

Submitted to the Hayward Gallery's Flash Fiction Competition allied with a George Condo exhibit. This story won a prize and was published online and in the Exhibition Catalogue.

### The Beholder

Visitors will occasionally remark upon the paucity of family portraits in our house. It is a fair question as, compared to similar creaking, colonial structures, few faces peer from the past... we have our reasons.

My great aunt Melinda was a vain woman. Her more witty and vivacious older sister had been - on her thirteenth birthday - blinded in one eye by a panicked gull, an event that ensured Melinda's de-facto position as the Pretty One. Now the favourite, her lazy and sullen nature was free to loiter behind a delicate if forgettable face and pure, platinum hair. Her father was a traditional man; distrustful of technology (and latterly, seabirds) therefor when it came to having a likeness made of his younger daughter he employed not a photographer but rather a painter.

Although any great talent teeters between genius and madness, this artist had clearly cast his lot. For days and weeks, eventually months and years, he insisted that the rendering was not achieved. His obsession entrapped Melinda, even as constantly holding the same pose took such a physical toll that her back became hunched, her hands curled and clasped at nothing, her neck became locked into a permanent upward peer. But as the deformities grew worse, so the pose became harder to maintain. In a six-month cycle of torture, both Melinda and her tormentor would begin anew. The woman withered like a dying tree root while the lunatic daubed and scraped, simultaneously chasing and destroying a vision of perfection that only he recognised. What began in the summer of 1878 did not end until sometime around 1902, with the death of Melinda herself.

My great-aunt's slide into madness became something of a regional joke, nowadays forgotten by all but family. The painting, I enquired of my mother once, "I don't know dear, I think that terrible man took it with him."