

ROTARY YOUNG WRITER COMPETITION: 'OUR WORLD IS BEAUTIFUL'

Our winner in the intermediate category [11-13]

A poem by Becky Adamson, 13, Wetherby High School

Senseless

The wind explored the young soldier's body
His mouth clenched tight in death,
His hands, in fear.

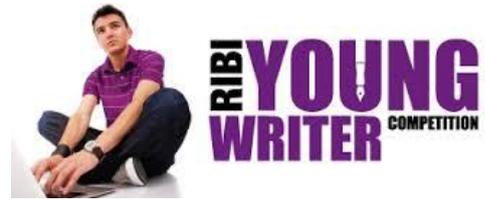
He died not knowing why he fought –
Killed by those who remain faceless and nameless,
By those who were so very much like him;
By the side of who may have given him
A life of friendship, laughter and fun.

The wind caressed the old soldier's face
His eyes locked open in death,
His mind locked closed with hate.

He fought, not caring whether he died,
Whether he lived...
For the war had spread the poison
Of mindless rage and malice,
Of bitter spite and senseless anger
Through all that he was.

So when the gunshots fell silent,
And the birds began to sing again,
A single sentence whistled through the trees:
'Our world is beautiful.'

The wind looked across the broken battlefield,
And told the clouds,
Who told the sky,
Who told the moon,
Who told the sun,
Who told mankind,
Who grieved...
But did not learn.



Our winner in the SENIOR category [14-17]

By Megan McFarlane, 17, Ralph Thoresby School

My World Is Beautiful

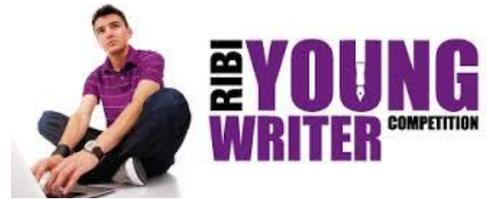
“We slept on durable wooden shelves; but we didn’t dream, and many didn’t sleep, we created the image of the stacked dolls of the Spielwarenladen that I had once admired as a child. On my 13th birthday I met the doll maker. He showed me the instrument he used to sculpt smiles, the velvet black paint he used to outline the glass eyes and the knife he used to carve the wooden bodies. But our toy maker must have grown too timeworn and tired, we were left: the unfinished toys. We were toys for grown men. Laughed at, played with and experimented on. But we were also the survivors. I’m not sure if it’s a success or misfortune to leave Buchenwald alive. Maybe this world isn’t all beautiful. But maybe knowing that shows how much of it is.”

“I wake up to echoes of my last words. ‘I cannot for I am both a Hutu and a Tutsi’. Then inside my head I hear whispers my words left unsaid. My left hand works my body armour, covering the scar that cut through my larynx. My skull is engraved with streaks drawn by the soldiers with machetes. I imagine the patterns these men may have produced as children. I wonder if my scars look akin to the scribbles on the page. Sitting mute, I consider the beauty of this world. I sit and consider if it really is.”

“I captured the moment closest to death. My camera feels dirty, guilty, ashamed. The uncensored image is engraved in my head, the flash of the shot masking the flash of the camera and the screams of the civilians echo in my nightmares. I don’t know his name. I like names. My name is Adam. I remember his checked shirt untucked from his jeans. I remember his eyes. I remember the chill in the air. I remember the date: February 1, 1968. I remember Saigon, although I wish I didn’t. Is this world beautiful?”

“I ripped off my burning *ao dai*, I thought of my *me’s* sleepless nights making me it. I was scared she might not make me a new one. But I was more scared of the burning gas chasing me and my friends. I am a fast runner, faster than my 11 year old brother. But my skin was sweltering and my eyes stinging. I was witnessing napalm burning my beautiful world.”

“Neil’s words resonate in my head to this day: ‘every human has a finite number of heartbeats and I don’t intend to waste any of mine.’ Leaving the world behind and landing on such a vast, untouched destination I look across to the ‘beautiful jewel in the velvet sky’, and I realise how incredible the world could be. The world looks beautiful. If we can conquer space, can we not overcome man-made devastation? The world would not only then look beautiful from almost 40,000 km away, but from the eyes of every man.”



The judge's comments were as follows:

The Field

As in previous years I was struck by the quality and variety of the entries. Yet, for all their diversity they have much in common. As a group how sensitive they are to the precarious beauty of our world and to the range and depth of human suffering it embraces! And how much they share too in terms of literary intelligence and imagination – for instance in the way they tell their stories from different viewpoints and how they deploy wit and paradox and make use of resonant detail and unexpected, telling punchlines.

It has been a great honour and pleasure to judge them.

The Winners

Two joint winners deserve our applause: **Megan McFarlane** in the senior category and **Becky Adamson** in the intermediate category.

Obliquely, un sentimentally, Megan McFarlane contrasts the suffering and savagery in the world with a distant glimpse of its beauty. Shifting between time and place, she confronts us with a series of four 'snapshots': a Jewish girl in Buchenwald; a victim in Rwanda, a press photographer and his subject in the Vietnam war; and finally the astronaut Neil Armstrong surveying 'the beautiful jewel of earth' as seen from the moon, all of them speaking through their own words. It is a strikingly mature and effective piece of writing.

In the long and noble tradition of anti-war poetry, Becky Adamson's poem, 'Senseless', is about the pointlessness of conflict and violence. The wind, the poem's presiding presence, blows hither and thither above battlefields, possibly those of previous world wars, maybe in the Middle East today. As it does, grim words, some immediate, some abstract, punch home: 'clenched'; 'faceless'; 'mindless' and 'sightless'. Then, finally, with a mastery of rhythm and detail combining human and natural elements, it builds to the spiral of its climax

The Runners-Up

Hard on the heels of the two winners come runners-up: the first, **Joe Murphy**, [of Roundhay School] in the intermediate category and the second, **Nida Rani** of Ralph Thoresby School, in the senior category.

Joe Murphy's story is a highly successful attempt by a young person to enter into the mind of a man at the opposite end of life. Very imaginatively he brings to life the past of an elderly patient in hospital via a series of sharply realised memories that capture the beauty of the world he has known. Its last paragraph lets us know that the end has finally come.

Nida Rani evokes a not-at-all-beautiful world: that of a girl in mental hospital. She captures the girl's self-aware, self-mocking voice very convincingly ('I've met more therapist than I have lovers.') tracking her mind games and the manipulative way she plays up to the expectations of her doctors.