Corkscrew Hill Photo
Roger Philip Dennis

All afternoon she counts the sounds
until the fly-specked room crackles with silence.
Even the song thrush noteless. A thick drizzle
trickles rivulets down the window pane,
smears distance on fields, curtains-off hills
and greens the sagged thatch,
aches in the creaking gate and screws
watering eye to misting glass:
a hearse skids slowly up the muddy lane,
blurs in droplets on a spider-web,
spins sideways into darkness...

...rattling cough of cattle, rusty tractor,
hinge of paint-peeled door, gears
of cars forced to back in one-track lanes,
buzz of pylons spanning the hum
of outboards in the yachtsmen’s creek,
yelp of kids in the converted Mill,
the soft click-click of a camera-shutter
up Corkscrew Hill...

The casement steams with sunset. She picks herself
up off the floor, mouth dry as mourner’s grin.
Her arm reaches, shakes, reaches again,
gathers the clattering jar from the shelf.

“Cider?”
The landlord frowns, sniffing cat,
moth-ball, mould. She squares her back
on his fine view – the duck bob,
seagull clutter, gape of lime kiln.

“And a nip of lovage,”
before he can point her
the off-licence hatch in the yard,

“to keep out the damp!”
and smiles spittle.

Her flagon scrapes a scroll of varnish
the length of the bar’s stripped pine,
past bleating townies, past the regular’s chair
and the corner where the photographer
sits draining her valley
through a tilted lens.
For discussion

- Imagine the actual photo that’s called ‘Corkscrew Hill’? What does it focus on? Who’s in it? Who has taken the photograph? Where have they published or displayed it? What does the viewer think of it? What’s the difference between a snapshot photo and a snapshot poem?
- What’s implied by that word “draining” in the poem’s penultimate line?
- The judge’s report on this competition-winning poem (below) mentions its “sweetness, sentiment, the visual and a touch of the grotesque”. Do you agree? Are those the descriptive categories you’d pick?

About the poet

Roger Philip Dennis is an artist and tutor running painting workshops from his studio in Devon. He has enjoyed writing since appearing in his school magazine at the age of nine. He grew up in the New Forest, and went to St Andrews for an MA in Philosophy, where he co-founded, produced and illustrated the literary magazine Entry (1969-73). Craft textiles, archaeological reconstructions, abstract paintings, and topographical views of Fife and Somerset prompted studying ‘Art and Design in a Social Context’ at Dartington College. A 1985 Arvon Foundation Apprenticeship Scheme for a novel led to work editing. He continues writing fiction alongside poetry.

Judge’s comment

‘Corkscrew Hill Photo’ caught my eye when reading through a large batch of entries. It seemed to contain a strange mix of naivety and complexity. Its sonic effects were engrossing. Its phrasing was surprising and fresh – “the casement steams with sunset”, “seagull clutter, gape of lime kiln”. Most of all, I couldn’t quite grasp what it was about, but in the best of ways – I wanted to reread and make my own story from what I was being offered. Like all good poems, it offered the shared experience of writership and readership. It’s not a typical ekphrastic poem, and I couldn’t place it geographically or timewise (does it jump backwards and forwards?), but that didn’t matter. It’s a stunning poem which mixes sweetness, sentiment, the visual and a touch of the grotesque. I am glad we found it. – Roddy Lumsden

Links

- www.rogerdennisart.com
- Find a filmpoem based on the poem here: poetrysociety.org.uk/poems/corkscrew-hill-photo/
- Enter the National Poetry Competition: poetrysociety.org.uk/npc

More details of poetry reading, writing and discussion classes all round the country and online at poetryschool.com
The Day the Deer Came
Joanne Key

Second Prize

The suburbs dream of violence. Asleep in their drowsy villas, sheltered by benevolent shopping malls, they wait patiently for the nightmares that will wake them into a more passionate world.
– J.G. Ballard

Ivy ran wild in the airing cupboard; it filled our cavity walls, absorbed our tap water and strangled our systems.

The boiler screamed like a speared pig. A wilderness nested in the underground car park, the subway, as the wild things came to claim our hollows, turn our dark spaces into arks, our children into wolves. We woke to find beds not slept in and scatterings of fur and teeth; Cinderella duvet covers were clawed into quilts of blood and skin. We cringed at the sound of antlers scraping and tapping on our windows; the heat and steam rising from the rut in the summerhouse. All this.

It started with one small crack in the road; the wear and tear of cars; the rush of traffic and baby buggies; the pounding of feet and wheels; the slow soak-away. We ignored the scratching of our skin and the rubbing of grooves – all the wearing down, and through. We smiled at poppies secretly seeding our concrete with the knotweed dreams that filtered into the sleepyheads of our begonias, the bowling greens, our turf and garden magic.

In time, the fissure stretched itself wide and showed us the lining of its empty purse, and as all our sorries fell to the ground, dancing and spinning around like street performers, the deer came without warning; heads held high and marching; hooves clanging on the concrete like empty bells – mouths without tongues.

‘The Day the Deer Came’ was first published in the Spring 2015 issue of The Poetry Review, 105:1.
For discussion
- Who are the ‘we’ and what is the ‘our’ in this poem? How would an ‘I / my’ version of the poem differ? Read it out loud, substituting ‘I / my’ for ‘we / our’ – what changes?
- A review of the J G Ballard novel from which the epigraph is taken: www.theguardian.com/books/2006/sep/03/fiction.jgballard. Have you read the book? How does it compare to or inform the poem?
- Imagine this poem is part of a summer blockbuster apocalypse movie. Is it the first scene or the last?

About the poet
Joanne Key lives in Cheshire where she writes poetry and short fiction. She recently returned to university as a mature student to complete an MA in Contemporary Arts at Manchester Metropolitan University, Cheshire. She has previously been shortlisted for The Bridport Prize, Mslexia Poetry Competition and The Plough Poetry Prize. Her poems have appeared in magazines including The Interpreter’s House, Ink, Sweat and Tears and Nutshells and Nuggets. Completely in love with poetry, she writes every day, often inspired by fragments of life, water, landscapes and ideas of imaginary worlds. She has yet to publish a first collection.

Judge’s comment
‘The Day the Deer Came’ imagines wilderness infiltrating the edges of the city and gradually reclaiming it. From the opening line, “Ivy ran wild in the airing cupboard”, the routine of everyday life is undermined by dystopian change. The “cavity / walls”, which might normally provide insulation, become vulnerable to intrusion. The city is falling apart, first physically, with a “small crack in the road”, and then economically too as “the fissure stretched itself wide and showed us the lining / of its empty purse.” The vantage point of the first person plural is skilfully combined with a syntactical build-up to give a sense of collective anxiety rising until “all our sorries fell to the ground”. This is a poem that has something significant to say about possible human futures and their relation to non-human life, but it holds us in the present with the compelling, list-like rhythm of its unfolding narrative. Much of its haunting effect comes from the closing image, where the deer arrive with “hooves clanging / on the concrete like empty bells – mouths without tongues”. Simultaneously suggesting celebration and threat, speech and silence, it creates an intriguing ambiguity that invites us to keep thinking. – Zoë Skoulding

Links
- nutshellsandnuggets.tumblr.com/post/108535200007/joanne-key-two-poems
- Find a film poem based on the poem here: poetrysociety.org.uk/poems/the-day-the-deer-came/
- Enter the National Poetry Competition: poetrysociety.org.uk/npc

More details of poetry reading, writing and discussion classes all round the country and online at poetryschool.com
The Poetry Society’s National Poetry Competition 2014
Discussion ideas devised by the Poetry School

Last exit to Luton
Fran Lock

Third Prize

He’s a real man, you can tell, all plushy skunk and a dog you’d do well to avoid. Aaron’s twenty-three; says he could wear my moony face as a pendant, calls me tweety-bird. I hang around his neck and Aaron drives. He’s taking me out to get buzzed at a club. I’m wearing white denim, spotless as a chorister, and we are sculling the druggy gale between the tyre shop and the roundabout; we’re leaving these scutty streets, with their pawned gold and thawed meat, far behind us. We’re away up the town, gone for the gavelled abandon of smashed out me ’ead, for fighting squib with binge, and living for the weekend.

Aaron is not like the boys at home, dimbulb chinless wonders who only want to trap you in the mauldering bondage of marriage like their mothers. Aaron’s got other ideas, got big ideas, and vodka, and jellies, and he understands. I’m mature, need more than pliant writhing in a narrow bed that howls like a chimney. He says you’re better than them, and he’s right. I refuse to end up like that, like the girls at the camp, lank slags currying love and desperate quaking from spousal apathy; to be one of life’s pale remainders, scrubbing my sink and trudging to church, burnt out on a soused downer again. I don’t want to be tied to the site, to the tribe, to the old men, their tournaments and sorceries; to a fist in the face. I am special. I am rare. I want gilt and spree and perfect hair and endless fucking diamonds.

He will take me away, I know it. In the club we are spinning until my vision breaks into dizzy splinters; his kisses determine directionality. I’m lipping limoncello, lisping citronella, reeling round my handbag like a wasp around a bin. I see myself in the mirrored ceiling, well impressed with the brittle shimmy of me. Aaron is grinning, and I am watching the weaponised swag of my nails, rinsed in warm red light and raving in front of my face, my own face, big as billboard. All is love, and there is God, shining like a migraine!

He will take me away, he says, but not today. Tonight it is back to his flat by flickering inches, and then to bed, this mad cabbagey firmament, where I am rummaged and squirreled by turns. Aaron is smoking, the smoke hangs in the air like a spookhouse special effect. His back is baroque with spots, a constellated mire. He does not tell me that he loves me, he tells me I am old for my age, and I smile. I smile at his Jesus tattoo, pink and coy as a bearded lady. Jesus is smiling too. I have no plans. I don’t want to go home. I have school in the morning. You know what they say about gypsy girls: our life is either a circus or a zoo.

For discussion

- Is Aaron really a “real man”? Do you believe she’s “old for her age”? Is “His back is baroque with spots, / a constellated mire” the language of a schoolgirl? How much distance is there between the composing poet and the speaker of the poem? What effect does that gap have on your reading of it?
- “You know what they say about gypsy girls: our life is either a circus or a zoo.” What’s the difference? Which life is the girl in the poem living? Who is the zookeeper / ringmaster and who the animals?
- Is this a poem that speaks of your youth? Do you wish it did? Do you wish it didn’t?

About the poet

Fran Lock is a sometime itinerant dog whisperer and poet, now living and working in London. Her debut collection Flatrock (Little Episodes) was launched in May 2011. Her work has appeared in various places, including Ambit, Poetry London, The Rialto, The Stinging Fly and in Best British Poetry 2012 (Salt). Her second collection The Mystic and the Pig Thief (Salt) came out in September 2014. She is the winner of the 2014 Ambit Poetry Competition.

Judge’s comment

This poem had to overcome the fact I didn’t know if it was a poem or a prose-poem or prose and I wasn’t sure it knew. Maybe it doesn’t care, I don’t. Its sheer bravado trumps all my inclinations. It goes swaggering through town like a vivid old-time circus, commandeering all five senses till they start to fuse with each other. It wallows in joy and rejoices in squalor, it makes the Now swell and swell till it engulfs the before and after. It’s golden and grim and salvaged and relished, it’s Hope and Misery having a hot date, it’s the one poem in a thousand that knows how to swear. I’m glad it knocked me down in the street, I’m still hearing it and it’s halfway to the next town. – Glyn Maxwell

Links

- Find a filmpoem based on the poem here: poetrysociety.org.uk/poems/last-exit-to-luton/
- Enter the National Poetry Competition: poetrysociety.org.uk/npc

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