

SECOND LIGHT POETRY COMPETITION WINNERS

MONIZA ALVI, adjudicator comment:

It was a pleasure to encounter so much ambitious, far-reaching longer work and to find these qualities in the shorter poems too. Exploration was deep and enquiring on a range of themes, including that of nature and the environment. With so many imaginative, unexpected and vital poems, there were tough decisions to make. Altogether, it was a feast of poetry.



First Prize, Short Poem Category, Kathryn Bevis

My body tells me that she's filing for divorce

She's taken a good, hard look at the state
of our relationship. She knows it's not
for her. The worst thing is, she doesn't tell
me this straight up or even to my face. No.
She books us appointments with specialists
in strip-lit rooms. They peer at us over paper
masks with eyes whose kindness I can't bear.

They speak of our marriage in images:
a pint of milk that's on the turn, an egg
whose yolk is punctured, leaking through
the rest, a tree whose one, rotten root
is poisoning the leaves. I try to understand
how much of us is sick. I want to know
what they can do to put us right. She,

whose soft shape I have lain with every night,
who's roamed with me in rooky woods, round
rocky heads. She, who's witnessed the rain
pattering on the reedbed, the cut-glass chitter
of long-tailed tits, the woodpecker rehearsing
her single, high syllable. How have we become
this bitter pill whose name I can't pronounce?

Soon, she'll sleep in a bed that isn't mine.
That's why, these nights, we perform our trial
separations. She, buried in blankets, eyelids
flickering fast. Me, up there on, no — wait —
through the ceiling, attic, roof. I'm flying, crying,
looking down. *Too soon*, I whisper to her warm
and sleeping form. *Not yet. Too soon. Too soon.*

first published in *Poetry Wales*, Vol. 58/1, Summer 2022.

First Prize, Long Poem Category, Jane Routh

The February Museum: recent acquisitions

(extracts: Sections 1, 3 & 6 of 6)

Fraxinus excelsior 18” square-cut deadwood log
with egg galleries of *Hylesinus varius*

Retrieved from the log pile, a long block
inscribed with life cycles: straight tunnels
across the grain where beetles deposited a row of eggs;

along the grain, smaller tunnels widen
where growing grubs ate their way out into the air.
Cleaned of frass with a toothpick, pale lines as if drawn

on a dark ground – the way you’d draw Cuthbert’s
ivory comb preserved with him in his coffin,
fine teeth running out on one side, even more on the other.

Handful of short hairs cut during a pandemic
from the head of a 78 year old male

Very fine, very plentiful and dark brown.
Not even the odd silvery one. No wonder
the girl in the chemist’s checked he was over sixty.

A amateur cut takes four times as long as a barber
– more, if you count next day’s extra snips at tufts
that were missed, or time picking up hair

all over the kitchen floor and stray bits up sleeves,
in a pocket, stuck to a jumper – all tossed out
for birds to line nests with, blown back by the wind.

Annotated February 2021 calendar page
with photograph over Luskentyre towards the Harris hills

Many empty squares.
Food deliveries on the same day each week.
Two birthdays and six online “events”.

A bright and windy day over the white shell sands,
hills dark in the distance and out west
turquoise waves spattered with white crests –

it always was windy, always cold
and the shining expanse of wet sand empty
of any sign of what we have done to the world.

First published online at *The Friday Poem*

Second Prize, Kathryn Bevis

My Cancer as a Ring-Tailed Lemur

We both know one day she'll eat me.
But, for now, we dance: a little game
of catch me if you can. Tracking her
is difficult. But specialists are interested
and, bit by bit, they creep inside my body's

forest, stalk her with their fancy cameras,
take images, write reports. On ultrasound,
she's punk-rock stripes of white and black.
On mammograms, she sunbathes, downy
as a dandelion gone to seed.

The child I am divines the time by blowing.
Five years, ten years, twenty, more. That's
when they spy her, up in the canopy,
her tail Rapunzel's plait looped
round a single sentinel node. Now, on MRI,

they spot her kindly spaniel's face
crammed into the lettuce of my breast.
At last, on PET-CT, they catch her
on the move. She's up and off alright: a lope,
a leap. She careens through my branches,

omnivorous for bone and liver, brain.
Because her nature is to double herself
again, again, she and her sisters huddle, tails
conjoined, tiny arms about each other's necks.
The child I am learns to prophesy afresh,

blows one year, two years, four years, five.
Friends say *this is war* and I'm *a warrior*,
a tower of strength. But the lemur and I
get on okay. I figure she has a right to be here.
She is, in some important sense, endangered too.

I draw the line at poisoning but let
the hunters starve her, most days. She looks
at me with orange eyes of ire as we witness our
habitat's destruction. My new need for naps,
my breathlessness – for both of us a forest fire.

first published in *Poetry Review*, Vol. 112/2, Autumn 2022.

Third Prize, Jane Routh: Viruses

H5N1 2007

We've been here before. Blindly warding off unknowables and worrying at 3am about deaths. The waiting, uncertainty, fear. But that was then and for the birds, clamp-down immediate, no movement, no feed spill, no mixing with the wild and a cull at any sign of illness.

We said *cull* ourselves, the word at one remove from *kill*. But that was then and there were rules to follow in our boots and rubber gloves: no touching, only feed on concrete we could hose, so not a single grain would draw a wild bird down. The virus lost. The flock survived, two (now ancient) ganders with us still.

No one with any sort of symptom could approach a bird, so cross-species mutation could not occur. But that was for the birds and nevermind their protests, their wanting life as and where it always was; nevermind their threats and hissing the rules were there. I had a poultry workers' vaccination.

FMDV Type O pan Asia 2001

Lockdown. Dread. No 'wait and see'. No 'possible' scenarios. Listening at 3am for tyres through straw and disinfectant along your road: *Just stay away!* At any sign, the slaughter: creatures you birthed, talked with in some mutual understanding dumped by JCBs in lorryloads.

Smoke from the pyres and an eerie glow in the north west skies. Nevermind mere business gone: it was your life your home, your family's history. Numbness. Suicides.

And that was then and some stayed on to milk again. The dread returns at 3am. Some go on but not the young and strong drafted in on good money carting corpses, good money for the clean-up spraying chemicals – but costed now by cracked and always-peeling skin, breath hard come by, strength all gone.

SARS-CoV-2 12 March 2020

But this is now, this waiting and uncertainty. This fear is new and for ourselves: the mind at 3am racing round deranged absurdities: how old is 'elderly', do some age sooner, some later than their friends? Exact locations and exclusion zones used to keep us up-to-date for farms with animal disease but we've no handholds for being grounded here and now with so much missing information of whereabouts and when and even here? and keeping safe and how and what we'll need our wits all scattered and with them words

included in *WRITE where we are NOW*, Manchester Metropolitan University website

H5N1 was the virus which gave rise to the Avian Influenza disease of 2007. There have been several mutations in animal Foot and Mouth viruses: the UK was hit badly in 2001 by Foot and Mouth disease caused by the strain FMDV type 0 pan Asia. SARS-CoV-2 is the virus causing the disease Covid-19.