

Forward/emagazine Young Critics 2017 Competition results

The Forward/emagazine Young Critics Competition offered students from 14 to 19 (and their teachers) the opportunity to respond to their choice of poem from the Best Collection and Best First Collection shortlists in one of two ways: a critical appreciation or a creative-critical response (their own piece of creative writing, alongside a reflective commentary). The competition was judged by the editors of *emagazine* and the poet Sarah Howe (winner of the 2015 TS Eliot Prize for Poetry for *Loop of Jade*). All winning and shortlisted entries are on the English and Media Centre website.

We read the entries with great pleasure and were very impressed by the overall standard of entries. Most impressive of all was the quality of writing in the 'Creative-Critical' category, where students of 14-16 and 16-19 wrote stunningly mature poetry in response to their chosen poem, at the same time as reflecting on that poem and their own in commentaries that were thoughtful, insightful and personal. It really confirmed for us the value of students doing their own writing, as a way of engaging with poetry and as a route into writing analytically. What they produced was, in itself, also superb! Sarah Howe was especially struck by the 16-19 poems, which she describes as 'incredible work, even by the standards of adult poets.' We were also impressed by the critical writing. Many students gave genuine responses, avoided writing formulaic sentences, got to the heart of significant aspects of the poem they chose, and wrote with clarity. There was some evidence of

'over-writing', weighing down the response with overly elaborate sentence structures and squeezing in impressive-sounding vocabulary for its own sake, but most students wrote with directness and an obvious intention of really saying something important about the poem and what it meant to them.

When we first planned this competition, we wondered whether GCSE students would cope with poetry written for adults, freshly minted, challenging and diverse in its nature. They certainly rose to the challenge. We had fewer entries than expected in the teacher categories but our chosen winners were of an excellent standard. Next year, we hope for more teachers taking part!

Forward/emag Young Critics 2018 Competition launches in May – further details in February issue!



16-19 Critical

Winner: Annabelle Fuller, Gateways School, on 'The True Story of Eleanor Marx in Ten Parts' by Tara Bergin

Highly Commended: Tom Allan, Camden School for Girls, on 'The True Story of Eleanor Marx in Ten Parts' by Tara Bergin

16-19 Creative-Critical

Winner: Mukahang Limbu, Oxford Spire Academy, for his poem 'On Ithaca' and commentary, in response to 'Telemachus' by Ocean Vuong

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

14-16 Critical

Winner: Gabriella Rossetti, Anglo European School, on 'Aura' by Emily Berry

Highly Commended: Alice Tittley, Rugby High School, on 'My Life According to You' by Sinéad Morrissey

14-16 Creative-Critical

Winner: Lucy Thynne, Lady Margaret School, for her poem 'grandma' and commentary, in response to 'Telemachus' by Ocean Vuong

Highly Commended: Alice Broadbent, Oundle School, for her poem 'Ariadne' and commentary, in response to 'Telemachus' by Ocean Vuong

WINNER Creative-Critical 16-19

On Ithaca by Mukahang Limbu

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 3rd-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.



WINNER Critical 16-19

Annabelle Fuller on **'The True Story of Eleanor Marx in Ten Parts'**

Eleanor's story, told in a series of fragmentary vignettes, seems simultaneously zoomed-out and highly focused. Though we are only given ten scraps of scenes, they are patchworked together to form a single and complete narrative via rhythm and sparingly used rhyme.

Stanzas three and five toy with the piece's form by reading like playscripts. 'The Housekeeper' and 'The Coroner' appear as impersonal characters, and the dialogue between Edward and The Coroner is mere emotionless script, with the reader relegated to the role of objective spectator by Bergin's irony. The real knockout lines are those which deal with minutiae, like '(She was forty-three.)', with brackets adding an uncomfortably blithe note to the fact that 'feeble' Edward cannot recall Eleanor's age. The usage of apparently irrelevant details is actually the backbone of the piece.

Bergin also subverts conventional images to reflect the poem's Modernist nature. The seventh stanza's metaphor is reminiscent of fairy tales – like Snow White, Eleanor ate 'a chunk of poisoned apple', and her body is displayed in 'a cupboard with two glass panes', the socialist version of a glass coffin. We are acutely aware that no prince will rescue our protagonist – in fact, Edward's behaviour triggered her fate.

The trope of girl versus woman is also explored via the image of a bride, reflecting themes of nostalgia, innocence and experience. Here, Eleanor's corpse is dressed in white, but 'it's not her bridal dress [...] It's from her childhood', and her body is displayed in Maiden Lane (unmarried, she is perhaps still in a state of maidenhood). By reminding us of this, Bergin reveals her protagonist's hidden frailty. Eleanor dies in her childhood clothes, perhaps attempting to perhaps to rival the youth and vigour of Edward's new wife.

This melding of opposites is what gives the poem such strength – the archaic genitives of the first two lines elevate Eleanor's story to mythic proportions, since she is 'of the eight-hour day' and Edward is a Janus-figure 'of the two faces'. We don't yet appreciate the tragedy of this image, but the portrayal of them as hero and heroine soon becomes bitterly ironic.

Bergin also uses figurative negative space to produce unorthodox imagery. The urn only 'holds the ashes of the soft summer dress', rather than of Eleanor's body – this discrepancy acts as an uncomfortable reminder of her horrific death. The ambiguity of 'Her tears are dew/and she crushes nothing' could suggest her powerlessness, and reflect the sense of waste stemming from her suicide.

The final stanza and line, 'Nearly all of this is true', subverts the poem's whole premise and prompts several responses. It reminds us of the piece's re-creative nature, though the poem does in fact resonate without an appreciation of factual context. We inadvertently wonder which details have been fabricated, and whether or not we have received the 'true story' promised by the title. There is also the question of whether the poem's truth matters; if it has incited empathy, isn't that enough?

