BSFS Poetry Contest 2023 Winners

Tell the Bees

When we were little
Gramma Bea would give us
each our very own wood dipper
coated with honey from her hives
as a treat.

To us it was a treat;
for her, it kept our mouths shut
while she served her friends
with gossip and a delicate porcelain tea set
reserving the cup with the small chip
in its polished edge for herself.

She taught us that swarms were merely lost souls
without a compass to guide them
and that you should only take what you need
when presented with abundance.

Eventually, she grew ill
and took to her bed.
A shadow passed
in front of the window
and stayed there.
The air hummed.

We gathered around her bedside
and saw her draw her last breath.
The family left to make arrangements
but I stayed for a moment more
and watched her lower lip twitch.

From there, a large bee
with a swollen abdomen
extended beyond its wings
crawled out and
fanned itself to dry
from spittle and mucus.

I plucked the bee
from Gramma Bea’s lips
and carefully cradled it
until I could get to the door.

Outside, the sky was sunny.
I walked back to the hives.
When we got there, the hives were silent
but a swarm had gathered on the side of the house,
their buzz a low drone.

I remembered my Gramma’s words
and carefully released the bee near the swarm.
Immediately, they surrounded her
but did not harm her.
Instead they bore their new queen
off to their new home
where honey
and milk would flow.

Ryan E. Holman
1st Place – © 2023
Kensington, MD, USA
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Call from Alleghania

The ebony night– my chrysalis,
boundless Fraser fir and red spruce let no light in.
The mud was soft and oozed around my toes,
mutual symbiosis,
until those icy blue eyes met mine in the darkness.

I gasped from slumber– but only a nightmare,
Dad’s mounted eight point buck stared back.
Lifeless and beady,
Just like him ever since Mother never came home.

I come from buckwheat cakes and venison,
Axes and crackling yules,
Small town congregations,
Kneeling on saddle-brown worn pews,
And whispers of lore– skinwalker territory.

Old Alleghania drew me in,
Moth to flame,
Appalachia in all her glory cried at night,
For me.

I found myself back on the soft mountain floor,
Canopied and secluded– the cold blue orbs
emerged again.
No longer a nightmare,
Yet a memory deep and repressed.

My mother,
A bloodcurdling scream,
Then silence.

It approached me–unwavering gaze of cyan,
Enveloped me in pelt,
And crowned me with antlers,
Welcome back, my child.

Alyssa Granato
2nd Place – © 2023
Sicklerville, NJ, USA

Watching the ISS Pass By

There’s something about it
that makes me wait,
like the train I knew
was on schedule to pass by
when I was a child.

The landscape of the night
sky with its stars carries itself
from one horizon to another
and I find it amazing
how little I know about it.

I only recognize the Big Dipper
and the belt of Orion,
but from where I stand
It’s enough to know
north is beyond the trees.

Everything else spreads
like a necklace of precious metals
dangling from the neck
of a Numidian queen
from a time no one remembers.

And then it appears,
on schedule in its path,
a steady light moving
in front of all the others,
affirming my presence,
the fact that I’m here, waiting,
like the occasional person
who would notice a boy
standing alongside
the tracks and wave back.

Stephen A. Chmelewski
Honorable Mention – © 2023
Portugal
The Watchers

And so we sat
Stones in the tides of time
And watched as worlds began
And fell
Began
And fell

We watched as the first strands of dna
Found their way into the center of cells.
We watched as they struggled and grew,
Found structure and shape.
We watched them flit through the water
And find myriad ways to live.
We watched as the first forests sprouted
On blackened volcanic soils
And gave new life to the shores.

We are the watchers,
The witnesses,
The living memory of life.
We are the birth,
And the death,
And the space in-between.
We feel each victorious hunt
And each failure
Each panting escape
And each painful end.
We are the lovers of life
Each birth one of family
Each death that of a child
To carry with us always

We have watched so many species
Call this place their home.
We have seen them grow and spread
And felt them wither and die.
seen climates cool and warm
Asteroids strike and volcanoes blow
And now we see a species take death
As their calling card
And spread like none before.

And in the end
we do not change.
And we know
If we but blink it will be over

And if the dust settles
Over the life which once called this place a home
It will settle too over us
And we will stay the same
Watching, Waiting for
Dna to find its way into cells
And worlds to begin
And fall
Begin
And fall

Søren Evans-Reese
Honorable Mention – © 2023
Providence, RI, USA
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Birds

Before this ashen sky, there were cardinals.
Suburban forests speckled with red blurs. Cardinals are monogamous which means they mate for life.

I used to live on a pipestem lined neatly with trees. My room was on the front side of the house which means I had a big watching window. I was something of a romantic back then. I imagined bird weddings on the front lawn.
Regal red feather suits and demure, brown brides wing to wing. I used to believe in love, which means I’ve always believed in remembering.

When she asks me what I miss from Before I say the birds but really I mean colors.
She’s from the city which means I have to tell her about cardinals. I paint pictures with words so that she’ll have this red memory too.

KG Graham
3rd Place – © 2023
Woodbridge, VA, USA

About the Winning Poets

Ryan E. Holman (First Place)—Ryan E. Holman has had work appearing in various publications and juried venues over the past two decades, and enjoys writing about mundane and fantastic life through the lens of the elements. She was raised and lives in the mid-Atlantic USA.

Alyssa Granato (Second Place)—I am a graduate student in Applied Psychology living in the Pine Barrens of Southern New Jersey. I have a fascination with horror and fantasy and love to implement it into my writing. It helps close the gap between what we deem “self” and “other”.

KG Graham (Third Place)—KG Graham is a poet and educator. Their work has most recently been recognized in the Our Shared Memory Project and in The Poetry Society of Virginia’s annual contest. They find joy in hiking, crochet, and teaching high school English.

Stephen A. Chmelewski (Honorable Mention)—Stephen Chmelewski is a teacher, writer, and traveler who lives in Portugal. He earned his MFA from the University of Arizona.

Søren Evans-Reese (Honorable Mention)—Søren Evans-Reese is an archaeologist and lover of the outdoors from coast to coast. They aspire to be the third in a line of part-time poets and full-time thinkers.