

**Second Prize Winner: Gill Learner**

**Chill Factor**

He tries to dream cool – of ponds he dared to step on  
till he heard the gun-shot crack, stilled waterfalls  
in Cumbria, of sleeping in an igloo or an ice hotel.

Singin dust grits between his teeth, chafes  
his shoulder blades, sticks to his sweat no matter  
how much care he takes undressing, shaking out.

His final tour. It's 48 degrees: he must think cool –  
frost fairs on the Thames, blue light of glacier caves,  
Shackleton's *Endurance* trapped and crushed.

Heat beats at his helmet like a welder's torch,  
his nape's on fire, eyes sear with watching  
as the search team makes its slow way back.

His last long walk. The escort's guns are poised.  
Without his body armour he steps light  
along the track. Tomorrow – home, to stars

in their proper places, Cathy's frown, the garden  
gossipy with birds, the children's bikes to fix.  
Soft-fingered sun. Rain. He lies flat, tools

to hand. The silence grows. Now he believes  
cool – in Saturn's rings, the Skaters' Waltz,  
a white bear on its lonely floe. He wipes his mind,

strokes away sand and earth, starts to unpick  
a knotted mass of metal, batteries and wires.  
The desert holds its breath.

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