

First Story
National Writing Competition Longlist
Key Stage Four

Stolen

Safah Ahmed, Loxford School of Science and Technology

You're this thing inside her. Prepared to bruise, scar and tear her. As if you were drowning. A lifeboat. You cling to your pink, sore rope, its red anchor digging into her flesh. You were so scared of dying, you made her play host. You are greed personified.

And still, still she won't let you go.

You have her hypnotised, your minds tied together at the ends, your bodies fused at the core. I wonder now, if she can even feel it. Perhaps the pain has her numb. Now I wait here, behind smudged glass, and count the tiny fingerprints in my mind that paint portraits on the panes.

Do you see now, do you see what you've done? We didn't call you. You chose to be here. You chose to come. You crawled in, your squirming limbs and undefined features invaded, conquered, stole a home and ignored the white flag that marked it OURS. You pushed her aside, overwhelmed her as you built your nest filled with silver coins. And now she is alone, with you, in a four walled white ceilinged room. All I can do is wait.

She is weak, waning, losing, failing as you claim everything within reach, you take and take and take. You never rest. Never. A sleepless beast, immortal it seems, electric in the way you pound and kick and drive us near to the brink of insanity.

You throw blows and shake walls.

Burst blood and break, cut, fall.

You are disaster amplified.

Her blood runs red – on your hands. Her entire being balanced on your small, wrinkled fingertips. I can see her trembling. Hear her screaming. The situation is critical.

How could we believe that this would be wonderful?

A new beginning, a brand new start.

What deluded us?

We were stupid.

So stupid.

Help us.

Our universe is a thousand fragments lying at your feet.

Our present built on debris, the fractured pieces of our plans shattered and clumsily moulded together to form this so called future.

And you are tearing free. One last time. Ready to leave the home you stole those nine moons that seem only nine days ago.

And I think that when you do, when you leave that home beneath her skin and venture into ours, I just might see you differently, behind clearer glass.

The ground is shaking. Our sky, unravelling. And you, this beloved, strange, unseen alien, are bellowing.

Leaving

Sharmin Akthar Oaklands School

Breathe in little bluebird
and wholly taste the winds' tribal dance
weaving, serenading, seducing
through the ocean-tinged tips of your wing-beats,
singing to the tune of flustered grappling
to mingle with the burnt pine savannah of nature's aftertaste.

Be bold little bluebird
and disperse your exotic blue plumage to the skies' edge,
showcase the warm red hue of your breast in pride
until you are brimming with its repletion.
Bubble and boil over with conviction, youngling,
in the melodious crochet of clattering and interspersed whistles,
as your fathers before you did.

Be the predator little bluebird
and wear the world upon your crown.
You are the eye of the Hawk
the jaws of an Orca, the virulent bite of the Tundra Wolf.
Snarl, give chase, dominate,
swoop down into the Earth's molten core
and brand it with your mark.

Be everything you can be and more little bluebird
Potential anticipates you.
But for now:
ripen into the realm of insatiable curiosities

perch on life's ledge

and take glorious flight into the unknown.

Home

Barirah Ashfaq, Feversham College

Let me tell you about her.

The ink will fritter away and the pages will exhaust but let me tell you about her.

Those final moments have been merged into a blur. It was an awful process of swearing and screaming, then an immense shove, then a solitary door, locked from the inside. But you can only hammer the door for so long, you can only plead for so long before your knuckles begin to rupture and your lungs begin to burn. So with empty hands, I reached into my chest and gathered the broken pieces within till it could beat normally once again.

I walked for years until I saw her, a shivering fragment of a girl who held herself as though she was balancing a crown upon her head.

We found each other in a crevice within the night. Both of us breathless, lungs screaming, minds running riot. We found each other when the sun was tired and half the sky had been roused, when we were too broken to speak, when our voices had been shattered, so we sat and stared at the being before us until our eyes gave in. That night, we slept beneath stars and void.

I have been with her since that moment.

Her feet are scarred and jagged but she walks on the dirt as though I will kiss the footprints she leaves behind. When I ask her what her name is, she says: "My name is Amira because my baba is a king and my mama is a queen so I am Amira so if you don't listen to me I will feed you to the lions."¹ Then she laughs and it sounds like the day when it caresses the night. And then I tell her to shut up because if her baba was the king, we would never see him sober, and she spits at me.

I shouldn't say that: she is the one who holds me when my eyes have been wrung dry.

Every day, she sweeps the roads and every day, she walks past Abul Basr, a blind, fraying man who speaks as though he sees more universes than us. She listens, captivated by the tales he tells. Then she comes back to me and she clasps my hands and I watch the towering citadels and obscure dungeons she raises, the pulsating hearts of the kings and beasts she unleashes before me, the tempests as they snatch the lives of sailors I have never seen, the tiny eternities she weaves through my fingers.

Mostly, I watch her for she is more than all of these.

We live beneath the rocks on the outskirts of a town too tired to dream. There is a gap between the boulders where we abide and it is small enough to be hidden, large enough to curl within. Sometimes, when I think about the place I used to live, my hands start to tremble but she holds them till I can sleep. Sometimes, when she thinks about the place she

¹ *Amira is Arabic for 'Princess'*

used to live, her hands start to tremble but I hold them till she can sleep. If we hold each other close enough, we will not be cold when it is too dark to see the sands.

Once, she kissed me and I tasted fallen empires and nebulas and all the moments when the sun kissed the moon.

She is not pretty (but if I tell her that she will sew my lips together). She has many scars on her delicate frame, most of which she spends many a restless night trying too hard to forget. Her hair is flimsy and chopped, bald at the moments where angry hands had been let loose. Her clothes drape over her shoulders and hang gloomily by her knees. She is not fair nor clean nor glowing nor tall nor curvy nor modest. She is striking. She does not make heads turn – she makes the moon gape in awe. Her skin is like the night, her eyes are like the stars; every atom of her being brims with the synergistic energy of multiple infinities.

She will make the galaxies to fall to their knees.

She is the seas and the skies and everything in between and everything beyond. She is explosions and settling dust, the edge of the earth and the very beginning. Her familiarity makes me feel as though I might belong and her arms are where I collapse after the day is done with me. She is the lingering glow when everyone else is drifting in a slumber. She is the constant in this confusing chaos I have been cast into. She is the oasis in the desert, the fire in the arctic, the candle in the abyss.

She is

more than what I can comprehend.

She is

everything.

When I am with her, I can

make it.

When I am with her, I can

breathe.

When I am with her, I am

Home.

She is

Home.

House

Amina Azong, Lammas School

Is our steel fortress a home?

When abuse soars through the air like furniture

When the confirmation of hatred rubs salt into wounds

In this house the fallen sneer at the righteous

Snuffing out hope as easily as a wet thumb to a candle flame

The shattering of bones and dreams ricochet from walls

Yet no one hears them.

My blade is more comforting plush

The pain is injected in doses, I can anticipate these scars

I can even crave them.

The blood falls like the tears you lust after.

Lust.

Moral men do not lust.

Then again you've never been a moral man

Just a liar with the title guardian.

Is a guardian's role not to protect?

But for me protection from you was never offered

I have never know the love that comes with a home

And neither will our daughter.

Her childhood will be set in a house

With a father who holds her mother on a leash

And a mother too weak,

too scared,

and too young

to protect herself in her own house.

The steel fortress she's too scared to call home.

Where Fires Ignite

Sophie Brock, Pentrehafod School

There are unmade beds,
with crumpled sheets,
beneath a broken window pane.
And fragmented glass,
smashed into smithereens, I won't
be able to retrieve.

Joined by broken toys,
that I once clutched,
between calloused fingers;
a childhood doll,
with auburn curls,
who is now abandoned.

Like mother's chair,
it lies discarded,
a limb broken apart.
Near the collapsed desk,
where I once sat,
with a yellowing notepad.

Bookcases have fallen,
leaving toppled stacks
of battered hardbacks with
bruised spines. And much-loved volumes
with ripped-pages,
littered with creases and lines.

The cinnamon-scent,
of the flour-coated kitchen,
once like a coffee-shop
replaced. By burning books,
and charred leather-binding,
our ideas set alight.

There's that food-stained apron,
that mother once wore,
on the back of its crooked hook.
And the spiced aroma,
of her cooking herbs,
beside that open oven door.

Carpeted in charcoal,
where we once sat,
moulded into our chairs.
Bishops lie scattered,
with a splintered board,
from that unfinished game of chess.

Charcoal coats the ground,
where the debris lie,
rubble decorating the room.
The brick wall that,
once stood before us,
now strewn across the floor.

It's the place that I,
once called my home,

this barren landscape – deserted town,

And this city street,

where fires ignite,

now caught in a war zone.

Stress

Lily Douglas, Willowfield Humanities College

One day there was a note on my door.

Stress,

She said her name was

Stress

Had come to stay for a while.

She kept turning a strand of her long

Red hair around her pinkie.

I did not want

Stress

To stay.

She kept playing rock music

When I was trying to sleep.

Kept coming home at

2am

In the morning,

Her light grey eyes intoxicated.

I wanted

Stress

To leave.

To stop talking to me in her

Smooth southern accent.

To stop

Cleaning up the macaroni cheese I had

Spilled while cooking dinner.

Stress

Was always there,

Even when I could not see her.

Locked in her

Plain white room until I thought of her.

One day

Stress

Came out unexpectedly.

Her heavy mascara dripping down

Her face bright red, lips quivering.

I went to hug

Stress,

But she pushed me away and

Said she had to leave.

I did not want her to go.

I looked into

Stress's

Room and there was nothing.

No posters, no desk, not even a bed.

Nothing.

Like she had never existed.

Years went by and she never came back.

It was the night before my wedding day.

I was sitting on my bed. Crying.

When I felt warm elegant arms
Wrap around me. Long red curls
Drop around my shoulders.

I never wanted
Stress
To leave again.

Home

Erin Gilbey, Lincoln Christ Hospital School

“So this is home?”

No. This is a house.

Can't you hear the floorboards cry for the loss of its inhabitants?

The white washed walls look abandoned, peppered with tiny holes where memories once hung on hooks.

Aren't the windows so exposed without their curtains, the naked floor so cold?

There are no children huddled around the fireplace, nobody stood in the hall, clasping a cup of coffee, waiting for you to get in, nobody to dance with in the kitchen.

In this house, there is no sofa to collapse onto, no music.

There are no books.

But if I painted that wall in shades of warm, if I cover another with books.

I could put a mat by the door, put the kettle on.

I'd have to turn up the radio and call up old friends. When they leave I will sit reading and laughing with my family until, in turn, we each tumble safely into our dreams.

Every time I go out I will bring back pieces of where I have been and slot them into gaps in the windowsills.

I will have a map by my bed with pins in the places that I want to visit and I will dream of strange cities and foreign tongues but I will always return.

I will always return home.

Home

Amy Hamshere, The Oxford Academy

Home is supposed to be the place you feel
most comfortable and secure,
the place you feel you belong.

The place you never want to leave on a cold, lazy
Sunday afternoon in the middle of winter.

It's the place where you feel happiest,
the place that even when you don't feel up to it
will make you smile,
or at a push,
laugh.

Home is the place where a single whiff of that
oh-so-familiar scent makes your head fog,
and become dizzy with waves of desire.

The scent that calms you when you're jittery,
one that soothes you as you cry and shatter.

The scent that reminds you,
no matter how broken,
it will be there to comfort;
even in your darkest hour.

Home is the place where you're surrounded
by everything you love;
everything you could ever ask for, ever want, ever need
is right there within reaching distance.

It's where you grow up,
where you face tears, happiness, excitement, giddiness

and heartbreak.

It's the place where you mature,
learning your way through life.

The one place you want to live out
the rest of your existence.

And if you abandoned it,
you'd surely die.

Home is the place where you lay your head every night,
or at least hope to.

It's the place that holds you together through everything,
good times and bad;
creating most itself.

It's where work and play come together,
whether you like it or not.

Home is the place you live more each passing day.

As a child, home is where you live,
but as you grow older you learn that's not the case.

To me, home is you.

Your arms and your touch,
the way you smile and the way your scent lingers
in the air,
as you do in my mind.

Home is the way you hold me,
however much I resist.

Home is you and purely you.

Always.

Cigarette

Rabia Irshad, Wembley High Technology College

I remember scrolling through Tumblr on my phone while we were driving to our new apartment, because I couldn't stop smiling, and if you saw my face splitting in half you would tease me for the whole journey. Tumblr has a wealth of quotes – quotes about life and nature and humanity. When we stopped at a red light, I showed you one I had stumbled on: "Maybe home is nothing but two arms holding you tight." You returned your focus to the road, but not before shooting me a grin.

Everyone has different ideas of home, and back then the first thing I remember calling home was university. At the time, I thought that having Ella in the same dorm as me, and you there, made it my home. I was struggling with my studies and the stress made me toss and turn at night. I should have realised that home doesn't make you feel that way, but I just overlooked it as the step that always creaks in the staircase.

The only concrete idea I have of home is that it's something you can always go back to. Right now I can go back to our university in my memory, but there'll be a day when I won't remember things like how much a cappuccino cost, or whether Ella's room was five or seven doors away from mine. If home is something you can always return to, it must be something infinite. I remember your philosophical outbursts. If you were here, you would tell me that nothing is infinite. But if the space that houses everything that has ever existed isn't infinite, then what is it?

The arguments started four months in. You called them 'civilised discussions', but at those times I could only stare through the windows at you because the door was barred. The arguments started when tendrils of smoke were trying to escape the kitchen door. The arguments started when you began to eye the Smoking kills warnings with disdain, instead of teasing me about the bad girl persona I was sporting with my cigarettes.

I stopped smoking. In our apartment, that is. I still smoked, I just didn't do it in your presence anymore. The arguments about that stopped for a while, but that's because you assumed that I had stopped smoking all together. You didn't ask, as though ignoring the problem would make it somehow disappear.

I was leaning on the apartment block's wall with a cigarette between my fingers. I didn't know you were going to be back from work so early, but there you were. Your face kind of crumpled for a moment, like blades of grass being stepped on. I stared down at my crossed legs, noticing a stain on my right boot.

'I know you see those stupid things online like sad girls smoke and cool kids take pictures with cigarettes but stop, just stop. You need to stop trying to act cool.'

I thought: I'm not trying to act cool. I'm just trying to smoke, but I didn't say it. I just took another puff of my cigarette and let the smoke carry the words back to my lungs. I could see the expectation in your eyes but I didn't know what to say, so I just inhaled one last time before dropping the cigarette on the ground. I stubbed it out with the heel of my boot. You said we needed space from each other. You made it sound temporary but the tone of

finality in your voice said otherwise and we both knew it. I tried to say something again but the lump in my throat was stopping the words from coming out. It dawned on me that it wasn't the smoking that had driven us apart; the smoking was just a catalyst.

I called you ten minutes after I had started driving to my cousin's house because I told myself that I needed to hear your voice. I pulled over to the side and stared at the flowers in someone's front garden as I said hello, and I could hear you breathing but you didn't say anything. You texted me saying your connection was faulty. I knew better but I just said it was okay. We texted occasionally after that but it slowly faded. It was as though someone had accessed the contrast setting to you and me and lowered it until there was nothing left but a void. I'm not sure if it's just the black spots swimming in my vision, but sometimes I can see minuscule fragments in this void, like the cracks in the whitewashed wall I was leaning on when we both realised we were trying too hard to make homes out of each other.

I've started looking for home in other places now. My skin is an infinite wall and the bones of my skeleton are the only staircase I will need. I may have realised that you aren't home, but you will still be in the bottom drawer of my mind, in the shoe-box containing scrapbooks of my memory.

My Home Planet

Shannon McNulty, The Bridge Ap Academy

My hair is a forest fire, burning a crooked path.

My eyes are the sun and moon, watching over you, day and night.

My mouth is a volcano, erupting burning lava.

My teeth are the mountains, crumbling away.

My arms are holding up the sky, my hands rolling the clouds.

My feet are below the earth, kicking and causing earthquakes.

My flesh is the earth's surface.

My blood is the earth's lakes, rivers and oceans.

My veins and arteries are the swaying coral reefs.

My heart is beneath the water, pumping, making it sway.

My stomach cocoons the earth, rumbling before lightening strikes.

Untitled

Safeerah Mughal, Feversham College.

I often wonder about who Home's first inhabitant was.

Lying in the hot sands of time I stared at the ceiling.

A circular feature sits in the centre, sentinel to the forgotten notes of an age sung long ago. It stares back at me, forcing its tendrils into my mind, smothering the chaos that raged there. It severs my thoughts and a wrinkled hand gently reaches into my soul and resurfaces. A deep voice then addresses me and I find myself lost in its depths- great forlorn seas with buried relics.

The gloss paint, that too early stifled the breath of archaic wisdom, now lies discarded and forgotten.

I often wonder why Home is always watchful.

In a voice saturated with nostalgia, he told me about the cavemen- who took solace in damp caves that looked like gaunt eye sockets on the face of wrinkled mountains. He told me about the stone they wielded, with which they spun stories and worlds in a language known only to them and the stars above. He told me about the human noise, the ballads that filled the pockets of air and the evenings spent under a sky that was at the gallows. He told me about how he held a rough hand, stared into moon-like eyes, slowly disappearing, and promised to preserve the home they had so passionately built.

He kept the engravings of their time in forlorn seas and waited.

I often wonder about Home wandering in the slums of this world.

His voice shaking with rage he told me about the lost. I sat, entranced as he described the lonely and emaciated; their bleeding soles kissed farewell Earth's cold lips and then they fold in on themselves, crumpling to the floor, quivering as life's last drains from them. Their worn grey eyes leaked dreams of warm walls that they take refuge in, of walls that would tend to wounds and console in tight embraces, of walls that would rebuild their lives. He told me how they rarely spoke out loud- their voices were forgotten but he made sure to visit them at night and gently lure their melodies. He told me how much hurt and loss was woven within these, and how he and the stars wept that night.

He told me about the Home they dreamed of.

I often wonder how Home survived in War.

He proudly shows me the Victoria Cross, the aged metal holding volumes of words trampled. It pains him to relive these stories but I coax them out. In a trembling voice he begins by describing the never-ending chorus of bombs and gunshots that nearly doused his flame. He told me about the angry voices he tried to stifle. The frustrated tears that smudged his calligraphic hand, harrowing words that pierced unfortunate hearts, now dissipated into the night- lost in the black wisps of smoke that permeated the air. He told me about the Earth that was butchered - the battlefields a grotesque mosaic that left soldiers spellbound, marveling at chunks of Earth thrown in the air. He told me about how the soldiers carried Home in their eyes. It was carefully wrapped in a silken cloth that was embroidered with a mother's love and the warmth of a blazing fire. And on the day when they would never go Home again, when mothers would hug to themselves a timeless piece of clothing, they left sad smiles and open eyes -that still held Home.

Ode to my Home

Alice Tyrrell, Graveney School

Home is where the Victoria Line takes me,
Where scalding tea and hot biscuits await me,
Dad's Bob Dylan records starting to play,
The smell of the house after being away,
William Morris wallpaper and cheap Ikea lampshades,
Energy saving lightbulbs brightening as the light fades,
Worn down carpets and clutter on the stairs,
Our finest furniture cloaked in cat hair,
A destination when I'm out in the world,
Cool when I'm hot and warm when I'm cold.

Home is film night every Friday with a take away
smells of warmth and comfort when Esma bakes a cake,
Plates smashed in anger and repaired in love,
The garden water feature Mum's so proud of,
Deafening dispute when Dad says 'No means no',
Late again and defensive when it's time to go
Raucous card games on the kitchen floor,
Losses and wins, wails and roars,
Vicious rowing when Jesse smokes in his room,
Yelling and tears because he'll be gone soon.

Home is the beating heart of Brixton,
A details that people always seem to fix on,
it is an endless supply of dirty dishes,
14 Christmas cards, 67 birthday wishes,
Jubilant on the sofa when Arsenal scores,

Watching Netflix and ignoring chores,
Nostalgia for the old and hope for the new,
An eternal lack of my favourite shampoo,
It's irritation, affection, excitement, and rage,
Home isn't perfect but it is pretty great.

Our life in reverse

Megan Welch, Swanwich Hall

Our home will be known for nothing.
Never will anybody say,
We were the perfect family.
That was wrong, the truth is,
Our entire family was a failure.
Acting that,
We truly got along.
Was a complete waste of time. And I know,
Lying,
Is the way to go.
In fact, being loving, respectful and kind,
Is a careless thing to do.
Forgetting about that dreadful time,
Can be difficult, but we will try.
Life...
Can be difficult but we will try.
Forgetting about that dreadful time,
Is a careless thing to do.
In fact, being loving, respectful and kind,
Is the way to go.
Lying,
Was a complete waste of time. And I know,
We truly got along,
Acting that,
Our entire family was a failure
That was wrong. The truth is
We were the perfect family.

Never will anybody say,
Our home will be known for nothing.

The Homes We Lost

Huw Wilson, Ysgol Dewi Sant

The photo I have of our old home looks nothing like how it is today. The grand mansions, marble fountains, and field-sized gardens do not resemble my father's hand-crafted walls, or the tiny vegetable patch that my mother laboured, or the cherry trees that my siblings nurtured.

I can still recall the night they took our home.

They came for us at midnight, howling-drunk on the fears of my people, who were forced to surrender their homes. The men stood outside screaming and rattling the flimsy metal railing that enclosed our house for attention, yelling at us to open up and let them in.

The disruption woke us all, and we huddled nervously around our father. He comforted each of us in turn, and then went out to question the white men on their presence. They said that they were here to take us to a new home, but were angered by my father's reply that this was our home and for them to leave.

They stormed down the railing and rushed to pulp the insolent black man who had refused their entrance. They mashed his skull in and broke so many bones in his legs with their batons that they could be hardly called legs after as they were so gnarled and knotted (but it didn't really matter as he was dead by dawn).

The men advanced to our house. They tore down the door, and hunted the building for us, found my sisters first and may have had their way with them. Then we were all dragged out and thrown on the cold street screaming, and then stripped as our clothes were added to the piles of belongings being hauled out of homes by men to be soon deposited into two lorries that had driven up. That was the last time I saw my home.

We were herded into the back of one lorry already stuffed with the newly-made homeless all chanting the same message: "They have taken our homes, They have taken our homes, They have taken our homes..."

The overcrowded lorry dumped us at the outskirts of the city, to a place with even more refugees, and we were welcomed to our new home by the sour stench of urine and sweat which accustomed us to our new level of poverty by obscuring any reminiscent scent of our pasts.

My father, who had been forced to crawl onto the lorry, with blood still oozing down his scalp and his legs twisted like wires into unrecognizable forms, crouched down to the ground of his new home and muttered with a deadness. "There is no hope."

Out of the squalor, we built our homes anew, from old sacks and leftover clay. The soil was sand-based and poor so nothing could grow, and the only food source was that which was sold at the markets, but was too expensive for the likes of us, so we relied on theft and scraps to quell our hungers, yet it was common for other children to waste away to tight skin and countable bones, and then to be gradually grinded to death by famine.

Though the clear stream that ran near quenched our immediate thirsts, it soon incarnadined, stained a reddish-brown due to the unrestricted defecation of our people.

We lived here for the rest of my mother's life. She too joined my father in the mass grave just outside our new home. My siblings say she died from malnutrition, but we suspect it was resentment.

When I was fourteen I returned to the place that was my home, and it looks nothing like my photo. All our belongings, all our memories, and all our lives were bulldozed down that night, sold to the whites, who replaced my father's hand-crafted walls, the vegetable patch that my mother laboured, and the cherry trees that my siblings nurtured , with grand mansions, marble fountains, and the field-sized gardens that now I trim.