**Teacher Critical – First Place**

**Charlotte Richer (Cherwell School), responding to 'Assurances'**

Though the volume’s title – ‘Assurances’ – promises certainty and confidence, this section denies us comfort of either moral justice or political necessity. Set in the Cold War, it eavesdrops on the thoughts of a public attempting to understand and justify the destructive potential of a nuclear deterrent. What we are allowed to hear are only snippets, unattributed but seemingly polyphonic. The lines weave together as if in call and response, as one voice echoes another, riffing on repetitions within each stanza (‘threat’, ‘enemy’, ‘if’, ‘they’) so that the word becomes weightier each time. The interlocking words draw us in search of a continuous thread, creating a shape of logic. Though the fragmented nature betrays the flaws of a logo based merely in sound, Morgan holds back from judgement: the voices are neither patronised nor legitimised (though exposing their interactions as an echo chamber resonates powerfully in a contemporary context). Each line is incomplete, missing its subject (what is ‘born from the need’?) or its object (‘Now that the enemy has shown that they.’). The staccato end–stopping disregards grammatical rules, creating dissonance which jars us and puts us on edge: like its speakers, we too are left trying to grasp something just outside our reach.

Whilst each line is a distinct (albeit incomplete) part, the poem comes together in counterpoint. It plays on our desire for completeness. The tercet structure feels imbalanced; its momentum pushes forward, but it denies us neat resolution. Something feels missing, but we cannot quite pinpoint what. For its speakers, that urge is towards understanding; they crave causality (‘now’, ‘that’, ‘by’, ‘for’, ‘as’). The tercets build with insistence, strengthening a shared horror as a result. The modal possibility of ‘might launch’ is recapitulated as certainty ‘in so launching’, the gerund verb form ending the stanza in a continuous state of waiting, incomplete and suspended. The poem exposes the superficial way we respond to language, rapidly escalating shared outrage through rhetoric disguised as logic.

Their horror and fear, though, is clearly a real one. The poem oscillates uneasily between abstractions (the vague ‘threats’, the cliched metaphors of ‘sailing so close’, the powerfully undefined ‘enemy’) and precision (‘such a threat’, ‘precise moment’, ‘four minutes’). It deals in hypotheticals of ‘if’, working in fragmented abstractions perhaps because the ‘reality’ is impossible to comprehend, let alone articulate. Indeed, the poem circles around the unspoken ‘it’ with fastidiousness, no more so than the short eighth stanza, where ‘it’ shifts from signifying the threat, the bomb, detonation, and finally (as articulated in the final line) ‘each and every’ – us seemingly included.

‘Assurances’ is a poem where what is omitted is as powerful as what is included. In its obvious (and frustrating!) incompleteness, we are pushed to fill the gaps: four minutes is ‘not sufficient for any.’…. In doing so, we betray our own flaws – whether violence, or naivety, or foolishness, or sentimentality. We are listening not just to the speakers’ thought, but to our own, with an unnerving sense of history repeating itself.