

## Second Place:

### Play the Game

**Alison Carter (Cockermouth, England)**

I have studied the splayed wishbone  
in the back legs of each plastic racehorse  
in my stable and know this to be  
an authentic indicator of fortune.  
I have trained the greats: Fandango, Play On  
Overcoat, Marmaduke Jinks, Dorigen,  
directed the dream finish, seen  
bookies cleaned out, operatic with grief.

I have lived in a murderous mansion,  
walked the yellow brick road to nine rooms,  
whispered to people with funnelled bodies  
heard deceit sing in them like filtered sand,  
watched them disappear without excuse  
into connecting passages, where they hide,  
silent, calculating, never falling  
foul of that fatal roll of the dice.

I have scored the perfect penalty, seen  
the Italians swoon to the floor in defeat,  
watched golden stars and streamers  
flow unchecked from my index finger,  
my perfectly manicured cuticle  
sparkle on AstroTurf as the press hone  
in, the current premium on my digit  
rumoured to quadruple overnight.

I have now moved to town on professional  
advice, bought a penthouse in a dark blue  
area. It is never light, there are storms.  
I am drawn daily to the candy coloured  
streets. There is a sweet vibe between  
Bow Street and Northumberland Avenue.  
I focus on my breathing, calculate  
the odds of tumbling jailbirds on release.

### **Judge's comments**

Like the two joint first poems this bravura piece was a frontrunner from the start. Faced with poems of this quality the judge is forced to make invidious distinctions between poems each in its own way marvellously achieving what it sets out to do. In the boldness of its conception and the energy of its language this is in some ways a more ambitious poem than the joint firsts. Just a couple of awkward linebreaks slightly tipped the edge for me.

But it is a hugely enjoyable read (not something often said about poems) with an unsettling premise - a gamer immersed in games (and board games too) so far that he or she has beheld 'bookies operatic with grief' (a wonderful image) over the victories of plastic racehorses, 'heard deceit sing' in the 'funnelled bodies' Cluedo pieces, is inexorably drawn to walk the candy-coloured streets' of Monopoly. This poem ponders on the nature of truth and illusion, of obsession itself, but does so with the lightest of touches.