

Mukwashi Trust School, Chilanga, Zambia

21st March 2025

Judges' report

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to you, our colleagues at King Edwards School, Birmingham, UK, for engaging with us in this year's poetry competition. Here at Mukwashi, we were truly impressed by the creativity, talent and enthusiasm displayed by all your participating learners.

Our team of judges was our Grade 11 and 12 learners led by their teachers in the English language, Ms Mutinta Mwanamwambwa and Ms Luyando Sikamikami. They had a tough time selecting the winners, and there was much animated debate about the decisions both in the classrooms during the day and in the teachers' studios in the evenings.

To all the KES learners who took part, we commend you for your bravery, imagination and dedication to the craft of poetry. Your writing inspired us, and we have no doubt that many of you will go on to become accomplished authors and poets.

Here in Zambia, poetry — especially performing poetry — is a traditional activity which is still an important part of our culture and has a high place in our school life. Writing and performing poetry is something our learners do more frequently than in most far north country schools, so we are always pleased and impressed to read such high-quality work from overseas. Our staff and learners are all looking forward to watching and hearing your winners perform their work!

The collection of poems we have explored offers a deep and heartfelt reflection on the emotions and experiences that many young people navigate daily. The poems touch on themes of ambition, perseverance, anxiety, escapism and the fleeting nature of dreams. They provide insight into the challenges of growing up faced by all young people everywhere, irrespective of culture and relative wealth, from the pressures of school to the search for meaning and personal identity.

Through vivid imagery and emotions, the poems express both the beauty of dreaming and the struggle of facing reality. Some highlight resilience in the face of failure, while others capture the quiet longing for peace in a fast-moving world. They serve as a reminder that young minds are filled with complex thoughts, fears and hopes — many of which go unspoken in daily conversations.

For parents reading them, these poems encourage you to listen, to understand and to support your children as they explore their emotions and aspirations. They remind us to nurture creativity, acknowledge struggles, and provide a safe space where young voices can be heard.

We hope these poems will inspire meaningful conversations in your learners' homes and will help strengthen the connection between parents and their children.

Mulemba Sakuwaha

Head Teacher, Mukwashi Trust School

Overall winner

Yijiang Wang, Year 9

*Oh, to rest upon the angel's mantle,
Rather than wade through the turmoil of men.
To escape the cruel soul-binding shackle
And drift beyond where mortal minds can ken.
May sacred choirs resound both soft and clear
And for doves to bestow their olive branch.
Only in dreams, we find the peace so dear,
Unless all life withers, swaying no branch.*

*A dice roll with life, where all sides will win.
Sick of all the days that stretch on within,
Strenuous life, mundane but hard to bear.
To vanish in silence, shed all despair,
To dissolve to dust, blown away by breath,
Even in Hell, I find my peace in death.
Care not for pity, woe, nor for sombre,
But beauty to sink in eternal slumber.*

*I close my eyes and sink into the black-
So black, Darker than black.
A tranquil rest, where no dreams cause awake,
A gentle lullaby, that time can't break.
So black, Darker than black-
An eternal slumber, no turning back.*

Judges' comments (all comments by Ms Mwanamwambwa)

Yijiang's brilliant poem '*Darker than dark*' stood out to us all as the most powerful and emotionally evocative poem in the KES collection. It contains haunting imagery, a profound theme and excellent rhythmic flow. This poem was the unanimous choice of all judges and is a worthy overall winner.

Yigang's words are sad, yet poetic, in their portrayal of despair. He communicates a sense of resignation, but his beautiful flow and lovely imagery also create a sense of peacefulness — as if the speaker has already embraced the darkness they describe.

What marks this young poet out as an exceptional talent is his ability to evoke human emotions whilst maintaining an even pace with striking poetic beauty.

Everyone at Mukwashi says '*Well done Yigiang*'. If you were down here, the whole school would give you a big standing ovation at one of our '*Special Fridays*'.

Overall runner up

Luca Sherwin, Year 7

*I've bled for my dreams.
I've burned through the nights,
pushed until my body screamed for rest.*

*I fall, fast and broken,
the air rips through my skin,
silence screams in my ears,
a deep, endless plunge with no end in sight.*

*Failure pulls me down further,
a weight that drags me into the dark,
no hope, no escape,
just the crushing truth that I'm not enough.*

*Failure isn't a lesson,
it's a shadow that follows me,
it tells me I'm not worthy,
that I should quit.*

*But quitting isn't in me.
I rise, even when my bones ache,
even when the world turns its back.*

*Dreams aren't handed to you.
They're fought for,
clawed at,
torn from the world that tries to break you.*

*Yet, I will not stop,
not until they're mine.*

Judges' comments

Luca's poem shows powerful perseverance in the face of failure. It creates an intense emotional landscape which reflects the struggle we all face of chasing our aspirations.

The shift in tone at the end is especially striking: after dwelling in despair, Luca reclaims his strength with defiance, declaring that quitting is not an option.

Overall, this poem captures a painful, yet relentless journey towards success, making it both relatable and motivational. Luca has achieved a very high standard of poetry for a Year 7 learner – we look forward to reading more of his work in a few years' time.

Year 7

first prize

Adam Makame

*Slumber pulls me under,
Soft and heavy,
Like a tide that knows my name.*

*Vast lands that never end,
Touching horizons that never felt so close,
Fluffy clouds that soften at every step.*

*A weight-less astronaut,
Floating through this eternal mirage,
The taste of stars at my tongue,
Fragments of dreams slipping through my fingers,*

*I chase those dreams through the echoes of childhood laughter,
Fading away like the footprints on a Sandy shore.*

*I run towards the hushed echoes,
Yet I run in slow motion,
My eyes start to shut,
I pull and pull and pull yet no use.*

*This could be the end,
Thus, I have so many stories to tell,
Friendships to amend,
Places to see,
But it all comes down like a stack of cards.*

*I close my eyes,
A black abyss consuming them,
My heartbeat starts to slow,
my body goes numb,
This is my time, my fate, my closing chapter.*

Judges' comments

Adam beautifully captures the ethereal and haunting nature of drifting between dreams and the finality of life. His imagery is delicate yet powerful, drawing readers into a weird, weightless world where reality and dreams blur together.

The poem is both mesmerising and deeply introspective. It speaks to the delicacy of dreams, the passage of time and the inevitability of endings, leaving the reader reflecting quietly. Our girls particularly liked this poem, with many arguing its case strongly.

Year 7 second place

Zayan Arshad

*Every night, when I went to bed,
I would dream,
I would dream of a world of peace,
I would try to forget about all the wars,
And all the killing.
And then I realised that I had to help,
I had to help those people losing their lives,
And the only way to do it,
Was by raising money,
So I did.
But now, when I go to bed,
I still dream,
I dream of how I can make peace,
I try to stop all the wars,
And all the killing.*

Judges' comments

Zayan's poem carries a heartfelt and sincere message about the desire for peace and the responsibility to make actions, and it moves skilfully from a place of passive dreaming to active effort.

Despite taking action, Zayan still dreams of peace — emphasising that this work is never truly done. Our staff particularly enjoyed this poem, and felt it showed a maturity beyond the writer's years.

Zayan's poem leaves us with a sense of both determination and longing, reinforcing that while one person's effort may not end all wars, the hope and persistence to make a difference must continue in order to make a better world.

Year 9 first prize

Aarya Yallappa

*The clock keeps ticking,
I can't sleep; I can't sleep.
My eyes bore into the ceiling. I've been lying here for hours.
My mind starts racing; my heart pounding fast and hard in my head.*

Slow down – breathe, breathe...

*It's not working; it's not working.
Tossing and turning, thoughts dancing around my mind; shadows flicker and flit in the darkness
when I open my eyes.
Why won't the stupid clock stop ticking?
I'm annoyed with my fear of nothing, with my restlessness.*

Try again – breathe, breathe...

*Finally, my mind slows,
I begin to*

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*Into sleep.
Into dreams.
Into nightmares.*

*Once more I am lucid – but everything is moving at a million miles an hour, the world is swimming
around me.
It's freezing cold but I'm damp with sweat.
Blinding bursts of light – chaos.
I'm surrounded by whispers, by quiet voices – they're talking about me.
I'm scared.
Something's coming.
I have to run.*

*Run.
Faster.
Don't stop.*

*I keep going, but the voices are swelling into jagged sounds – not voices.
Screeching now, like animals – anguished, desperate, feral.
They scrape against my skull like shards of broken glass.
I'm getting tired, my legs feel like logs, and I look down at my bare feet, they're bleeding,
I run quicker; I have to.
Suddenly, my foot gets caught and I fall forward.
I cry out but no sound escapes my throat.
Desperately, I strain to get to my feet, but my body is drained and still.*

It's over. They're here.

*I plead and beg hopelessly,
I scream a soundless scream as the darkness consumes me.*

Silence.

*And I am thrust back into reality, gasping for air, and filled with relief.
But the whispers still linger in the dark.
'Tick, Tick, Tick.'
Have they ever left?*

Judges' comments

Aarya's excellent poem is an intense exploration of anxiety, insomnia and the terrifying descent into nightmares. His vivid imagery and erratic pacing indicate the restless, racing mind of someone trapped in the grip of sleeplessness and fear.

He manages to convey the experience of escalating thoughts, with repetitive lines reflecting the frustration of trying to sleep; while the gradual descent into the dreams and nightmares is depicted with a sense of slow inevitability.

Aarya captures the torment of sleeplessness and the blurred boundary between reality and nightmare. His poem is haunting and relatable — especially for anyone who has ever felt trapped in their own thoughts.

Year 9 second place

Tom Webb

*My dreams are vibrant, filled with colours bright,
Where learning's a joy, a pure and gentle light.
No slamming lockers, no judgmental eyes,
Just open fields beneath endless skies.
But school's a cage, where dreams are forced to hide,
Beneath the weight of lessons, nowhere to confide.
The pressure builds, a constant, heavy dread,
Another day, another hope lies dead.
In dreams, I'm free; here, fear fills my head.*

Judges' comments

Tom's poem presents a striking distinction between the ideal world of dreams and the harsh reality of school. The last section, "*in dreams, I am free; here, fear fills my head*" captures the poem's core theme — the longing for a world where learning is inspiring rather than oppressive.

This poem resonates with anyone who has ever felt trapped within the unbending expectations of navigating an education system which prioritises structure over creativity, discipline over passion.

Of all the entries, Tom's poem sparked the most discussion among our learners. Many of them wanted to ask him questions about KES and to compare his experience with theirs.

Year 11 first prize

Daniel Zhao

*At night I lay in my bed,
Dreams of greatness fill my head.*

*In this dream, I touch the sky.
In this dream, I am meant to fly.
In this dream, a life so grand.
In this dream, a fortune in my hand.*

*But, just as I reach out to this golden light,
My alarm clock sounds, ending the night.
The dream fades in the blink of an eye,
As I sadly let out a sigh.*

Judges' comments

Daniel's poem beautifully captures the fleeting nature of dreams and the bittersweet contrast between aspiration and reality.

The abrupt interruption by the alarm clock serves as a reminder of reality's constraints. The final sigh conveys disappointment — a universal feeling for anyone who has ever woken from a dream too soon.

It's a good, precise poem, with no wasted words, which 'hits the nail on the head'. Our poems tend to be longer than this, and Daniel has helped us to appreciate the power of brevity.

Year 11 second place

Henry Ballinger-Reed

*To dare to dream
To dare to escape*

*Far, far away from the bone prison
A million miles from dull and dreary reality*

*To a merrier life,
To a scarier life,*

*Where long grass in the fields dances and fawns leap
The spring sun shimmers and the breeze kisses
Where ghouls creep inside the walls searching
for any breathing beings to devour their souls.*

*When you wake up.
It is all over.
The joy. The fear.
Gone. Never to return. Flying away
like a red balloon released into the wind*

*To dare to dream
To dare to hope*

*To find excitement far from our homes
To drift away milliseconds later*

*To be forgotten
To be lost*

*To dare to dream
Only to forget*

Judges' comments

Henry's poem explores the nature of dreams, capturing both their beauty and their inevitable disappearance. His metaphor "*red balloon released into the wind*" symbolises how dreams slip away and never return in exactly the same way. The poem reminds us how easily dreams fade leaving only fragments behind.

Henry deserves a special mention because he taught us all a new word. None of us had come across 'fawn' as a noun before, and we all had to look it up in a dictionary to find what it meant!