

## Forward/*emagazine* Creative Critics 2021 – Winner and Runners-up

### Winner

**Charlie Bowden, Queen Mary's College, Basingstoke, Hampshire**

'The Beautiful Girl Whose Country I Can't Pronounce (after Selima Hill)'

I can but I don't, out of respect because  
if I said it, it would make them real to me,

the flash fires that dance across her forehead  
and the cold hard waves that tumble down her back.

It's better for me, personally, to hear and not say it  
so instead it's a mirage in my mind, always out of reach

like an almond left hanging from an old stop sign  
high in the sky, obscuring the sight of the sea

and a little girl teetering, teeth chattering and half-asleep,  
who dreams of the green twigs of a Californian almond tree.

I was originally attracted to Selima Hill's poem for its ability to say so much with so few words; I was intrigued by Hill's envisioning of the emotionally and physically taxing journey of "someone who is lost" and decided to link it to the prospect of immigration. Having seen politicians argue over whether to send innocent people seeking asylum back to their war-torn countries of origin over the last few years inspired me to think of the lack of respect migrants are typically afforded in the UK and how white British people tend to view their cultures and home countries. I took the structure, style and themes of Hill's poem and put them into the perspective of a young immigrant surrounded by selfishness and misunderstanding, using "I" and "me" more often than "she" and "her" to communicate how we often feel the need to put others' struggles in our context or completely ignore them in favour of our own problems. I used the image of an unreachable almond, linking back to the fruit in the original poem, to represent both the freedom and power of developed countries as almonds are native to middle eastern countries but have been transported and cultivated in the west for many years, most notably in California, with the green twigs of young almond trees representing the possibility of a new life. The end of the poem is meant to signify how the true struggles of immigrants are often washed over in the face of legislation and political statements, and the poem as a whole is meant to feel almost like a bombardment of excuses on the narrator's part to emphasise the innate guilt that many of us feel when we hear of atrocities being committed in countries we often turn people from away.

### **Judge Kim Moore comments:**

My first placed poet chose to respond to Selima Hill's 'The Beautiful Man Whose Name I Can't Pronounce'. This poet has put a wonderful twist on Hill's poem, changing the title to 'The Beautiful Girl Whose Country I Can't Pronounce' in a poem that seethes with anger against racism and the way immigrants are treated by both government, society and individuals. The commentary was illuminating and traces clearly and carefully how the new poem has its roots in Hill's poem before blossoming outward to become something really original.

## Runner-up

**Charlotte Vosper, St George's College, Weybridge, Surrey**

'Up and Away'

Jolt onto the bus and debate where to sit:  
With the wasted old man or the infamous tit  
In your maths class who looks like they just want to quit  
As the tunes in their ears ascend up and away.

Faint, tinny bars from these earbuds escaping  
As teenagers rap about women they're raping  
And high-schoolers huddle in cubicles vaping  
Sweet clouds of bubblegum, up and away.

Pull down your school skirt by sheer force of habit  
And speed down the high street as meek as a rabbit;  
Better pick up the pace or he'll think he can have it  
And you ponder how you could float up and away.

Always perceived, yet deprived independence,  
Pushed into a law court and left no defendants  
And wondering when it all got so relentless –  
Their promise so futile; flee up and away.

'Up and Away' is a poem loosely based on Chingonyi's '16 Bars for the Bits', drawing inspiration from the musical influence exhibited through its tight rhythmic flow and melodic reference of "16 bars". This idea is reflected within my poem through a similar rhythmic drive and the inclusion of the line "tunes in their ears" as a vehicle to move the poem forwards. The overarching theme of a societal disregard of adolescents is inspired by Chingonyi's line "the youngers get bladdered and stagger"; I was struck by the lack of realistic literary portrayal of the teenage experience that did not either glorify or erase. Additionally, I decided to imitate the relatively indifferent tone that discussed what could be regarded as failures of modern society. For instance, I contrast the gravity of misogyny and rape culture reflected in the line "Better pick up the pace or he'll think he can have it" with the simple consideration of how one could "float up and away". I believe that escapism is a powerful tool in both literature and everyday life, which is why I centred my poem around the repetition of the act of leaving a situation ("up and away"). I view the nonchalance of Chingonyi's writing as a form of this escapism, where one does not consciously confront the flaws of a late-stage capitalist society that forces divisions between class and creates a space where there are many "homeless in parks" that have to make "bargains with breathing"; this is a technique I admire and tried to emulate. Structurally, my poem is also 16 lines long and features enjambment to mimic the spilling of topics and ideas and a consequent urgency to address them all at once.

### **Judge Kim Moore comments:**

My first runner-up is 'Up and Away'. Through their commentary, the poet describes how they have taken inspiration from the musicality and formal drive of Kayo Chingonyi's poem '16 Bars for the Bits' to create their own reflection on teenage experiences. The jaunty rhythm and rhyme scheme deployed in the poem contrast sharply and effectively with the disturbing portrayal of misogyny in the poem.

## Runner up

**Florence Burdge, Camden School for Girls, London**

'Things I have caught'

Primary school was rife  
with colds and whispers and giggles.  
We caught them all  
and passed them round  
like a rumour.

A summer of camps,  
sports and sweat, and ice lollies  
under the shade of a watchful oak.  
A glorious moment when I caught the soaring ball  
with one outstretched hand, and heard my name  
cheered by a chorus of friends.

Years later I caught the tube  
with my girlfriends. On the way to London Town  
in a delicate summer, jeans and a jumper.  
I caught his camera;  
we must have caught his eye.

Amber's house.  
From the bottom step  
light and content, I caught  
a snippet of a whisper that slithered down  
without the owners knowledge  
and got caught in my brain.

And when my friend was slipping  
down, down,  
each night I reached into that black hole  
and caught his hand.

And now each day I catch the train,  
I wear a mask  
to keep out the cold.

Caleb Femi writes in this poem about being a young black, working class kid in the UK, and the challenges that come with that. The first few stanzas paint such a vivid picture of childhood, particularly childhood in London, and feel reminiscent in an almost comforting way. It is this that first drew me to the poem and made it so heartbreaking towards the end. His poem is a journey from youth to adulthood and it is reflected in the tone of his writing - from comedy to emotive and heartfelt description. In my response to his poem I explored my own experience as a young woman in London and my growth from innocence to experience. I started my poem at the age of 5 to 11, around the age that Femi begins his poem, and the age where children are still at their most innocent. The first two stanzas are, then, about the joys of being a child, and even if colds are

something I didn't want to catch, and I sometimes didn't enjoy my sports camps, my memories of that time are positive ones. I therefore kept the beginning lighthearted. Similarly to Caleb Femi, I wanted to use the later stanzas to explore more important issues. For instance I mention harassment on public transport and mental illness, both issues that I know many young people face. In the last stanza I referenced Covid-19 as it has dominated so much of our lives for the past year and a half and it is something we have had to learn to accept and deal with. I think these things represent my development and growth and reflect the same journey in Femi's poem in terms of my own experiences. I thought the play on the word 'stolen' was used beautifully throughout the poem, from stealing sweets, to hearts, to dignity and finally grief, and I used the word 'caught' to tell my own story in my response. I think the word being used throughout connected the narrative and the poem as a whole, and ultimately inspired me to write my own reflection with the same link.

**Judge Kim Moore comments:**

My second runner-up is 'Things I Have Caught'. This poet was inspired by Caleb Femi's poem 'Things I Have Stolen'. The poet pivots around and explores different connotations and ways of using the word 'caught' to create a moving portrayal of the highs and lows of growing up.