**Teacher Creative – First Place**

**Matt Oliver, Bede’s School: ‘Nightjars, Umbria’ in response to 'Day, with Hawk'**

*Nightjars, Umbria.*

Something flips the latch of light

mid-summer sleep. Just an itch, itch

on dry air, below the sigh of

Cypruses and scrubby trees

breathing in the heat. This low

reel, this oddly bog-steeped,

dug-up sound, frying itself in the valley

sends me groping out through

the veranda door. Dream-fugged, least

-attuned thing, I squint out—eyes

trying to sift darkness, for what

I don’t yet know. I’ll later see

feathers in some book — vagabond rags

mothy with leaf-litter, hoarded foils—but

now it’s just this thinning strand

of night-song. Not song exactly;

would *scurr* be nearer? Feeling some

snagged sound-fly trapped

in the ear’s dry well, I turn

back to wrap the noise in words,

or words in noise, already splicing:

...*bog-steeped...dug-up sound*

*....mushroom song-churr in the ground.*

I sit awhile, drafting, re-

drafting. Unequal in the dark.

**Reflective Commentary on ‘Nightjars, Umbria’**

So many things drew me to Vahni Capildeo’s ‘Day, with Hawk’, not least the way in which it manages to evoke a fleeting encounter so vividly, and at the same time posit the idea that language is so often inadequate to convey the beauty and wildness of such encounters. My choice of the Nightjar— a rarely seen, vagabond grey-brown bird of the heathlands— seemed a nice counterpoint to the ‘princely’ hawk, but I like to think there’s the same thrill of uncertain exploration running through both poems.

I focused on two things: keeping the bird at a distance, mainly using sound, and evoking the desperate process of somehow trying to coax my feelings for it into words. Just as Capiledo wages a struggle, ‘hanging on to language’ and questioning her own limitations, I felt that I had licence to lay bare the difficulties I’d had in finding words which could express the otherworldly, eerie beauty of the Nightjar’s song. I wanted the poem to feel spontaneous, as though someone is revising, correcting as they hear more. At the same time, I needed a little of Capildeo’s ‘snow-champion’s balance’ in making sure it didn’t feel too rough and unpolished.

Form is something which also fascinates me, so I was really eager to experiment with the single stanza and use of enjambment that I admired in ‘Day, with Hawk’. Run-on lines seemed like a good way to convey the idea that my speaker’s thoughts are rushing, that he’s never really made up his mind about the sound he’s hearing.