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.

Sangin 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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