Went to a museum for a special exhibition.  
It was a once-in-a-lifetime  
exhibition of an Earth of so long ago,  
Where there were no humans around.  
High in a dull room,  
Was a silver metal walkway with side handles,  
That was cold and hard to touch with soft fingers on one hand.  
The other hand held onto another person,  
Carefully on the metal walkway, feet and white-and-red  
cane went tapping, tapping, tapping.

Out of nowhere,

There was a mighty roar, making the person with limited

hearing who used the white-and-red cane,

Jump back with heart missing a beat.

The person's limited eyes scanned quickly and spotted a

dinosaur in the museum!

Its huge, dark grey head with small eyes looked so close,

And seemed to look at you closely.

Or was it trying to smell you with its nose,

Moving its head and the rest of its big body from left to right,

As if it tried to find something.

The person could only see the dark grey head with its small  
eyes,

And sharp, pointy teeth that looked very deadly.

The person knew it was a fake,  
But good grief, it was a very scary dinosaur,  
To look at and not daring to touch.  
Its name was T-Rex.  
There was a deadly Dinosaur in The Museum!

**Panel's comments:**

- I thought this was a good fun blast of a poem, vivacious and sweet.
- Charming and funny. Well-paced.
- This made me laugh! Fun!
- Vivid and engaging piece.

## **Terry James**

### **The Scream**

We don layers, thick coats, cosy hats and warm gloves, and pull on sturdy boots. Stepping from the warmth of our hotel, the pair of us are greeted by the brittle chill of early January. The surfaces are surprisingly slippery underfoot, as we stride cautiously but purposefully across the snowy city, in pursuit of a particular “hidden gem.”

On the outskirts of Oslo, we wend our way upwards, trudging, slipping, sliding, through the wintry woodland. On either side of us, the spikey, black briars and bare branches are stark against the dazzling, white carpet.

As we ascend, we leave the sounds of civilisation behind, and the Norwegian forest is near silent, save for the song of a solitary bird and the crunch of our footsteps on snow. My youngest daughter, now twenty-three, leads me by the hand, our mother-child roles seemingly reversed. She calmly guides me, offering gentle words of encouragement as we climb, describing our surroundings all the way.

After several minutes, we pause, breathless but exhilarated, to survey a mysterious statue (the upright figure of a woman), inconspicuous amongst the trees, and then we continue our climb. We stagger around yet another bend, navigating icy patches, then up a sharp slope and, at last, we reach our destination, high above the fjord and the city of Oslo. We decide against sitting to rest on the snow-covered bench and instead stand, breathing in the view and smiling with satisfaction. Here is the spot, over a century ago, where the artist Edward Munch looked out across the landscape towards the setting sun and a lurid, blood-red sky. Apparently, he was inexplicably overcome by a sudden sense of melancholy and was inspired to create his famous painting, *The Scream*. There, on the hilltop, a square, black, metal frame on legs, like an easel, has been placed to attempt to recreate the view Munch might have seen from that rugged vantage point. Today, however, the sun is bright, the morning sky is a clear, vivid blue, and we feel elated!

Phone in hand, my daughter takes a plethora of pictures, trying in vain to capture on camera the magic of the moment. Standing with the view behind me, I look through the frame from the other side, my mouth gaping wide as if mimicking *The Scream*. Momentarily, I am once again that playful parent, pulling a face to make my little girl giggle. She duly chuckles and takes a snap.



We embark on our precarious descent, my daughter ahead of me. I follow tentatively, listening intently to her constant instructions. I cling to the iron rail with one hand and, with the other, I prod the ground with my long cane, now a makeshift snow pole. We exchange a courteous “Hi” with a couple of walkers making their way up, and feel thankful that they had not appeared sooner to disturb the stillness and serenity of our hilltop haven.

We reach the bottom and it is a relief finally to be at the tram stop with firm, flat ground beneath our boots. Where to now? We travel away from the calm of the suburbs and back to the buzz of the city.

We visit the vast National Museum and look round the nearby Nobel Peace Centre, then as the sun dips below the horizon, we pass the Oslo Opera House at the water’s edge. Soon we find ourselves in the spectacular Munch Museum. Having bundled our bulky coats into a locker, we stroll leisurely around the gallery, exploring various artworks as we move from room to room, my daughter audio describing as we go. Then suddenly, there it is, displayed beneath subdued lighting in a room all to itself, we are standing in front of *The Scream*.

**Panel's comments:**

- Fun! I like the way the encounter with the painting in the museum is not the most important part. A different way in to exploring the impact of that painting.
- The writing was concise and clear without hyperbole. I felt I was ably taken along with the author and daughter, up to the lookout point.
- Multisensory details about the cold, snow, ice, etc. The daughter provides audio description in an inobtrusive way.
- Nicely written, precise and effective.