

# Forward/emagazine Student Critics Competition (2017) Winner Creative-Critical Response 16-19

Mukahang Limbu, Oxford Spires for his poem 'Ithaca' and commentary, in response to 'Telemachus' by Ocean Vuong

## On Ithaca

Sons wait like chillies pressed against  
lean sandalwood altar backs without

the sweat to slip. Sons smell the spice  
on the hands of mothers, who kiss *palm-to-*

*-palm-* and dream of being wives to empty beds, to  
soldiers too afraid to wear their boots. Fathers

polish that black leather with the hot lick  
of a lighter. Always. Fathers clean. Fathers

wash. Fathers wash Night out from the hair of  
their sons. *Father washes Mother's pale face.*

\*\*\*

*ma's*  
face *ma's* arms  
*ma's* eyes

were  
a mountain trail  
too vast

to  
wrap around my  
chest

*ma's*  
face *ma's* arms  
*ma's* eyes

are  
a narrow path with  
dull

stones  
oceans and  
rhododendron

\*\*\*

Papa pushed my hair back, and with grease spiked it into spears.  
Grandma said, *boys like you* will never catch the sunlight. *You are the shade of sunrise.*

**Reflective commentary:**

I first discovered Ocean Vuong, as a performance poet, online, reading his piece: “notebook fragments”, and was immediately inspired by his honest exploration of his own identity (cultural background and sexuality) because these aspects are apparent in my own conflicts, growing up as a homosexual adolescent in a Nepalese community.

*Telemachus* centres on one of Vuong’s (and my) recurrent themes: the relationship of fathers and sons. Vuong, Telemachus, and I all share a wandering father, and my poem focuses on the impact of this loss on a family. Like Vuong’s, my poem is autobiographical but seeks to be general too, so I use cohesive 3<sup>rd</sup> person plurals, “Sons...”, “Mothers...”, to create an impersonal tone and an omniscient narrator. In this, I am echoing Vuong’s calm yet clearly personal narrative with its intimate speculations and gestures- “*I might...*”, “*I turn...*”. In both poems, we understand, for all the myth-making there is a close relationship and a loss.

I titled my poem “On Ithaca”; the island, where *Telemachus* and his mother Penelope waited for Odysseus, and this allows me to echo Vuong’s configuration of a western classic epic into his Vietnamese/American story: my Ithaca is clearly Nepal.

My poem is about *waiting*. Therefore, I mirrored Vuong’s couplet form, broken by running enjambment and broken syntax and rhythm to establish distance, create a feeling of breathlessness, and an agony of anticipation.

Vuong’s *Telemachus* realises his father’s scars will always be with him. My *Telemachus* makes his way to peace through his mother: the two tenses, “were a mountain trail”, “are a narrow path”, are used to create a sense of growth.

At the end of the path is a grandmother, a couplet, at the Eastern, right side of the page.

# Forward/emagazine Student Critics Competition (2017)

## Highly Commended Creative-Critical Response 16-19

Allegra Mullan, Camden School for Girls for her poem and commentary in response to 'My Life According to You' by Sinéad Morrissey

A response to My Life According to You (by Sinéad Morrissey)

So I was born before I realized and  
You were already there and big so you  
Knew things and told me some of them  
But then it snowed and you got hit  
By a sledge but I remembered it wrong  
And for a while I thought it was me  
And we lived in a house and then a different house  
And the first door was yellow and the second was green  
And I missed the yellow door and I cried for  
A while but not for long because it made

my head hurt

But you let me sleep at the end of your bed  
And then I was still little but I was as big as I had ever been  
So then you were ten and wouldn't  
Let me sleep at the end of your bed anymore  
And I cried even though my head hurt  
And it was okay because you would still  
Talk to me and you would have your friends  
Round and I could talk to them but only some of them but that was before

you were quiet

and you watched a lot of telly all day  
And I went to school and I read books and I felt much older than before  
Everyone kept telling me off I met a boy who I liked and  
He liked books too but he didn't like me  
You didn't like me either for a long time and my head hurt  
A lot but then one day you did again when I was a teenager  
And even though I couldn't sleep at the end of your bed  
You talked to me and maybe it was even better  
This way because

I have so much more to tell you now

## Commentary

Morrissey's poem dramatizes the way in which memory re-enacts the past. One recovered detail detonates the next, and the lack of punctuation means that her readers are forced to work sentences out of the chain of words. Their racing rhythm is only interrupted by the lurch of the heavily indented line breaks that end each stanza: 'he was just lonely/ for his sister/ to come and keep him company' – solely through structure Morrissey enables us feel we are the ones remembering.

What I discovered when trying to imitate this was how one recollection could provoke another. Memory is unpunctuated. The lack of punctuation also allows the poem to imitate the rushing way a child might narrate a story. Until discovering the identity of Morrissey's 'You' near the end of her poem I had assumed that the childishness of her language choices ('sparkly' and 'tummy' for example) were in the voice of the speaker's childhood self. Only on finding out that the speaker was addressing her daughter did I realize that this voice was the speaking half-language that an adult speaks to a child. Here the language takes on an emotional change; the speaker's child has reawakened the child in her.

Morrissey's poem is an exploration of the way that a mother thinks about her own childhood in order to understand her daughter. As soon as we hear of the speaker's daughter being born we hear about the possibility of her grandchildren. It seems that women cannot help but compare their lives to each other's, yet cannot be satisfied with the parallels they draw. This is why I chose to write a narrative of sisterhood. This relationship involves not a cyclical structure but a conflicting, parallel progress. Morrissey's speaker is remembering alone; my speaker's memories are tangled with another's.

## 16-19 Creative – Highly Commended

### Mahira Mannan, Haggerston School: for ‘Poem’ in response to ‘dinosaurs in the hood’

while we’re at it, let’s make another film called *A Happy Constellation*.

*Me before You* meets *Dangal* meets the *The Confirmation*. it should start off with an asian girl, doing something that isn’t her maths homework. let the asian girl be special. let’s have a scene where *fair and lovely* isn’t her best friend; she’s painting self-portraits with her eyes closed because she’s that good.

this time round, don’t let Scarlett Johansson steal the lead role, i repeat this protagonist is not white, she’s asian and she’s in the spotlight, she’s nobody’s shadow, she’s not a comedic punch line this time ‘round. we’ll have an all asian cast, all different colours, shapes, sizes, from all around the world, i want kids exchanging *jelebi* for *kimchi*, *tsuivan* for *ras malai* and all that’s inbetween.

she’ll ride her bike and put her earphones in, asian girls belong on tumblr too. but don’t get her wrong, she’s great at driving too but her love for the environment is stronger; her mother on the other hand, [we’ll make a short segway here], is a retired formula 1 driver, now she kicks ass in political matters, deliberating with the local council. it’s all for one and one for all.

we’ll have kpop as background music, it’ll be loud and clear alright. we’ll let them know that bts no longer stands for their overused *behind the scenes* but rather *bangtan sonyeondan*, that while they mock music of other languages, they’re shitting on artists who have broken into the west with a full *korean* album. no. 1 on the billboard 200 chart, people. *we did that*.

i’m sure their only-english-speaking asses will quiet down for a moment. and they’re laughing at *bollywood* now, i hear. how convenient. i hope they know Priyanka Chopra’s net worth before they come for her with their racist misery. to be frank, i don’t care, i want us to keep the drama, i want the motions before her first kiss to last a thousand scenes, i want thunder in the background when the

antagonist [read: caucasian man] appears. but mostly i want that asian girl to know that she has hopes and dreams far beyond that tiny domestic bubble, that she has a culture, an identity she needs to take full-fledged control of before they take more it away. i want this movie to be a big fuck you to this popular trope of asian erasure. if i can’t have the million dollar budget, if i have to film this damn film on an iphone 8, none of that matters as long as an asian girl can finally shine.

#### Commentary:

Danez Smith’s ‘Dinosaurs in the Hood’, touched the expanse my heart. I felt as though it was the very words, wishes of some of my black friends – they would have loved to watch this film. In all honesty, at first, all my mind could fathom was *Black Panther*, a film finally giving the black community what they wanted; I couldn’t help but think that ‘Dinosaur’s in the Hood’ was Smith’s very own Black Panther. And so when I tried to respond, I tried to encompass the mindset of my black friends and by that I mean, convey the felicity they felt towards Black Panther and in this case what they would have felt towards ‘Dinosaurs in the Hood’ had it been real. But as you could imagine, that did not work out all. But with a blank page, reading over Smith’s words again, I thought to myself: why do I have to pretend? Why would I need to be a Victoria, a Rachel an Ajoke when films have been desperately erasing Asian cultures? And so I envisioned all the clichés and overused tropes of Asian characters I could think of and like Smith, turned them of their head. I tried to encapsulate a similar sort of dry humour that Smith expresses, through sardonic phrases, blunt rebuttals – I even tried to mimic the ‘fragmented’ structure of the poem that somehow makes it whole, cyclical even; which fits perfectly with Smith’s last sentence that I also tried to use in a similar fashion. In short, my poem tried to possess the same purpose in which I adorned ‘Dinosaurs in the Hood’ with: a film that my people would want to see. Smith’s poem screams one resolute message to me; *whether you’re off the mark or not, someone has got to say it*.

## **Winner – Forward/emagazine Creative Critics 2019**

**Lucy Thynne, Lady Margaret School, Hammersmith Fulham**

### **Responding to Dubrovnik by Vidyan Ravinthiran**

#### **My mother, swimming**

Sometime far from now I will think of this: you, a pale line  
sketched into the blue, the waves holding you  
as any daughter would want to be held.

The day slips past like water trailing through a child's hands,

and I want to be small again, swimming with you, not here,  
but in the bathtub at home, sliding around like an egg-yolk  
loosened from its shell. You'd put me between your thighs, opened  
into curving brackets of skin, and I would not be thinking

of myself in the third person, but laughing in the way  
I've now forgotten. There's something about arriving  
in the rain and it all quieting now to this: the sea,  
wine-dark, you, its drawing in reverse.

I don't want to think of when I won't be sitting here,  
watching you swimming, so I think about your own mother instead –  
how as she got older, her memory reached further back  
into itself. How she told us that she remembered

being curled in the womb, the liquid, amniotic glow,  
and later, the face of her mother after birth.

None of us believed her, but I think this is the same  
kind of swimming: a kick and a breath, holding on,

her daughters and their daughters encased  
like Russian dolls inside of her. We run home and in the dark  
of the garden I dream of you calling to me from the sea,  
your voice shouting as it throbs above us:

my daughter - I love you, I love you.

## Commentary

Ravinthiran writes about watching both the present and the past through observing a loved-one: an ambiguous 'you.' The piece is titled 'Dubrovnik', but is as much about the echoes of Sri Lanka later in the poem, described in beautifully evocative images and subtle rhymes ('bitten', 'smitten') that tie the poem together. I loved the idea of the observer that begins 'Dubrovnik', and so have tried to respond to this by creating my own, who watches her mother swimming and, much like that of Ravinthiran's, thinks of a past and future.

In Ravinthiran's poem, there is a strong sense of two separate places, with the act of swimming as a bridge between them. I decided to write about multiple places that intertwine as a result, some more domestic and maternal – our bath at home, and ultimately the womb, all told through the inherited family memories Ravinthiran also writes of. I really liked the significantly implied female presence in Ravinthiran's poem – he refers to two mothers – which I wanted to draw on myself, applying this to my own personal history of my mother and grandmother. I chose the same setting of Ravinthiran's poem – the sea – which seemed apt, as a kind of mother to so many other living things.

'Dubrovnik' above all touched me for its beautiful and deceptively simple presentation of time passing. The poem jumps from the present to a 'later' to the earlier memory of Sri Lanka, and even the possibility of being 'pulled in and under and lost forever.' Both mothers at the end of 'Dubrovnik' act differently as the antitheses of each other – but neither seems less loving. Like my own mother and grandmother in this poem, two very different kinds of mothers, this poem aims to recreate Ravinthiran's sense of tenderness in portraying loved-ones and motherhood.

**Runner-up – Forward/emagazine Creative Critics 2019**

**Katie Kirkpatrick, Hills Road Sixth Form College, Cambridge**

**Responding to: 'Scenes for a Bright Town' by Helen Tookey**

**mosaic**

in this shard  
is the curve of his iris  
dirty sea water grey  
polluted with questions,  
glinting, like sunlight on the crests of waves,  
when answers are evaded

in this shard  
is the inside of his lip  
so vulnerable, so soft,  
pink like the blush of your cheeks  
every monday afternoon

in this shard  
is the palm of his hand  
with carvings that tell fortunes,  
a life line to a time  
just beyond the coastline

grey pink flesh  
the shards are set in grout -  
and still he looks up expectantly



## Commentary

Tookey's poem made a lot more sense to me when I focussed on the final image: reconstructing a city using 'fragments'. For my poem, I wanted to take the theme of fragmentation but apply it to a person rather than a city.

I admired the way Tookey's poem is split into sections, each of which captures its own distinct image, and so decided I wanted to mirror this; rather than subtitles, I chose to use spacing to create the visual image of a mosaic.

The imagery in my poem is inspired by that of Tookey's: she focuses on nature and the seaside, and I decided to echo this by comparing features of the boy to sea water, waves, and the coastline, thus giving my poem a sense of setting. I tried to mimic Tookey's skill at conveying character and plot without explicitly mentioning it through details such as 'every monday afternoon' and 'when answers are evaded': she expresses so much so subtly in lines like 'not midnight exactly – three minutes past/by the kitchen clock'. These kinds of phrases also allowed me to mirror the uneasy, quiet tone of Tookey's poem.

The ending of my poem is intended to suggest that the shards of the mosaic are fragments of memory, and that the character referred to in 'your cheeks' is expecting too much from their memories. This was inspired by the way the final line of Tookey's poem pulls together the idea of the different images making up the city, and also makes readers question the language of the title: surely a 'bright' city doesn't need to be reconstructed? I tried to mirror this through the idea that the last line makes readers consider whether this is really a mosaic, a memory, or a living person.

## **Runner up – Forward/emagazine Creative Critics 2019**

**Anna Holland, St Nicholas Catholic High School Sixth Form, Northwich,  
Cheshire**

### **Responding to ‘Flowers’ by Jay Bernard**

#### **Her**

The streets will run red  
Tonight  
The stars will shine from a blood-soaked mirror  
Tonight  
The flowers will die  
Tonight  
The meadows will thrive on my beating heart  
Tonight

You beg to know my  
Crime  
You assume I must be punished for my  
Crime  
You hunt me for my  
Crime  
You do not get the right to decide my  
Crime

Why won't you help me  
Escape?  
We're crying and screaming, desperate for  
Escape  
But they won't let us  
Escape  
Because in Russia, hunting us is their  
Escape

Do I have your attention now?  
Will you come and save  
Us, the innocent?

All I did was love her.

## Reflection

Jay Bernard is an LGBTQ+ black poet who, through their poetry, fought to raise awareness of the suffering of black people in our society. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I feel that it is my duty to follow in their footsteps and fight to make the suffering of our community known. In Russia there is a website dedicated to identifying gay people, only so that they can be hunted and brutally murdered. Their only crime is loving who they want to. On July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019, gay activist Yelena Grigoryeva was stabbed to death for trying to defend members of the LGBTQ+ community who had been detained by Russian police. This website turns the murder of LGBTQ+ people into a game based off the Saw movies, and Yelena found her name listed before she died. Despite numerous death threats, Yelena continued to fight for her community, and this poem is dedicated to her memory, and to the memories of all the LGBTQ+ Russians who have been slaughtered because of who they loved. Bernard's poem expresses so much anger at the murder of innocent people, who died because of something they couldn't change. "Flowers" is an inspirational step towards breaking the silence surrounding the treatment of oppressed minorities, and I would like to follow in the footsteps of Bernard and Grigoryeva and tear down the extreme censorship we are held under. "Flowers" actively accuses the general public of their ignorance, and I themed my poem, "Her", around more directly accusing the reader of not doing enough to fight for us. Poems such as these are a call to arms to the people, and it is now their responsibility to respond.

# Forward/emagazine Creative Critics Competition 2020

## WINNER

Joyce Chen (Westminster School) for 'Cuttlefishing off the coast of Hong Kong' (responding to Will Harris' 'Holy Man')

### Cuttlefishing off the coast of Hong Kong

The night was painting the sea and my hands a vanishing colour  
but I could still feel the sticky warmth of the plastic reel  
like a comb flat in my palm. I must have only been five or six,  
peering out from between the boat's edge and safety rail,  
looking for cuttlefish in the dense water  
like looking for stars in a smoggy sky.

I felt small and forgotten watching the darkness congeal  
in a swarm of lazy mosquitoes and adult chatter -  
if I heard two dialects on deck, I would have thought  
they were lovers, then. The boat washed dimly yellow, the shade  
of my bedroom in those years of nightlights and spinning dreams.

a hitch on the line -

*Pull up quick but careful, careful / Pick it up for a picture, while it's still alive*

[now I like to think that I gave the sad creature to my brother  
because I could not carry the weight of its dying pulses]  
but when they all came up like a magic trick, fried and salted in a huge pan, still I ate  
and ate.

*Your tongue's gone black!*

and I think black as oil ink, black as an ocean for running away;

I would not think of how, in twelve years,  
protestors clad in black flow

# Forward/emagazine Creative Critics Competition 2020

## RUNNER-UP

things i am freezing to come back to later

after The Larder by Vicki Feaver

the cold shock of the river water kissing my waist  
the feeling of realising too late that the sun was branding me red  
the taste of heat in the back of my throat, on my forehead, between my palms  
the cans of pina colada we bought, the face you pulled after your first sip  
the scent of barbeque in the air, the way it brought back a memory i couldn't touch  
the outline of a square where the market once was, evacuated  
the way you spread cream on your scones, the way you pronounced the 'oh'  
the light creeping through my curtains at 3am: foreshadowing.  
the first day the weather turned, wool strangling me lovingly  
the guilt relaxing between my ribs, settling down above my diaphragm  
the email i started writing to my old english literature teacher about it all  
the smell of charity shops, of other people's memories  
the knowledge that not everything is temporary  
this poem.

### Reflective commentary

What I loved about Feaver's poem was the way in which it combined attention to detail with a general sense of nostalgia and longing. In my poem, I decided to take the same concept of storing things to remember but take on the new form of a sonnet and new themes of moving away from home for the first time and the seasons changing.

In terms of imagery, I was inspired by Feaver's sensory descriptions and fine details, such as the 'petal-shaped crater where the flower withered'. I tried to mirror this in my writing with phrases like 'the way you spread cream on your scones'. As Feaver's poem gets a lot of its power from understated, conversational vocabulary, I also wrote in a more casual style, hopefully making readers feel like they are looking in on an individual reminiscing as opposed to reading a 'public' poem.

I also loved the way 'The Larder' changed after the first three stanzas, focusing in on one key image. The transition between my first and second quatrains is intended to echo the gradual transition from summer to autumn, with the volta marking a more dramatic change in tone. Personally, I found the end of Feaver's poem to be a particular highlight, with the vivid image of 'crushing/its tangy pulp on my tongue.' I wanted the ending of my poem to be similarly striking, but in a very different way, and so decided to play on my title. I also liked the idea that poems can often seem like they are never truly finished; with regard to meaning, I wanted to suggest that life goes on even after what feels like a significant change.

into rivers of fear running through  
Hong Kong like a lifeblood; of how  
the waiter's face closes like a reflex  
when we order in Mandarin,  
the teapot left empty on white tablecloth,  
its lid floating belly-up like an apology  
or a dead thing: to him,

we were the predators with open jaws  
and he saw our tongues were black.

### **Reflective commentary**

Holy Man's penultimate stanza inspired the beginnings of my poem, as Harris associates the colour green with everything from the universal ('a cartoon frog... a septic wound... the glen') to the deeply personal ('the lane in Devon where my dad / grew up, and the river in Riau where my mum played'). I therefore chose black, a colour that has featured across daily news in Hong Kong for the past year, but also has strong associations with one of my earliest memories.

Harris's fixation with religion, from 'Christmas' to 'Tibetan prayer flags... meaningless severed / from the body of ritual, of belief' and 'a jade statue / of the Buddha', is reflected by my political focus in Cuttlefishing. While Holy Man centres around an unlikely encounter with a stranger who awakens spiritual introspection in the speaker, the central act of catching cuttlefish comes to signify the conflict between nations which bleeds into my speaker's life.

The stylistic feature that visually stood out to me from Holy Man was Harris's paragraph-like chunks of prosaic narrative, which I mirrored in my first two stanzas. In my poem however, the stanza and line lengths are not constant but devolve as the subject shifts across time from personal memory to the wider political backdrop. The two couplets especially break from the structure of the poem to highlight the stark contrast between how we perceive ourselves and what others see or assume.

Finally, the last line of Holy Man particularly stuck with me ('- and I flinched, waiting for the blade to fall'). I wanted to create the same sense of apprehension and undefined fear, or almost pre-regret, at the end of Cuttlefishing, hopefully leaving the reader with a sense of the confusion and guilt that often accompanies dual identity.

# Forward/emagazine Creative Critics Competition 2020

## RUNNER-UP

### Hide and Seek

What the hell, I still play hide and seek, Jack and Jill  
are lethal now, they're fetching a pail of poison,  
I'm thirsty for damage, I can fix this, but I'm already downhill  
I refuse to stop hiding, it's not fun anymore, toys in  
No one's looking, no one knows I'm hiding, an escapee  
"Fie, fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of a broken one." They attack.  
I cover my eyes, a filter of black, so they can't find me.  
All the prayers and violence couldn't put me back  
together again. I scream into my pillow, I can't fix this.  
I'm alone with my childhood monster, still the space  
under my bed isn't big enough for both of us. I need an abyss.  
So, we've moved to the closet. I know I'm only a misplace  
thinking of myself, but I can pretend that my monster is  
lonely. It offered me a rose and I might've passed it  
on. But my only friends are a bottle of tears and this  
feeling, a tissue, a tissue. I'm not crying wolf, I'm a misfit,  
and the sheep now, the bullets are invisible. Shift my gears,  
Are the hits silent too? I peep through the closet door  
Far, far away, my night light is still on, have you any fears?  
It tempts me. But I've spent so long in the closet that I account for  
all the monsters in the dark. A prisoner of your opinion.  
I had a little lamb too, but I can't see her from here.  
One day, I'll see her again. Abstain, I won't be your minion.  
Be nimble, be quick they say. Be like Jack. I just fear.  
They don't understand, justify your lies, you'll all fall down  
As I was born like this, I was born a big bad wolf, I should shout  
Runaway chanting, don't eat me, you can't catch me, so I wear a crown  
I'll make it up the hill. A tissue, a tissue. Ready or not, I'm coming out.

### **Reflective commentary**

This poem is called 'Hide and Seek' and it's in response to 'Rookie'. Although I interpreted 'Rookie' to be a poem about how people have the ability to have divergent sides to them, one that appears utterly normal and the other that is complete disassociated from the rest of society due to ignorance and innocence, I feel as though my poem shares elements with it. 'Hide and Seek' is from the narrative of a closeted member of the LGBT+ community and similar to 'Rookie' the verses introduce two sides. One that is seemingly innocent and ignorant to reality and the other is a deep set normality to fit in with the rest of society. In my opinion, both poems have an underlying tone of fear and isolation, like they don't feel as though they belong. Furthermore, I feel a sense of pity and sadness grips the entirety of the poems. Although my poem ends with a sense of hope and 'Rookie' ends with a feeling of utter loss both have a note of finality and acceptance of their fate.



## 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.

## Coming Apart by Francesca Lynes

Your land is coming apart, first a single thread loose,  
Picked by one of the younger ones, before he knows

The whole  
side of  
the hill  
rips in  
two.

A woman  
remains there.  
She will not  
leave.

She clings onto the tree trunk, her mouth stretched, close to splitting at the seams I will not leave.

The dirt spreads: tan and maroon reaching the ash blue sky,  
The red of her top: a gash, a sign.

I do not know what she so desperately protects.  
The land that was here before, now a tapestry unwoven; too muddled to see the colours and shapes.

What happened to your once embroidered land?

Why did I never see this? Why did I only see the ruin and the rips?

Unmake that hatred  
Unmake that tragedy  
Make the past that I was never shown.

From the dust, show me the fingers of the olive branches when  
they reached out,  
when they grew.

Teach me to make za'atar, to pick the olives, to cut the cucumbers and tomatoes on your breakfast table.

This was only love once; untangle it from the mess they made to cover it.

Show me how to embroider your land once more,  
Show me how to see it since I never saw how it was before.

## Reflective commentary

I chose Mohammed El-Kurd's poem 'Bulldozers Undoing God' because of the emotions it evoked. El-Kurd encourages the reader to grieve the country's loss by contrasting the domestic foundations of its reality: 'breakfast table', 'za'atar', with the intense tragedy it endures: 'every footstep is a grave'. In my poem I wanted to express remorse at not knowing this country when it was beautiful: only ever seeing it in disrepair. This reminded me of war-torn countries in the media and how we know so little about many countries, particularly their value until they have been through a tragedy. This adds to the dangerous single view of many countries outside of Britain as less stable, less valuable, when in fact we were never shown them before, contributing to the dangerous myth of Western superiority. I thought about the word 'war-torn' and visualised a country ripping. This inspired me to use an embroidery motif, as did the dressmaking allusion: 'corseting the tree's waist'; the reference to 'embroidered destinies' and the verbs 'stitched' and 'untangling'. I hope the original country is symbolised by a complex, colourful and beautiful tapestry, hard to rebuild after destruction. Structurally, I was inspired by El-Kurd's use of line indents to create meaning. For example, I aimed to visually represent the tearing of the hill in two with the woman who remains, mirroring an image from El-Kurd's poem. At the end of my response, I used many imperative verbs to convey the urgency I felt writing this poem - why do we not see countries before ruin? What does this say about our view of them? Overall, I want my poem to leave readers with a slightly unsettling feeling, because of the tragedy but also because they are confronted with their views of other countries, particularly before their coming apart.

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## Eurydice on the Artist

/I wasn't in the poem the poem was true/

I promise, I've not screamed since Taenarum. Nor loved a poet

He always said he'd press a poem out of me: Wildflower pretty, wildfire pretty  
Dead petals pledged to a smouldering page

Time stirs in its slumber, raises its three heads, slobbering from its three maws  
and drags me back, kicking, to some eerie Thracian wood

/Relief/, I would have told him, had he asked,/is a poor counterpoint to venom/  
/Relief/, I think, /feels bloody in the mouth, soured by sorrow/

The word itself, hisses and drips  
From a lyre to a bitter pooling note - black ichor, molasses thick in the woodland smoke  
A promise well worth crossing, double-crossing  
Make a brook of me, babbler - or a damn of Styx,  
His green stark against this underworld grey  
Here we are, turning away,  
Held hostage by our falsest moments, by our truest oaths  
And by truth's course, a pair of ghosts.

And now, a fresh boy, a grave boy  
As in newly torn asunder, yet a carcass overgrown  
A snake split spine-wise,  
/The queen coming home/,  
Scaled skin shed like the turning of the leaves  
/A pomegranate out on the seashore bleeds/  
Seeps deeper, returns to the dust.

But forgive me, when memory fades - Death takes with it many faces  
You tried so hard to make a muse of me  
You, with your quick wit and portable pedestal  
They will say you came for me, that you tried  
But you brought a song to a grindstone for finishing touches, polished till it hummed with shame

See how it spins, how the story warps?  
Worth as much as a kiss to a corpse

## Reflective commentary

The facet that initially drew me to McCrae's poem is the way that it exists between truth and fiction, even within a mythological world. Eurydice herself seems torn between relief and betrayal, which was the broader tone I wanted to communicate in my poem - a longing for a state that never truly existed, alongside an indignance at its theft. Personally, I was inspired by the way McCrae captured the experience of rumour, fallacy and of not being believed. At some point, we have all felt voiceless, and every rendition I have heard of this myth speaks about Eurydice instead of speaking from her perspective. 'Eurydice on the Art of Poetry' offered a fresh view for me, so I felt the urge to contribute and to highlight aspects that felt important to me, such as their initial meeting, and Orpheus's own death. In my vision of this poem, he is a revered and seemingly perfect figure, whose talents forgive him many things, allowing him to maintain his immaculate reputation. All Eurydice can do is offer her story in the hope that someone listens, which I think contributes to the emotional undertones of distress and of anger. Rhyme and repetition are what I mainly based the structure on, relying on them to show emphasis and heightened sensation, as opposed to the original irregular line breaks. Furthermore, I was fascinated by the role of memory in the poem, which I chose to represent through enjambment, with specific breaks to show Euridyice's lapse in memory after death. In my response, I reference other mythological elements like Cerberus and Persephone as well as places of origin like Thrace to contrast the persona's past with her present, despite the way she slips between the two, reinforcing her feeling of vulnerability in the face of greater forces.

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## My Olive Oil Blood

Palestine is our mother,  
Our love, our blood,  
Our sweet and tender Teta

She is our Friday mornings,  
The adhan  
Mint tea, zaatar, warm bread and olives

We were plucked from her by force,  
Forefathers forced on foot,  
Miles from home  
To find a new home  
away from home

We cling onto anything we can,  
Knafeh and  
Keffeyeh brought to life  
To revive our memories, our Teta's stories  
Make them flourish  
Flowers blooming in foreign faraway lands

To grow up in the diaspora  
Is to grow up a silent fighter  
Fighting for the right to hold a passport,  
to identity,  
culture,  
heritage,  
homeland.  
The right to be Palestinian

To grow up in the diaspora  
Means whispered prayers at every Breaking News  
Our hearts sinking at each name uttered by the journalist  
Our eyelids stripped back against our will,  
to witness  
helplessly,  
aimlessly,  
The constant nakbas,  
The very horrors on our own land,  
Our blood

On foreign soil every footstep is murder.  
Murder of our heritage,  
Murder of our identity,  
Straying further and further away from our roots

Our identity an abstract outline now,  
The outline of our land

The outline of our land  
So we wear our gold chains with pride  
The outline of her map seeping into our skin

We may not be there  
To hold them hand in hand  
But we will always be part of the land

Woven and stitched into her tatreez,  
The intertwining roots and thread holding our beings together.

In the roots of her olive trees,  
Letting the olive oil  
Flow free in our veins

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## Reflective commentary

El Kurd writes of Palestine and the extreme struggle of being in Palestine, focusing on an elderly woman and her fight for something as simple as an olive tree. He describes the immense struggle by using familiar images that evoke mixed feelings of sorrow and home-sickness for any Palestinian. Due to my own personal experience as a Palestinian, I felt extremely connected to El Kurd's writing and wanted to give my perspective of the struggles of being a Palestinian on the outside looking in.

The poet creates a sense of desperation that Palestinians have to keep their land, which is shown through the elderly woman "clinging onto the tree trunk". This made me ponder the ways in which I "cling" to my identity and culture, as it can be hard to keep these alive in the diaspora. I chose to write about things from my heritage that are kept alive in my life away, such as keffiyeh, Knafeh, and olive oil. I also drew parallels to other lines in his poem, such as "In Jerusalem every footstep is a grave", by writing about my footsteps away from my homeland and what that means to me. Additionally, I played on his use of "roots stitched into the land", by comparing all Palestinians to a traditional embroidery, in that we are all connected through our love of Palestine, regardless of location.

"Bulldozers Undoing God" was a beautiful and emotional poem for me. The poem focuses on the elderly woman clinging onto a tree, however this idea spreads along the rest of the poem, describing the way in which Palestine has been ruined over decades of "constant Nakbas", and how Palestinians have been forced to cling to their identities, despite leading very different lives within and outside of the land.