

Beaver Trust Nature and the Ecological Emergency Poetry Competition 2021

The Winning Poems

With thanks to our judge Terry Gifford

A big thank you to everyone who sent poems to our inaugural poetry competition, on the theme of nature and the ecological emergency. The standard was very high, giving our judge Terry Gifford an unenviable task in choosing the winners. There were many fine poems that didn't make it into the final twelve, so we would like to convey our congratulations to everyone who entered. The winning poems are reproduced here and the top four prize winners will be announced at the end of the presentation ceremony.

Beaver Trust would also like to thank Rob and Fiona Sneyd, Railholiday, Cornwall Beaver Project and Woodland Valley Farm for their kind donations towards the costs of running the competition. And a very big thank you to Jim Parkyn for making the bespoke beaver model as the prize for the best beaver poem. It certainly inspired lots of beaver themed entries!

As it was not only Beaver Trust's inaugural competition, but a first for me as a poetry competition organiser I would also like to give a big personal thanks to our judge Terry Gifford, who did so much more than judge; he offered guidance and support whenever it was needed. I would also like to thank Jenny Smith of Wells Poetry competition for her assistance, not only in putting me in touch with Terry, but also for her friendship, patience, and wisdom. I would have been lost without Jenny and Terry, so feel very lucky to have had their help.

Finally thank you to everyone else who has contributed to making this competition such a success, from Steve the web designer, to Resurgence and Ecologist Magazine, and everyone who shared posts on social media, included us in their journals and web pages, and offered encouragement and support, with an special thanks to my husband Dave who has been a rock throughout.

Lizzy Lister

Shortlisted Poems

Beverley Bewley – Picnic at Blackshaw Clough
Julian Bishop – Dung Beetles
Jane Burn – The Tiger Drew Breath from Russia's Lungs
Ross Cogan – Republic of Beavers
Ross Cogan – Reconsidering
Sandra Davison – Loch Maddy High Spring Water Mark
Bex Hainsworth – Ghosting
Sarah Howden – Reintroduction of the Beaver
Scott Iley – The Aspen Meadow
Emilie Jelinek – The Owl
Jon Alex Miller – Zero
Fiona Ritchie Walker – Following the Beaver Trail

Picnic at Blackshaw Clough

The picnic bored her.
Bread too dry.
Wrong flavour of crisps.
So hoped she'd like it by the stream.
She used to build dams you see.
Hours she'd spend with her sister,
Lugging stones, plugging breaches.

Dad lifts his camera. A glower at the lens.
We eat up quickly. Move on.
Pine forest. Weightless.
Perfect fusion of fresh and fermented.
I inspire the scent.
We talk. And talk. No reply. She's not behind us.
We scan. The inky lines of the trees remain unbroken.

Then she's there!
Prostrate in a dark hollow,
A flash of golden hair over a fallen log.
She kneels before her decaying altar, mobile in hand,
Clutched tight like once a prayer book.
Oh God! Not that bloody phone again!
That's why we...

"Turkeytails! They're turkeytails! Look!"
She swipes image after image
Of these fanned coats of many colours.
Eyes now disarmed, eager, seeking,
Awed in adoration of these mycological miracles.
She paints them later from her photos.
I pin the pictures in my head and take my pen.

Beverley Bewley

Dung Beetles

(could vanish within a century - Biological Conservation journal)

Strange that catastrophe should announce itself
on such small feet
among such humble collectors of dirt,
street-cleaners, shovellers of stools,
tunnellers through filth.

Ancient Egyptians saw gods in them, suns in dung
shaped into spheres
dragged into creepy-crawly underworlds;
guided by starry skies, they deep-cleaned fields,
deodorised cattle dumps.

Photographers fawned over tigers, meercats,
svelte giraffes
while caddis flies withered in the wings -
no lightbulbs exploded as spiders dived for cover
beneath piles of calcified scat.

Globetrotting beetles wade through cesspits
teeming with tailings,
cowpats contaminated by worm controls.
Bugs that make the world go round push up
the daisies, while the planet goes to shit.

Julian Bishop

The Tiger Drew Breath from Russia's Lungs

Snow has swallowed the earth – drowned it beneath waves of wind-carved drift. There is a softening of edges, a quieting of chill air, a silence of buried things.

This is an almost voiceless land. Hoar-song binds the branches – splinters pluck the strings of pale skies. Deep in the growth, plate-size paws sink into the cold, walk stories of spoor, tread parables of the hunt. A myth weaves the spindles – a blink of flame flickers against the frost. A myth that can be read through clawed wood,

through striped skin, through the crows, for they do not come to ground when such brilliant beasts are near. One cat climbs a hollow trunk. Another wipes its glorious head on bark,

smears a scented ghost. A mother mouths her cub while mist rises from her open throat, skeins the weighted trees. They are cutting down the lungs of the world.

She will move away from the fresh-sawn wounds, baby swung from her jaw loose as an emptied pelt. Greed bares the ground – the exhausted forest is scarred with stumps. Roots slowly learn

they no longer feed vanished crowns and leaves no longer soak our waste. The tigers turn tail on the nothing of their home. Lorries spin on the frost. Boles are trailered up like broken bones.

Jane Burn

The Durminskoye Reserve in Siberia was established to help the endangered Amur (Siberian) tiger who depend on the habitat for survival. Russia contains the largest natural forests in the world, soaking up so much carbon dioxide they are known as 'the lungs of the world'. The forest is being cut down at the rate of an area the size of Wales every year and much of the logging is illegal.

The Republic of Beavers

after Joseph Brodsky

It is winter in the Republic of Beavers
and the water, laced thug-like with its steel
toecaps has harried the crowds from the streets,
let fall glass nets to trap the blurred neon.

The fog is trying to reconquer the land.
Like fat, insolent soldiers billeted
on an unwilling town by some command
in the next state, it blocks alleys, it wades,

arms-linked, down boulevards and over bridges
scaring children and flustering their nurses,
and staring through the dirty panes of cafés
with a smirk of menace. The palaces

stand back from the canals, patrician disdain
written on their façades, the blinds drawn down
gashes of weak and wary light within
seeping over the sills. Porches let on

to small kingdoms of dust: long corridors
chasing their tails in the dark; gilded mirrors
that pilfer your reflection; the mild odour
of abandoned books. Outside the water

paces like a lover. 'Water is time'
he says, 'time is water. They are the same'.
And in the bay ripples of lace-cuffed foam
mark some rhythm like a metronome.

Ross Cogan

Reconsidering

Old men who know the tides, can feel the sea
stirring beneath their keels and read the Braille
of stippling wind on their raw faces, call
it 'reconsidering': that moment when
the deep machinery of weights and wheels
reaches its moon-drawn summit; pauses and turns

towards the land. And, like the mad-haired priest
dragging his load of prayer up heaven's slopes,
it climbs the banks and sounds the cliff for gaps
and gullies, saps in rocks where it can lay
charges of sea that later on will burst
in shafts of ice. Day withdraws from the sky.

Squadrons of pin-voiced birds hurry from hedge
to bush, sowing their small notes of alarm.
From out over the marshes, winds take aim
at lines of stunted hawthorn. A dark stain
covers the early stars and a clenched ridge
of cloud reports the first rumours of rain.

Ross Cogan

Loch Maddy High Spring Water Mark

Loch of the Wolf where,
in gently murmuring gloamings
or the fume of storms and waves,
blue grey shielings and lonely islands
glimpse passing ferries and searching lights.

The restless sea haunts tidelines,
surging beneath big headlands and through narrow straits,
whilst westwards the Moder Dy rises in the fog,
whispering, “ciùineas ron doinnean”, bringing
homebound dangers our ancestors would not recognise.

The North sends meltwater South –
tha am muir á lionadh - overwhelming the High Spring Water Mark
as causeways, bays, piers and homes are gifted to the sea
and, with the howl of the untameable sea wolf around us,
our coastlines return to older maps with fewer place names.

Sandra Davison

ciùineas ron doinnean = the calm before the storm
tha am muir á lionadh = the tide is rising

Ghosting

An iceberg of green netting floats
in the open ocean. Unmelting, its ropes
sway like jellyfish tendrils, a forest
of hardened kelp. A swell lifts
the decaying veil, then drops it again,
a terrible shroud.

A spinner dolphin hangs
in suspended animation,
eyes black as mussels' shells,
fins holding up knotted chains,
Marley's ghost, snared harbinger.

The web reaches sandwards
to where it is anchored by lobster cages
piled like sunken aviaries, their yellow lichen
glinting with the hidden light of fool's gold.

Abandoned crab traps are still making a catch,
set by long-dead fishermen whose boats rust in the bay.
Summoned by curiosity, they crawl over the coins of shells,
the burial ground of their brothers. A chorus of ghostly clacking
goes unheeded. They do not turn back.

A seal swirls through the blue murk,
considers an easy snack, but can sense a death
it does not bring, fears the noose, the macabre collage:

a turtle shell weighing down the gauze like a cannon ball,
a hammerhead who came to scavenge, but sprang the trap.

They are caught, collateral, an afterthought.

Bex Hainsworth

Reintroduction of the Beaver

(1526-2001)

What do you remember
of us – and we of you?

Pieces. A foot
like a disinterred bat's wing
still dripping from the dark earth, stained
with stale river and molasses. A writhing muscle
of water. Yellow teeth
like slabs of rusted armour,
spark-splintered, sharpened again
with every bite.

After this shameful interregnum, we assemble you
from your own parts. Stich back your face
from scraps of sun-slicked fur. A Renaissance blazon:
symbol made stubborn flesh.

How will you meet us in this brave new world?
You, who can hold summers hostage
in a fortress of bronzed pine?

Had we forgotten how the loch
would scour your skin to silver?
That you, too, know the art
of piecing broken things together?

Sarah Howden

The Aspen Meadow

Ours is a bright wee burn, brimming with coiled rush and swirling chase.
The heron (a grey rock amongst that rushing), plucks her tythes with reptilian grace.
Geysers of mayfly erupt from the eddies, and scything through them, swallows flit.
Then Pipistrelles come thrumming through nights, thick with moths and starlit.
November brings the flashing steel tide of salmon, grim at mouth,
Flowing, fighting, northwards, then ebbing, spent, south.

I plant Aspen and Willow, along the bank, while the dewy meadows gleam;
A prayer of hope, a gift, to beavers not yet here, but coming, in a dream.
I see them here, in our hay meadow, newly sunk in emerald water.
'Won't they flood our house? If they build dams here?' interrupts my daughter.
But this is not our home, our meadow, our bright wee burn with riffled fall.
The accountant has informed me; we only borrowed them all.

Our doings and beings, comings and goings; we pay back what we borrow;
And the landlord tells me that when we go, none will follow.
The Dipper. And the Oystercatcher. The lonely curlews' call. They will stay.
The pearl mussel larvae, clinging to the gill of the salmon, will find its' way.
And when the beaver comes to these forgotten meadows and abandoned soil,
She will find an Aspen meadow, suckering up through the ruins of my toil.

She will find my prophecy, written in quaking leaves and sweat and blood,
The cool baptism of quiet waters, a land in-waiting for the flood.
With each thrust of the planting spade, each slit sod and pressing of root,
With each scrape of backfill and firming with black boot,
I give back the crop of bright wildflowers that I took on loan;
I dig the foundations for the beavers' world, and bury my own.

Scott Iley

The Owl

No one sees him
though his voice fills the dark
wrapping the house,
echoing across the cold night,
across the misted paddock and steaming river,
beneath the perfect arc of a silent,
outstretched wing.
Enfolded in my arms, you listen
as he calls to his mate
and drift into sleep.
Love is your small body close to mine
breathing softly.
It is the peace of your moon face,
your tiny hand in mine,
the smell of your warm, soft hair
like the downy underbelly of our lovestruck tawny
it comes at me in elemental form,
fills me with terror.
Somewhere in feathered cloak,
he silently sweeps the woodland floor
quartering for the faintest rustle,
ready to swoop.

Emilie Jelinek

Zero

For the River Rother

The grass long since
gives up the green,
dry fibres now
becoming dust.

Only brown stems
of summer blooms
and broken pods
of poppy and
dog rose remain

We walk the ragged
path to the river.

We smell it first,
a cold stone smell,
a cold clay flow
in the August air.

And then we see
the low body
of the naked
river,

 scattering
sun. We drop our
clothes and enter in.
Brown water wraps
its golden light
around our skin,
an electric cold
jolt into bones
and marrow, we
let out a laugh
and for a moment
we are shocked
back to zero,
and all the waters
of all the rivers
roar in our veins,
and everything
begins again.

Jon Alex Miller

Following the Beaver Trail

We saw no beavers but we found
their world, the neat built lodge a silhouette,
dark in the burn of the evening sun.

We didn't see a beaver but we heard the sounds of jaws
working through wood, a body moving water,
sending ripples to the Dubh Loch shore.

That night the beavers gifted us
a perfect dusk, the art of listening
and on our way home, such stars.

Fiona Ritchie Walker

For more on Beaver Trust, please visit beavertrust.org