

Young Critics Competition 2018

16-19 Critical

- 1st place: Freya Buxton, Queen's School
- Highly Commended: Erika Yip, Milton Academy and Cameren Birch-Ghose, Caroline Chisholm School
- Commended: Molly Thompson, King Edward VI High School for Girls

16-19 Creative

- 1st place: Natalie Perman, Withington Girls' School
- Highly Commended: Aidan Tulloch, Thirsk School and Sixth Form College and Mahira Mannan, Haggerston School
- Commended: Cia Mangat, St Paul's Girls' School and Dominic James, Wren Academy

Teacher Critical

- 1st place: Charlotte Richer, Cherwell School

Teacher Creative

- 1st place: Matt Oliver, Bede's School
- Commended: Olga Dermott-Bond, Rugby High School, Celia Shephard, Dulwich College International Shanghai Pudong, and Neil Bowen, Wells Cathedral School



Barbara Bleiman, one of the editors of emagazine, said of the whole collection of entries:

As always, we were hugely impressed by the best entries to the competition. In almost every category, we have read writing that has been eloquent, engaged, thoughtful and sharply focused.

It is interesting to note that in both age categories – 14-16, 16-19 – the creative response to a poem, accompanied by a commentary on the chosen poem, was of an exceptionally high standard by comparison with the purely critical writing. Shortlisting the creative writing was really tough – there were so many brilliant poems to choose between, and such fantastic commentaries too. Much of the writing in the commentaries, interestingly, surpassed that of the purely critical that we saw (winners and shortlisted entries aside, of course). In the 14-16 age category, we decided to award two first prizes for the Creative Writing and, sadly, none for the critical, to reflect this disparity.

We've been asking ourselves why it is that the students who wrote their own poems also wrote so well about the poems on which they were based. Is it because the engagement with the original poem is of a different kind to the analytical thinking they are being expected to do in preparation for exams? Have they had to 'get under the skin' of the poem, in order to draw from it something that inspires their own writing? Is it because the act of writing a poem pushes them to read the original with more attention, and closer scrutiny? Or perhaps, rather, it's the reverse – that it pushes them to identify some big, significant aspects of the poem that they can then speak about with authority and conviction? This is a question for teachers as well as students. We have no definite answers. It seems strange that students are writing better in a form they've not been taught to write in – a commentary – than in a form they have been taught to write in – a critical analysis. Whatever the answers, it's worth all of us, students and teachers alike, noting that the very best critical

writing that we saw, across the whole competition, spoke with an authentic voice, didn't try to impress with lots of literary terminology, genuinely noticed significant and interesting things, had something to say that was expressed clearly, simply and convincingly. It went down big roads, ending up at a major destination, rather than following small dirt tracks that led nowhere. It took an angle that it pursued and developed, rather than dotting around analysing detail for the sake of it. It spoke to the reader.

When you read the winning writing in the 16-19 age category on the next two pages, I hope you'll see what we mean by this.

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- For all the winning entries, go to <https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk>

Winner Critical Category – 16-19

Freya Buxton, Queen's School, London: 'Day, with Hawk'

Vahni Capildeo's poem, 'Day, with Hawk', is an exploration of an encounter with a 'peregrine', in which a 'stunned' speaker grapples with language in a seemingly desperate attempt to express the moment.

The poem's metalinguistic concerns are made apparent as the speaker draws attention to the inadequacy of language for expressing the profundity of the moment. Capildeo states she is left 'hanging on to language by its clichés', which establishes a sense of an uncontrollable struggle with language, that continues throughout the poem. Capildeo's use of mimetic enjambment as she 'hang[s] on to language' is interesting, as it suggests that the speaker is required to employ a visual representation of language, as language alone cannot express the sense of spiralling out of control the speaker feels. Added to this, Capildeo suggests a difficulty in communicating the event to the reader through her need to revert to 'clichés'. Yet this statement produces something of a paradox, as the multiple neologisms and compound words throughout the poem, such as 'singer-songwrite' and 'chestnut-stippled', suggests the speaker is attempting to form a whole new vocabulary in order to describe the bird appropriately.

Through her exploration of language, Capildeo creates an interesting juxtaposition between herself and the bird. While she is described through a semantic field of loss of control, through verbs such as 'tumbling' and 'hanging', the hawk appears 'princely' with a 'non-urgent flexing of chest muscles'. Capildeo conveys a sense of deep awe of the bird's ease of movement which is further highlighted through his initial description as 'Like the fire from bare twigs that twists a floral kiss on winter's neck'. The soft sibilance used can be seen as reflective of both the bird's elegance in the air, as well as the speaker's infatuation. Moreover, the internal rhyme between the lines suggests a momentary drawing together of the two beings, who met 'just once', which alludes to the profundity of the moment. The rich imagery of this description, which compares the hawk's energy to the new life heralded by spring, furthers the contrast between the speaker and the bird. The juxtaposition of expressive description with the fragmentary ending lines draws attention to the rift between the 'princely' bird and the struggling poet. Capildeo states that 'Love, this is; no poem.' This somewhat ambiguous line, punctuated by a caesura and end stopped, suggests that the speaker is struggling to maintain the flow of thought and speech as she is awestruck by the hawk's majesty. This idea is furthered as Capildeo struggles to find the collective noun for a single peregrine, which could be 'an embarrassment of poets. An adoration. An abyss'. The poet exhibits her 'embarrassment' at her own confusion and the poem's final word, 'abyss' marks the poet's ultimate loss of control of her language.

Thus, Capildeo's poem is so intriguing as a result of her exploration of communication, which leaves the reader grappling for understanding, just as the poet herself does.

Winner Creative Category – 16-19

Natalie Perman, Withington Girls' School in response to 'Do You Speak Persian?'

do you remember

my great grandmother spent years
peeling cabbages
boiling broth that steamed the house
white with grief.

when she arrived in america
the streets breathed smoke and
people cut words like steak
which dripped raw blood into
cavernous mouths:
swallowing words like food.

she couldn't speak their language
but she began to copy sounds
of foreign laughter like the clink of wine glasses
and and *that* and *what* and *how* in cracks
of pavement in new york.

she forgot how to pronounce the
sounds of her childhood
so she spoke only yiddish:
she had idioms about onions
bought *tchotchke* for
the neighbour's children
and then her own.

my grandmother says
she was a little *meshuggeneh*
(although she was *mishpucha*, family, of course)

she never recovered from travelling
alone to the united states at age 13
knowing her family were dead.

when she shaved horseradish for pesach
and the walls would sweat with
the sharp smell
but her eyes were always dry

she said to my mother
that it was her tongue-
her tongue which crawled out of her mouth
and made strange sounds
verbs and vowels that tasted
sour

since she lost her tongue
she couldn't remember
who she was
anymore

words like
peeled *kroyt*
down the drain.

Natalie's Reflective Commentary

Kaveh Akbar's poem 'Do You Speak Persian' begins and ends with night; I decided to begin and end with cabbages, one of the few words I know in Yiddish (*kroyt*). Akbar's poem intertwines language with his heritage as Persian, I intertwined mine as an Ashkenazi Jew with equally faltering knowledge of the language of my family, which oscillated between Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Hebrew and English.

In Akbar's poem we are invited to lose ourselves in the Persian language, without knowledge of the phrases he uses. As such, I decided to tell the story of my great-grandmother, who lost part of her identity when she forgot how to speak her native tongue, Russian, and took on another, English. Akbar's image of swallowing words moved me to focus on my great-grandmother's life through the imagery of food, cabbages and the kitchen.

I left my Yiddish unexplained as Akbar left his Persian, although the words are quite well-known, as are Akbar's Persian phrases: 'Delam barat tang shodeh', I miss you, and 'Shab bekheir', good night.

In Akbar's poem I sensed the urgency of the need to hold onto words before we lose them, to treasure words, to take care of them. Akbar's exploration of the struggle of language, being an immigrant or 'other' in a new place and learning a new language yet forgetting your own, represented in the beautiful futility of a star travelling light years only to 'die in the back of an eye', seemed to me to express grief, longing, loss, hopelessness, but also the need to reconnect and find new meanings. This poem serves as an ode to my great-grandmother and her search for language but also an ode to grief, and the people whose words get lost in their lives.



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- Winning entries in the Forward/*emagazine* Young Critics Competition for 2017 and 2018
- Winning entries in the *emagazine* Close Reading Competition 2017 and 2018