

=2nd Place – Ann Kelley for “Flaming Stargazer”

Flaming Stargazer

i.m. Nathan Kelley 22.04.61 – 14.12.85

This Christmas he’s been dead
longer than he was alive.
He had twenty-four years
of learning about fish

and what makes them tick.
Of winters floating in warm seas
where fish were as if
a child had painted them.

In photos he’s grinning,
not showing the shark-bite
scars of heroic surgery,
nor the years gasping for breath

drowning in air.
Not showing the weeks treading
water in wards of old men
whose hearts also failed

and where he could not bear
to waste precious time,
but instead read books on fish disease
and the geology of planets.

He shelters now in the shallows of my heart,
and on the oddest of occasions,
for example, when I see a tank of guppies
in a waiting room, a jar of winter daffodils,

or a full moon blueing the bay,
he rises to the surface,
and like his fond goldfish,
Carassius auratus,

the flaming stargazers, whose
celestial eyes followed his every move,

he's still there in the current of life,
with me wherever I go.

What the Judges said:

This poem's matter-of-fact language and arresting images – fish 'as if a child had painted them'; a full moon 'blueing the bay' – testify to how grief becomes manageable over time ('This Christmas he's been dead /longer than he was alive'), but can recover, in an instant, all of its intensity. Despite its core of sorrow, its content is not mawkish. Tragedy is indicated elliptically, in linked images: 'drowning in air', 'treading water in wards of old men'. The young man's memory lives close at hand 'in the shallows of my heart', returning easily to the surface like the wonderfully-named Flaming Stargazer to become a poignant metaphor for an unfulfilled life, looking back from eternity with 'celestial eyes'.

About Ann:

I live in St Ives, Cornwall, but I haven't been in the water since finding myself surrounded by three large sharks off the Great Barrier Reef.

I survived walking into a pride of lion in Zimbabwe, followed by 30 angry elephants.

I now live quietly on the edge of a cliff with my husband where we've been struck by lightning, suffered landslip and flood, and had the shingle roof blown off and a glass roof blown in.

Published:

Paper Whites (poems and photographs, London Magazine Editions 2001)

Because We have Reached That Place (Poems, Oversteps Books 2006)

Novel, The Bower Bird (Luath Press 2007) Costa Book of the Year Award 2007 in the Children's category.

I've taught medics and patients in UK, Australia and Zimbabwe and medical students in Cornwall to write poetry since 1997. Poetry Remedy (Patten Press)
Hon. Teaching Fellow of Exeter and Plymouth Universities.

Working on Raining Cats and Dogs (Oversteps Books.)

A novel for Young Adults - Dark Eden - for Oxford University Press.

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