

COBIS Poetry Competition 2025/26

Through Another's Eyes

Key Stage 4-5 Winner

Tea with the Other Version of Me

We sat at the small kitchen table
-mine by accident, hers by miracle -
And the tea cooled into a thin horizon neither of us crossed.
In her eyes I saw rooms where laughter had learned to tiptoe,
And when she lifted her gaze to mine it was as though, for the first time in years,
Two windows of forgotten truths broke open,
Filling my mouth with glass.

I wordlessly watched a single strand of hair unhook itself from her ear
And thought, absurdly, of the mornings I spend taming mine -
How every mirror I've trusted never warned me there was a second girl
Using the same amber eyes to practice a different kind of survival.
I wanted to say something bright and precise,
Something like *you are here now, you are safe*,
But the words arrived wearing soft shoes
And sat down beside my tongue, unwilling to startle the room.
So I looked at her instead,
And in the small geography of her face I traced two countries:
The one where I live without thinking about it,
And the one that lives in her even when she tries not to -
A map folded so many times it remembers the creases more than the roads.

"We used to name the stars," she spoke in the grammar of carefulness,
Pauses stitched between words like invisible thread,
And I understood, without being told,
That sorrow had taught her a new posture for the mouth,
A new way to hold the jaw so that nothing trembles when the past walks by.
And the reminder stung - those were the same stars I named wishes upon.

Glaring at the golden ridges of a hung frame,
The smiles of my family emulated something I couldn't hear,
Though it pounded heavy in the hollow of her chest.
She said the laughter of her little brother still echoes in the rubble,
That she sometimes dreams of him holding sunlight in his palms
and offering it to her, saying, "*Here, keep this safe.*"
She spoke of the day her mother stopped wearing perfume,
Because the scent of jasmine made the soldiers suspicious.
"Even beauty," she whispered, "is dangerous where I live."

I kept noticing small, indecent luxuries on my side of the table -
The looseness of my shoulders,

In partnership with:

The easy bloom of appetite,
The way my ring tapped the cup like a happy animal.
Across from me, she wore my features as if they had been issued rather than
chosen,
And every movement asked permission of the air.
I wanted to offer the whole vocabulary of comfort and knew, instantly,
How large and useless those words can be.
So I passed the sugar instead.
When her fingers brushed mine, I felt the history of a street I have never walked,
A door I have never knocked,
A night I have never had to survive.

In need of holding some sort of conversation,
I began to overshare the way I always do when I'm nervous -
About my exams, my friends, my crush -
But the words felt shameful,
Too alive, too untouched.
"We don't have grades anymore," she said, her voice steady, "only numbers."
I didn't understand,
And she added, "Not our marks - our ages.
The older ones carry the younger ones when we run."
I still didn't understand.
My questions bloomed like wildflowers in the garden of my confusion,
Each petal tinged with the ache of not knowing
how someone with the same abilities and the same desires,
The same work ethic and love for her family,
Simply wasn't lucky enough to have had my path in life -
And so sits in a refugee camp, voiceless until asked.

"They came at dawn."
Her voice faltered. She began to tell of before such occurred-
How that very morning she argued with her mum
Over the need for more needless clothes,
How she counted down the minutes till her school bell rang,
And then how the sky tore open and screamed.
The streets were alive with running feet,
Each one trying to outrun a fate already decided.
"It smelled like metal," she said,
"like the earth itself was bleeding."

I sat there long after she'd gone,
The ghost of her presence still clinging to the air.
I tried to imagine the weight of being forced to pause a life mid-sentence,
Of leaving behind not just walls and photographs,
But the rhythm of a heartbeat that once trusted peace.
She had been torn from her story before the chapter could end,
While I have lived mine as if pages never burn.
I looked down at my hands - unscarred, untested -
And wondered what kind of mercy keeps them so clean.
I have spent years mistaking safety for promise
When it was only ever luck wearing a kind disguise.

And now every breath feels like borrowed air -
Fragile, undeserved, yet mine to use for something more than silence.
We were two girls with two histories,
And the tea knew it first.

Natallia (age 14)
International British School Cairo

In partnership with: