



Voices

Shortlisted entries from Voices 2019:
The creative writing competition for
children in care and care leavers

With the support of



Nick and Katie Searl



The Queen's Trust

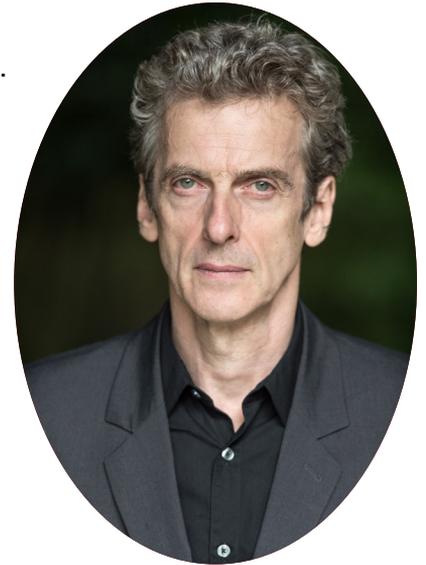
Rosemary and Bernard Mayes

A message from Peter Capaldi

Coram Voice's competition provides a unique platform to celebrate the creativity of children in care and young care leavers.

Although I've only been involved for a few years, it has been wonderful to see the competition grow. And I'm still knocked out by the talent of those who take part. The experience of care is not a straightforward one, and needs greater understanding from all of us. There are few things that illuminate it more than these powerful words, chosen by gifted and resilient young people who have gone through the system.

The shortlisted entries in this book provide a diverse and often emotional insight into this year's theme, 'growing up'. The judges and I were blown away by the inventive ways in which these stories were told. They are truly engaging, insightful, and imaginative. I'd like to thank every single one of the young people who chose to share their words and talent with us.



Peter Capaldi, Voices 2019 Host

A big thank you to...

Havas for kindly donating the use of their wonderful auditorium and helping to make the event happen. Thank you to Nick and Katie Searl and Cadence Innova for their very generous donations without which Voices would not have been possible. Thank you to Rosemary and Bernard Mayes for generously supporting our Primary School category. Thank you to The Queen's Trust for their continued support of the competition. Thank you also to Bounce Children's Books, Canongate Books, Faber & Faber, Harper Collins Publishers, Penguin Random House, Pushkin Press, Rock the Boat - an imprint of Oneworld Publications, Scholastic UK, Usborne Publishing and Zephyr, for their wonderful prize donations.

A big thank you to our amazing judges, who for the first time included previous entrants to the competition, all of whom were dedicated to supporting the competition and inspiring young writers. Thank you to judges Ashley John-Baptiste, Mr Gee, Ric Flo, Kiran Millwood Hargrave, Kit de Waal, Alice Broadway, Jenny Molloy and Jarvis, as well as our wonderful host, Peter Capaldi, for supporting Voices for the third year in a row. Thank you to all the young judges: Abbey, Aminah, Asmara and Jade for their fantastic help. Thank you to all the shortlisters who took the time to read through so many entries, and thank you to all the charities, virtual heads, local authorities, social workers and youth groups for sharing information about Voices and encouraging young people to find their voice. Thank you also to colleagues across the Coram group who have helped with running and promoting the competition.

Finally, a huge thank you to all the young people who took the time to enter Voices 2019. We are immensely grateful that so many children in care and care leavers shared their stories about growing up, and submitted such fantastic entries to the competition. We are proud to showcase their work, and we are proud of every single young person who entered.

Brigid Robinson, Managing Director at Coram Voice

Primary School Category

Life's Process, p. 5

The Journey Of Power, p. 6-7

Who Knows What I Will Become, p. 8

Growing Up, p. 9

Growing Up Isn't Easy When You Think About It! p. 10

On Reflection, p. 11



Lower Secondary School Category

Growing Up, p. 13

This Is Me, p. 14-15

Reality, p. 16-17

Proud Of My Skin, p. 17

Does Height Matter? p. 18

Growing Up, p. 19

Upper Secondary School Category

The Truth About Growing, p. 21

Listen, p. 22-23

Being The Architect Of Your Own Experience, p. 24-25

Time To Grow Up, p. 25

Shedding Of Skin, p. 26-27

Growing Up, p. 28-29

Care Leaver Category

The Girl Behind The Glass, p. 31

Unwanted, p. 32-33

An Unintentional Gift, p. 33

I Want A Future, p. 34-35

Growing Up Behind Closed Doors, p. 36-37

Who Am I? My Identity, p. 38

Many of these entries are about people's lives and some of the content may be upsetting. 3

The background is a vibrant orange color. It features several large, overlapping circles. One circle in the top-left is a solid lime green. Another circle in the top-right and a third in the bottom-right are filled with diagonal stripes in shades of yellow and orange. A fourth solid lime green circle is positioned in the middle-right area, partially overlapping the striped circles. The text is centered on the left side of the page.

Primary School Category (age 5-10)

Life's Process

Kindly supported by Rosemary and Bernard Mayes

It's a miracle a true miracle,
A wonder of how we are formed.
Day by day minute by minute,
Each cell, each bone, every vein
Is GROWING UP.

We may start bald we may end up the same,
But our hair keeps on sprouting
Our nails keep on needing to be cut,
And our clothes get smaller on our growing limbs.
We are GROWING UP.

Our brain takes in more information,
While our eyes and ears locate the world.
Our taste buds change from milk to solids,
From crawling, to walking, to sprinting to charging.
While we're GROWING UP.

Blubbering baby language to talking human words,
Then in comes responsibilities when school meets our eyes.
Friends are there to guide you when troubles are near,
But more our parents loving arms and ears.
It's difficult sometimes GROWING UP
We grow into teenagers sometimes we
rage,
But my safe home is always there now.
However big or old I get,
When I am all grown up, I will look after
them.
It's a long journey GROWING UP.

What's good about growing up
Is that it never really stops.
Everyday has so much more to give us,
Make the most of your days when going through this stage.
Life is a one off, so enjoy GROWING UP.



**Second Place
Ryan,
age 9**



Judges Comments

There are some lines in this poem which shine out and really describe growing up in an intelligent and thoughtful way. 'From crawling, to walking, to sprinting, to charging' is a beautifully visual take on the theme. The writing took us to the place of the writer with clear images in mind. This is an artful writing skill which this young person is gifted with.

The Journey Of Power

Worried and confused, depressed and isolated – these feelings played an important role in my childhood. I had been expecting to receive my “SUPERPOWERS” by the time I was three; here I was at five and there was no sign of any “SUPERPOWERS” – none, nothing – ZERO.

Fortunately I had a friend called Emia. Emia was always there for me; some people said “she’s not real!” But she was real to me.

Even though she was imaginary she played a huge role in my childhood. I will never forget her because she was always there for me, always listened to me and always cared if I felt down or cross.

Concerned my parents took me to the Super Doctors as they wanted to know why my “SUPERPOWERS” had shown no sign of appearing (I was 11!) But the appointment didn’t go very well. “Your daughter is 100% fit and healthy!” Dr R concluded, having spent long dreadful hours prodding, poking and shining blinding bright lights into my eyes. It occurred to me that maybe my “SUPERPOWER” was never to be blinded because those lights were extremely bright.

Even though my parents seemed disappointed they accepted the fact that maybe I was unlucky and would never get any “SUPERPOWERS”. On the other hand I NEVER gave up hope, UNTIL on my sixteenth birthday I woke up expecting to have my “SUPERPOWER” (just like Superman had on his sixteenth birthday). But no matter how hard I persevered no “SUPERPOWERS” appeared – zip-none-zero-gone – zop (sorry I had to put that one in!).

Life plodded on very slowly, like watching thick dark brown paint dry. I locked myself away in my room, only coming out for food, drink and toilet breaks. I ate only what I could find in the cupboards – dry biscuits and occasionally a tin of baked beans. I did this to avoid socialising. I hated my Mum and Dad and I’m pretty sure they hated me– I was an embarrassment. I thought they had forgotten all about me and I was fine with that – tip-top – 100% fine.

For my seventeenth birthday, I planned to spend the day like any other – locked away in my room.

But when I woke, I felt a tingling sensation. I started to glow. Sparks began to appear from me. I couldn't believe it – my amazing – yet strange powers had arrived. It was definitely worth the wait because on my seventeenth birthday, 7th July 7777, I had gotten my powers, and this is where my good luck streak began.

I was recording myself on my phone when the tingling sensation began – the whole thrilling event was captured on film.

My luck has continued which goes to show why most people regard seven as a lucky number.

Although my parents were extremely happy that my “SUPERPOWERS” had arrived, I think me and Emia were happier.

I AM NOW “SUPER GIRL”.



Third Place
Phoebe
age 10

Judges Comments

We love the idea of waiting to receive ‘SUPERPOWERS’, it’s a great concept, and one we can definitely relate to! This piece made us laugh, there are some great lines and a very individual voice that comes through. Creative with comedy! Loved it!

Who Knows What I Will Become?

In the secure contentment of the womb, I hear the soft, warm tones of my mother's voice.

It gives me a WOOSH of excitement to meet the voice I hear daily.

Who knows what I will become?

I open my eyes and see a breathtaking world before me.

I cry for attention and all is waiting there is love.

I achieve my first milestone and then I let out a beaming smile.

Who knows what I will become?

As I spring up through child hood I begin to learn the rights and wrongs of the world.

Throughout the school years I discover the immense worth of knowledge that a waits for me.

During this period my independence flourishes

I establish my first friendship and produce many more.

Who knows what I will become?

From the beginning to the end of child hood the world seemed fun, although worries taint this world for me now!

I am now a responsible loving mother, who will provide my very best for my young.

As I advance so does my career, which assists my talents and enjoyment.

Who knows what I will become?

The person in the mirror looks totally unfamiliar now, due to the many wrinkles and grey hairs that swarm my face upon me.

But in my eyes I see the person I have always been.

Sweet death awaits me now and I feel brave to take the next step.

Who knows what I will become?

I know that I became a wonderful person, who touched many lives and I am proud of that!

That's who I became...



Anonymous
age 10

Judges Comments

The concept is great. A complete life's journey with that one echoing question 'Who knows what i will become?' is powerful and resonates with me. It really communicates that growing up doesn't end at childhood.

Growing Up

Kindly supported by Rosemary and Bernard Mayes

A cold December night 4 years ago is when I was able to start growing up
To begin to feel like other children feel
Regular food to replace the hunger of missing a meal.
The fun of toys and being shown how to play with other kids
Clothes that keep me warm and fit
Kind words, happy people, no fighting, no police, no drama.
Waking up in a bed - my bed - my room – my quiet.
I won't lie having a toothbrush, a hairbrush, a shower - I resisted – I was scared.
But my hair isn't itchy and I'm not smelly
No one calls me names
I live on a farm now and I care for the animals.
Have a foster family that love me and give me a birthday to celebrate
Candles, cake, presents, a party and singing.
Holidays, high days, picnics on the beach.
I'm proud of myself, I'm ten, I love school it has a pool.
I play drums, do Brownies, read books, play dolls and lots of other things
I can be me, me, ME!
I love school, lessons are cool
In September I move on to another one
Scary, maybe, but I'm not alone
So I won't whinge and I won't moan.
I feel safe and the people around me care
With lots and lots of time to spare
To help me achieve my dreams
Put up with my ideas and funny schemes
A teacher is what I want to be in this little town by the sea.



Olivia-Grace,
age 10

Judges Comments

*I love the line - 'Waking up in a bed - my bed - my room - my quiet'.
That line is a journey in itself and the writer creates a nice rhythm
throughout the piece.*

Growing Up Isn't Easy When You Think About It!

I remember the day I first time opened my eyes. Too bright! I also remember when I said my first word. Feeling emotions whilst seeing those emotions , and the first emotion I felt. Like the time I first saw a Paramedic when I was dehydrated. Like the other time I seen an ambulance slip out my dainty eyes view. Each time I think of that every morning, one tear always trickles down my pale, silky cheek. Growing up in care can feel like a true happy ever after miracle, some feel like another metre has been fallen down from their secret endless pit of despair. Yes, we do feel happy, and sad, but that's obviously what life has in store for you, and you must live with that. I do. From the age of 3, I have managed to grow up without my Mom, and from the age of 6, without any family relatives except my older,11 year old, sister S. My Social Worker R, is the most funniest SW I've ever had, and E is my most well known Support Worker I've had since the age of 4, and after 5 lovely years, she is now moving to a more advanced job. I will miss E like my own Mother.

Childhood in Care is quite a scene in my life, and I keep S (for that is my Foster Carer) really safe, like me and my sister did when I lived with my Mom.

My Respite carers S and R are very nice people. They give us lots of freedom, whereas S does not, but hey, different houses have different rules, so don't judge them by that.

Growing up can be stressful in care, because you are living with a person you aren't related to, hence you don't always find keeping the rules easy, because you aren't used to them. Sometimes, Carers get beaten down by children when they're angry.

"When you're angry, or annoyed, just get a book and take yourself away" A quote from S, Foster Carer.

The cared for child must be happy, and when they're angry, ignore them until their calm, because growing up in care can be a hard time for kids. It's hard on their lives because they may be used to life before being fostered, and usually, they pick up bad habits from it. So next time, remember the title (and quote off S) and remember, being fostered is no different, so be happy.



Erin,
age 9

Judges Comments

There is a real natural, flowing voice in this story. Its stream of consciousness takes you through different ideas in a conversational and mature way.

On Reflection

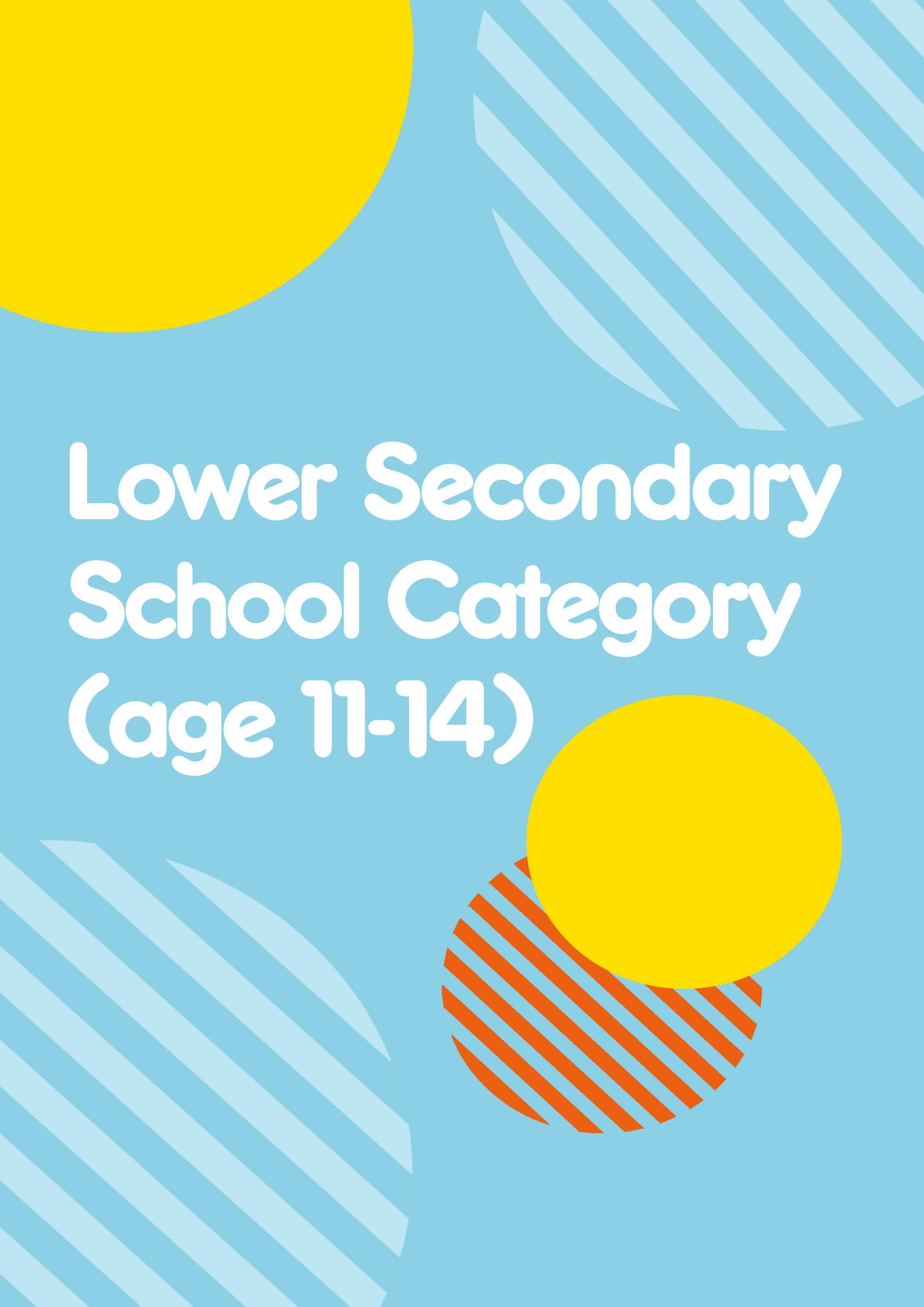
Kindly supported by Rosemary and Bernard Mayes

I see you watching
As I grow up
As I get taller
You get nearer
As I get older
So do you
But when I smile
You just grin back
You watch me growing
And wait
Until we are close
And stare into each other's eyes
I turn away
I shout and tell you
I won't be you
I won't be you



Judges Comments

We love the pace and simplicity of this piece. The title 'On reflection' is a perfect choice, each line reflects another and it grows in power as it reads. A beautiful and intimate poem, we wondered how the writer felt after writing this - proud we hope?



Lower Secondary School Category (age 11-14)

Growing Up

Year 1

A new life a clean slate

A wonder of creation

Could grow to be amazing

An asset to our nation

Year 2

Starting to figure it out

Learning the ropes

Starting to wonder

Of dreams and hopes

Year 3

Starting to create

Tinkering with his hands

Could be a great architect

Designing amazing plans

Year 4

Starting to mend

Fixing toy cars

Could be a great doctor

Healing people's scars

Year 5

Starting to learn

The danger he could face

Of a life not used

Such a waste

Year 6

Starting to grow

Biggest in his class

Hoping not to miss a chance

And let it

fly past

Year 7

Starting to own

His own small wealth

Little does he know

It might not be so good

for his health

Year 8

Starting to realize

Not all is in clear sight

And to find certain things

You need a little force

and might

Year 9

Starting to make friends

Each one a gem

Beginning to know

He will need them

Year 10

Starting to aspire

Trying to achieve

wanting his share

of success

Before he has to leave

Year 11

Starting to explore

Gone away for a while

From the Amazon

Rainforest

To the vast River Nile

Year 12

He does not yet know what

he'll be

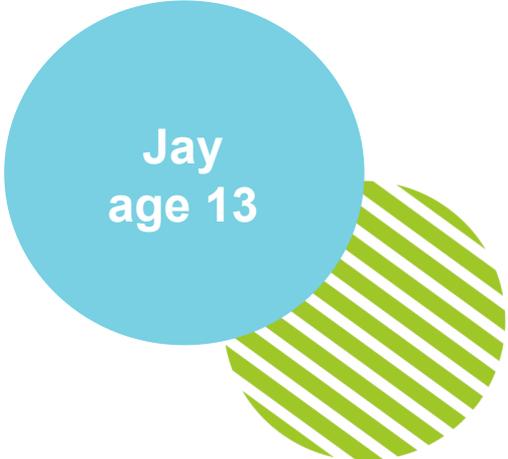
One of life's great mysteries

Yet he does know

as he should

That he has the power to

make history.



Jay
age 13

Judges Comments

We liked the structure of this poem, it was simple but effective in displaying the theme of "Growing Up". Through the different verses, the reader grows up with the author. We also liked the fact that every verse began with the word "Starting" except the first and the last. This repetition resets the clock for each year but gives us a new bit of information each time. This would work great as a theatrical piece.

This Is Me

Growing up not much good luck
Began at the beginning, haven't reached the end
That's no time soon, by what I intend
Being in care gives me happiness, more than any angel could send.

Bliss till I was five, years went too fast
Then came the nightmare, when I thought I wouldn't last
Sadness when I learnt that my BFF, My Nan, had passed.
No human being so young should feel that aghast.

From there on in everything went downhill
But one day it all came to a standstill.
From the bottom of their hearts and from goodwill
My foster parents love me more than my other family will.
Their home is my home
It's where I have grown
It's my safe haven I call my own
It will always be there when I run from the unknown.

A new Primary School, my new friends did rule
Made a difference from the old, the way they treated me wasn't very cool.
They made me feel such an utter fool.
My new school was much better, the kids were never cruel.
For Primary School I was glad
I had many comrades
And that was totally rad,

But now I've embarked in a new adventure
High School's the place I've dared to venture.
Sure, at times it can be a real fist clencher
But my educational journey won't be a mis-adventure,

I dream of going to University
Just because I am in care, I will face adversity.
But due to my personality
Cambridge is going to see my strength and diversity.
After that, who knows what I will be
I might become a Lawyer or get a cheese making degree
I might even end up your local MP

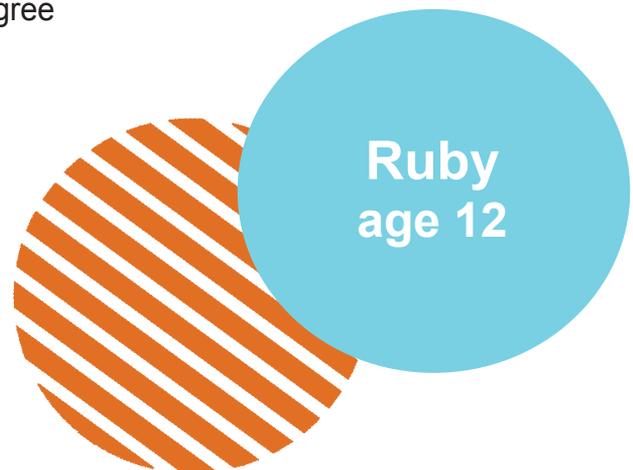
For all those adults who show kids you care
I sincerely hope that you are aware
That people like you, your kindness is rare,
You pluck children's troubles out of the air.

I know that actually I'm not like other kids
The insults I dream of behind closed eyelids.
Even though they are trying to scare me, in the midst,
My courage to ignore them, that's what bravery rides.

This next part I would like to dedicate
To other kids like me, whose life may not be complete,
In time there will be great reason to celebrate
Because being in care CAN TURN OUT GREAT.

Any support you need will always be there
This I know well because there are people who care
You're important it's only fair
That everyone deserves someone who CARES.

Growing up, isn't just about getting up and out of your bed,
Or brushing your teeth.
Growing up is a journey, WE CAN ALL GO SO FAR



Judges Comments

We liked the storytelling here & the sense of journey that gave it a warm glow of completion at the end. We also loved the imaginative lines such as "You pluck children's troubles out of the air", they really added a sweet texture to the tale and were effective in being inspirational.

Reality

As a child, she was happy. Blissfully innocent and oblivious, she thought the world of her family and friends, although sometimes they would annoy her. Her best friend would take her Barbie dolls and sit in her seat, much to her distaste, and her mother would ground her and not let her eat what she liked. All these things were trivial, but at the time, each little thing felt like a dagger blow. Her mother was anxious, determined to guard the little girl against the outside world so would answer her questions with only her version of the truth. Misbehave, and the bogeyman will get you, misbehave and Santa will leave out their house on Christmas day.

Her life continued like this for a while. Months turned to years. And then the process began, and she started to grow up. She learned not only that Santa and the Tooth Fairy didn't exist, but that her parents make mistakes, grandparents, old people die and lying is easier than facing up to the truth. Telling the truth means punishment, so why do it? Social media changed her life and she discovered that followers and likes are how you get friends. Popularity becomes her biggest goal. Her bedroom door would remain shut all day, and the little girl isolated herself from her parents, herself, the world. She didn't realise what she had until it was taken away. The argument started on Saturday raging, hurtful words flying round like fists, it carried on the next day. No rest. Just shouting, endless, endless shouting. The girl sought release with her friends, who were not really friends but parasites, and returned the next day after curfew. An aneurysm then tore her family apart. It all happened very fast and the next thing she knew, she was an orphan.

For the first time in her life, she prayed. She prayed that her mummy would return and everything would be okay, but nobody knows if He exists or that heaven is a certainty. The only thing that is certain is death. That is inevitable. The girl had yearned so long for adulthood, and now, she only wanted to go back. Despite everything, there were lessons to be learned still; she learned that families can blame and reject you no matter how old you are, that siblings will lie and distort the truth, anything to find an explanation, and finally, foster care is nothing at all like Tracy Beaker.

The innocent little girl was transformed, sharpened and made mature past her age. She realised that for some people, growing up can effectively end their lives and cause a family to be ripped apart at the seams. She knew she had overlooked everything hugely, that she had grown too quickly.

Despite this, she will never forget. Life has marked her, scarred her and she refuses to forgive. She was exposed to things that growing up, she did not know existed. Never in her dreams. Not even in her nightmares.

Judges Comments

Beautiful writing, showing wonderful potential for exploring the theme through self-awareness. The “yearning for adulthood” twinned with the “lament for lost childhood”, these are very mature evaluations captured in in a few well-chosen words. This is not a pretty tale with a nice neat conclusion. It leaves the reader searching, which is a testament to its power.

Proud Of My Skin

Sometimes it's hard fitting in when you're black,
All those cold sniggers when you turn your back.
The dubious looks you receive on the streets,
the frowns on people's faces you meet.
All their prejudice makes me shudder,
I wish my skin would just change its colour.
On the bus arriving at school,
the other kids telling you bein' black 'aint cool!
All those smirking faces at black history month,
just wishing the ground would swallow you up.
Getting pushed around, being called a N***R,
too angry to eat my now cold dinner.
Pre-judged for the colour of my skin,
equality seems so impossible to win.

BUT

I'm *smarter*,
I'm *older*,
I'm *wiser*,
I'm *bolder*,
Determined to be proud of my skin,
Committed now to STAND OUT... not just in.



Second Place
Shannon,
age 14

Gilberta
age 11

Judges Comments

This poem matches the theme in the respect that it alludes to childhood experiences growing up. Emotions are strong and you can feel the frustration in the author's pen bursting to get out. Though it starts off quite simply, the poem actually matures as it evolves “Equality seems so impossible to win” is a heavy line loaded with much complexity.

Does Height Matter?

People think I'm not big, they think I'm rather small
I suppose that when I'm in a queue, I'm not really tall at all.
I always get rude comments, you look like a garden gnome
Or I think you had better hurry up to your little dolls house home.
When I go to the cinema and try to sit upon the seat,
It folds up and devours me, all you can see are my feet.
If I go bowling, the balls are as big as me,
As I try to roll them, I end up on my knees
Here's a message to those who don't know me, I'm really big inside,
I tower high above my head, next stop is the sky.
In this tiny head of mine is a clever brain,
I can add, spell, sing and dance, if I don't fall down a drain!
When I'm on my PS4, no-one can beat me
I am the 'Master' of the Universe for everyone to see
I put on a pair of my big shoes and stand up tall and straight
Then look them in the kneecaps and their bad behavior, I won't tolerate.
I suppose a lot has happened in my short history
Lots of stormy weather, combined with 'choppy' seas
But I can see land ahead and sunny skies there too
Cos I'm as BIG as anyone and that means as big as you!

Judges Comments

The poem is an amazing combination of both funny & insightful observations surrounding the idea of size. The awareness of being physically "small" but potentially "huge" is both clever and inspiring to all ages. The last line is a beautiful affirmation of self-pride cements the theme that there are many ways to "Grow Up".

First Place
Adam,
age 11



Growing Up

I remember.

I remember my Dad getting arrested in front of me and I couldn't do nothing about it.

I remember my mum kicking him out.

I remember being full of rage and rage isn't my friend.

I remember the day I got to give up my dog I felt like s***.

I remember crying because I missed my Dad.

I remember my Dad being around but who gives a s***?

I remember not sleeping, thoughts running right through my head.

I remember getting bullied and nothing being done.

I remember running away and not knowing where to go.

I remember being put into care and feeling unwanted.

I remember being raped.

I remember wanting to die, just end it all.

I wish people could eat make up and make them pretty on the inside.

Them who try to knock us kids in care down, but you will fail so F*** you all, you don't like us P*** Off.

I remember the first time I cut, I was in so much pain and I just felt numb.

I remember the taste of my first fag.

I remember the first time I smoked weed and the first time I sniffed, but that don't make me a failure.

I remember trying to kill myself because the other kids were so cruel.

I remember the social doing nothing.

I remember sleeping on a cold bench.

I remember I got put into care with a new 'family' I didn't fit in I asked why they didn't fight, they laughed at me.

I remember being with Lisa* and Tim*.

I remember feeling safe. I remember.

I remember feeling like I had a family, like I had a home.

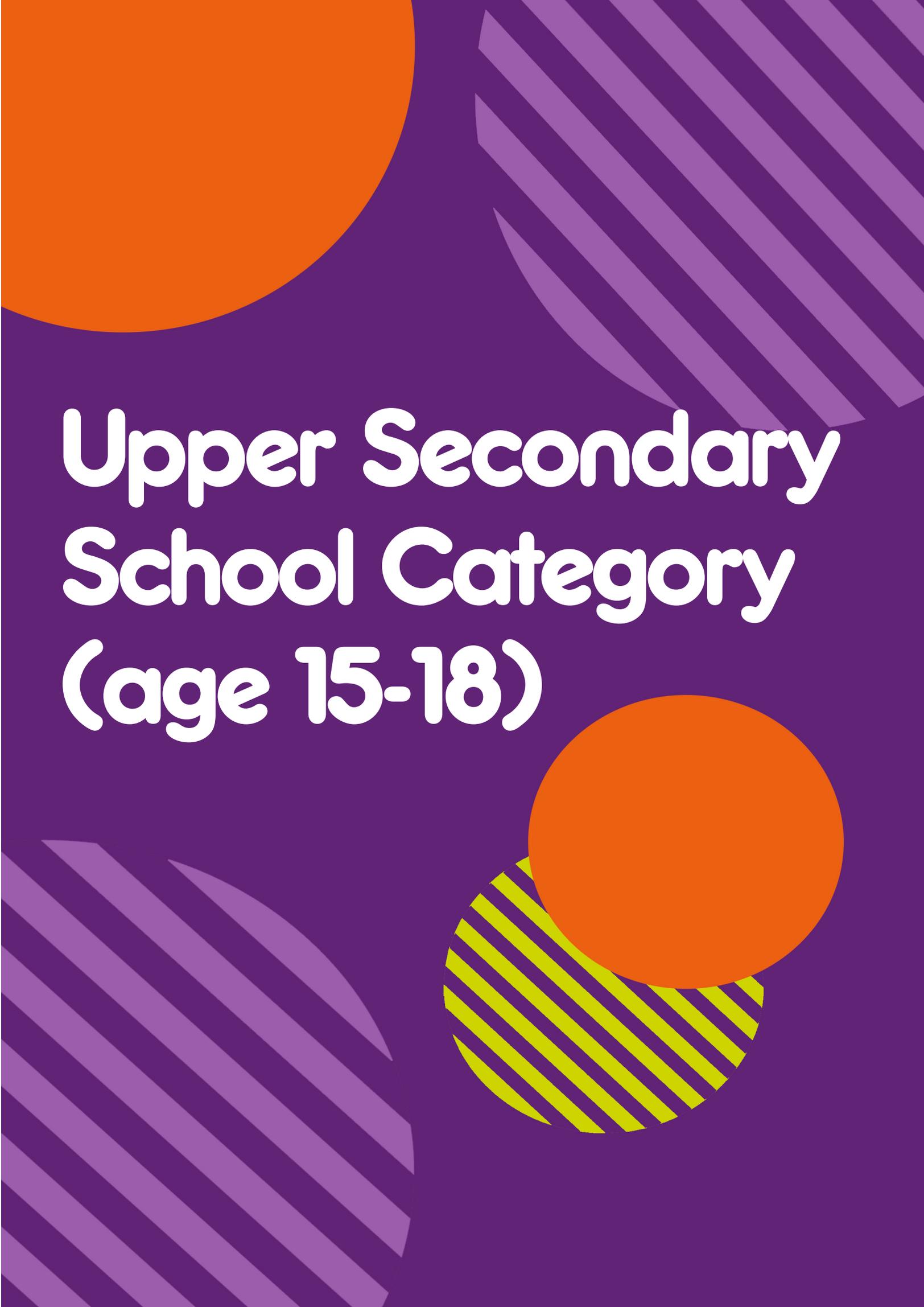
I might be a kid in care but I have a story. I remember.

Never mind "growing up" being a child is hard enough.



Judges Comments

This is a poetical dose of cold reality. The use of the phrase "I remember" throughout is interesting because it implies that the author is sitting in a comfy chair recalling events from long ago. But the last two lines bring the reader to the crashing realisation that these memories are recent and that the journey of "Growing Up" has only just begun. This is a tale of survival. It would make an amazing stage performance.



Upper Secondary School Category (age 15-18)

The Truth About Growing

I was born out of a loveless marriage
The collateral damage
of a war between two borders
I am a mistake they say
I am told what is between my legs
Means they cannot offer me
The love they are capable of offering

I have troubles sleeping in new places
Takes me a few days
to get used to the musky smell
Of a new house or home is it?
I'm not sure yet
But I keep moving until I find
Somewhere I can stay
Someone who wants me to

I fall into the habit of offering myself
Too many ways out, too many times
My favourite being taking
Painkillers until my body couldn't carry
When I didn't have the guts I would
Gather the names of everyone
Who hurt me and blame it on myself
After I etched lines into my skin

I would later find a stable home
Designed to give care I believe
And yet in all its stability lay a 16 year old
Troubled with issues far beyond
the body and mind where
It took at least 4 people daily to remind
Her that she meant something

At 18 I was quite something
I found a voice amidst my anxiety
Yet at every meeting they try to play me
And I can never find the dice

Growing up for me is struggle and tears
And I am tired of telling people
In similar positions that it gets "easier"
It does not.

Everyday is a war and every night
You battle anxiety and your depression

But Rome was not built in a day
And neither were you
We are not toys of the system
We are not pay cheques to our carers
We are people who struggle
To get to sleep sometimes
We are people who yearn for real relationships
We are people whose lives balance on
The idea that there is more
That we will be more than yesterday.



Judges Comments

The opening is so powerful, compelling and punchy. This was a good read and showed insight and the ability to get a reader to understand and relate. Raw and honest.

Listen

Even before we are able to babble,
Nonsense at only months old.
The adults around us, do not have a filter,
They don't have to censor their words.
To our little ears, we are oblivious
Of the... shhh naughty words,
The swear words, the no no words that
Would later lead us to scolds.
The old lecturing or the "timeouts",
That would become more frequent during
The teenage years.
Multiple "bad words" in just a sentence when speaking with our friends.
And the... slip ups we'd make around the adults... oops.
We got used to them,
The silly words.
It all became normalised for us.
The gasp worthy words at infancy,
Are now said without a flinch, a bat of eye or
Hesitation.

But not all the words were naughty,
Some were just taboos we were taught to think ill of...
Or taught to think to not think about it all.
It's many things for everyone.
There are too many words in the English language after all.
The word that hit my 7 year old ears was
"Anti - depressants" that were for another family member.
The word was linked with crazy, what I was taught to think of it.

So when my 14 year old ears heard it again,
From the doctors lips and the word suggested for myself.
The word linked to it floated beneath my lids as I closed my eyes in frustration.
Adamant, I said no.
I said no again at age 15,
At 16.
I was not crazy.



But another word floated to my ears.
A word I often heard in the media, on the news
In shows, and movies.
Sometimes within lessons.
My 16 year old ears heard the words of the professional I was speaking to.
“Trauma”
My ears stopped listening after that.
My mind freezing, similar to a timeout at childhood.
I think I can’t have gone through anything traumatic.
That doesn’t make any sense.
A lot of the taboo words we were taught to think of don’t make any sense.
I looked back at the professional,
I tuned back in to their words.
And I listened.
Listening is hard.
Since we’re taught to not listen.
But words now make sense,
Now that I’m learning to listen.

Judges Comments

This poem is an interesting perspective with a consistent thread running through it. It is a good description of the way words have power.

Being The Architect Of Your Own Experience

Who is the architect?

Experiences are the tiny catalyst that start our journey through life. They are boundlessly recurring with a never-ending supply. They are the primal at helping us to make sense of the world in a quick efficient way. Our brains predict and constructs your experiences into emotions which allows you to grow and develop into the individual you are today.

Reminiscing back to a time where a sense of helplessness and disillusionment had begun to erode my optimistic and expectant outlook. That chaotic year, when I was 12 years old, culminated with me entering the system and constantly being reminded of my traumatic past, the feeling of growing up alone in the system overwhelmed me.

I've been down a roller coaster of emotions, as you and I both know there's no such thing as a typical day in care. From being pushed pillar to post, one day you can be going to school thinking everything is fine, the next you're sitting in the car park with your social worker and all your belongings in a carrier bag, as you're having to move once again. Giving up is the most imminent emotion for us children, as we view it as the easy way out. However, emotions like this are just guesses that your brain constructs in the moment where billion of brain cells and neurones are working together. You have more control over those guesses than you imagine.

Reflecting on my early formative years and the abuse I suffered from my parents, I often marvel at my apparent resilience in the face of adversity, as it was so easy to saunter down a dark path. Abuse is clearly damaging. However, the trauma I suffered at the hands of my birth parents was not as destructive as one might imagine, as I was able to take my experiences and shape them into who I wanted to be and not who I once was. I am now aspiring to start a lifelong driven career in medicine.

Emotions are not built into your brain at birth. Emotions are not universally expressed or recognised, they are not hard-wired brain reactions that are uncontrollable.

You might believe your brain is pre-wired with emotion circuits but you're not. It doesn't matter who you used to be what matters is who you decide to be today.

You are not your mistakes. You are not your past. You can decide differently today and at every moment. You are prepared by your past experiences and this in time forms the bases of your emotions. You are the architect.

Judges Comments

The writer talks boldly about taking control of their life and the ability to rebuild. A thoughtful piece using great vocabulary.



Time To Grow Up

Growing up ends the thrills
'coz now I have to pay the bills
They say I have to be responsible
But I'm confused and my brains too full

*Always telling me to grow up
I just want them to shut up!*

Independence makes me feel alone
Wish I was still a kid at home
Relationships go from good to bad
The ones you love always make you mad

*Always telling me to grow up
I just want them to shut up!*

The weight of the world on my shoulder
A lump in my stomach the size of a boulder
Wish I could always stay young and small
Always have someone to catch me if I fall

*Always telling me to grow up
I just want them to shut up!*

When "grow up" is all you have to say
Remember to also tell me "everything'll be ok"
Growing up is what we all have to do
But it's the one thing that makes me blue

*Always telling me to grow up
I just want them to shut up!*

Judges Comments

A crystal clear piece of writing with a great perspective – we liked the honesty in relation to the theme: that growing up is lonely and tough, something this writer is resisting. The repeated phrase worked really well making this anthemic and bold.



Shedding Of Skin

For the first 14 years of my life I didn't have many worries or fears and certainly nothing to be ashamed of. So outgoing and bubbly, I knew nothing but mama and me; mama was tenderness, care and protection. Mama was my whole world summed up in one individual; she was my security when danger bared its fangs in my face. Mama represented the walls that protected me from harm. Mama was a simple woman; she had a voracious appetite to live, learn and grow and she shared her knowledge within my small African village. However, there was a shadow in our lives. This was my father; a man who could hurt you with his words and his fists.

After my 14th birthday, I woke up to a very different world from the one I had known. How can I describe the suffocating feeling of realising that I had to start living without my mama? She had gone missing, chased away in the dead of night by my devil of a father.

My days were now blue, my heart torn out, my dreams taken away, my hopes shattered. If anybody had cared to look into my eyes and not be scared by my empty gaze, they would have known that the wounds on my body looked just like the wounds on my heart.

Survival was just beginning. Then I was spirited away into hands of those whose only care was to make money. Trafficked to different countries like a package, profitable and disposable. Do you know what it is to scream silently? To cry out in desperation and the only answers you receive are the echoes of your own voice! What a tragedy it is to silence another; when adults in your life control and mistreat you. But I knew if didn't walk their talk I would never see my mother again. I would give anything to see her again!

I miss all the things we had yet to do, sometimes I wish she were here with me, holding my hand; then I realise she's somewhere hoping for the same thing. I wallow in this sorrow with little hope for a better future, trapped in my mind, dreading the passing of time as it beats and hurts me.

And perhaps the bravest thing I will do as I grow up, is to move on.

I am building a home within this body, I am building me. My home will no longer be a place of humiliation or insecurity. It will be a palace of kindness, a chapel of undying hope and a temple of respect.

When tomorrow comes to greet me, I will rise to face it with a brave heart, no matter the pain or the ghosts of yesterday. I believe there is so much beauty left for me in the chaos of life. I will not let my future be dictated by my past, so I will rise.

Yes I will rise.

Yes I will!



**First Place
Winnie
age 17**

Judges Comments

WOW. What an incredibly emotive piece of writing. We loved the creative approach to the theme of growing up and we were both blown away by the standard of writing – amazed that this writer has English as a second language. They told their story with rawness which engaged the reader utterly. A real journey and we love the image of finding a home in one's body. We both agree with the writer's own words that they are brave, that they will rise – there is so much beauty left for them.

Growing Up

I come from a broken home,
And nights alone.
Constantly beaten,
Making sure my siblings had eaten.

You always took drugs,
And you were always dating thugs.
You suffered with depression,
And filled with such aggression.

I had to look after my youngest,
While protecting my eldest.
Could never have a break,
A smile I had to fake.

Every time in school,
I just acted a fool,
My siblings weren't safe alone,
So I must stay at home.
I had to be their mother,
Could never watch them suffer.

I started texting older men,
Because they made me feel a ten.
I was unable to manage,
To them an opportunity to take advantage.

I became unwell,
Social workers started to tell.
Life wasn't fair,
I was took into care.

Drinking became my best friend,
I just wanted the pain to end,
And in desperate need,
I'd turn to weed.

Started to run away,
Felt like I had to pay,
But I was just a kid,
And there was no excuse for what you did.

I went to secure,
Looking for a cure.
At the bottom I lay,
Hoping for a different way.

I started making progress,
Myself I started to impress.
I was getting better,
My shoulders as light as a feather.

I finally found the key,
Now I'm sat doing a G.C.S.E,
The future's so much brighter,
And my worries so much lighter.

I recovered,
Happiness I discovered.
My childhood doesn't define me,
I can be who I choose to be.



**Third Place
Chelsey
age 16**

Judges Comments

Courageously honest and really well written. We liked this piece for the way the writer told their story and took the reader along with them. It shows real self-knowledge and strength – a wonderfully hopeful ending.



Care Leaver Category (age 19 -25)

The Girl Behind The Glass

I waved at a girl I saw
Wonky teeth and eyes aglow
Staring at me through the glass
Clutching Miss Rabbit in her fist
And giggling a soft melody

I laughed at a girl I saw
Wicked tongue and a cheeky wink
Making a face towards the glass
Wiggling along to a song I knew
And twisting her truths into knots

I frowned at a girl I saw
Bruised lips and puffy eyes
Trapped behind a wall of glass
Gagged by shadows of the past
And screaming words I would not hear

I cried at a girl I saw
Torn shirt and desperate glance
Pounding fists against the glass
Sapphire lights with crimson tones
And the future choked by sirens

I reached out to a girl I saw
Ravaged skin and defeated air
Her hand joined mine upon the glass
Rush of heart ache merged to beat
And a flash of recognition

I look up to a girl I see
Reclaimed body and affectionate gaze
Familiar face in the glass
She nods “we’re okay, go on your way”
And I smile at my reflection.



First Place
Sophia,
age 21

Judges Comments

We were both so impressed with the imaginative angle to this poem. We had to read it twice to see all the imagery and would like to congratulate the writer on such beautiful heartfelt writing with a strong and memorable title.

Glass is a great symbol for reflections of growing up metaphorically and literally and the message in the title goes beyond leaving care and will resonate with people from all walks of life. We loved the journey that the girl goes on, moving through different stages of growth and identity finding resolution in a positive and powerful way.

Unwanted

Have you ever felt lost?
Not physically, but mentally.
Walking down a pavement
in the evening frost,
knocking a strange door and waiting patiently.
Door number one...
Wondering if the face that greets you
will smile,
and if your worries in life are gone.
You stand and wait a while.
Have you ever felt lost?
Not mentally, but physically.
Staring at this big house wondering
how much it cost,
knocking a strange door and waiting patiently.
Door number two...
The kind face before said they loved me like
their own,
but that wasn't true.
These people don't smile,
They take me into their home.
I was only there a while,
Door open, clothes missing, I don't have a
space to call my own.
Have you ever felt lost?
Mentally, physically and emotionally.
Here I stand again,
now I don't care how long I'll be here.
I know this house will be the same.
knocking a strange door and waiting patiently,
Door number three...
This time a smile greets me at the door,
this house is temporary.
I won't be here long, that I know for sure.
Have you ever felt lost?

every door is a house, not a home.
This time I knock door number one...
they promised to love me.
The door opens, and my dignity is gone,
Let me explain what I see.
The suitcase I arrived with, still stained,
black bags with holes.
I am an object still waiting to be claimed.
I take my bags and my worth,
and toss them in the car.
hoping I'd get swallowed by the earth.
Have you ever felt lost?
like you could disappear?
I inhale a breath and hold in a tear.
my bag snags,
and there my clothes lay clear.
humiliated and frustrated, I persevere,
knocking a strange door and waiting patiently
Door number four...
knowing that my time is limited here,
behind the door is a family I adore.
They show me love,
they show me trust.
hair as white as a dove,
and skin as delicate as dust.
They treat me like their own,
and encourage me to be me.
I never feel alone,
they feel like family.
Have you ever felt lost?
like you don't belong?
Because I did,
but I stayed strong.
I felt unwanted as a kid,
but one family helped change my world.

they helped when I moved away,
when I achieved a goal they were thrilled.
They celebrated my success,
They said I always had a place to stay
if I was ever in distress.
Have you ever felt lost?
And that you don't have a home?



Judges Comments

We loved the strong theme of knocking on doors. We know that as care leavers, there are many moves, many doors and the theme of having to continually knock on doors before you feel at home was one that we could identify with.

An Unintentional Gift

In relation to the theme of growing up, this piece describes the exact moment I was given a chance to grow into something new.

We hear the anger pulsate through her words. Instinct pulls us towards the staircase. We charge down. To safety. To sanctuary. To somewhere that is away from her. We stumble into the living room. We take refuge on... a chair. Our naive, child's mind concocting an alibi of how we were here the whole time. Didn't do anything. Didn't need punishing. Thud... Thud... Thud. She has reached the stairs. Her figure slowly becoming visible. Just a figure, the details worn and forgotten with time. Fear is clawing its way from our chest to our gut, to our arms and hands, to our legs and feet. Anchored. Paralysed in a time long gone yet kept almost fresh like an old Polaroid. Her figure is now right on us. The shape of her head looming above us. We can feel the hatred, the anger radiating from her. We say nothing. We do nothing. She raises a fist to the sky. Then brings it plummeting into earth, into our face, into our eye. But wait, there's something missing, something almost forgotten.

She raises a fist to the sky. There it is wrapped around her finger.
A gift. A gift to bring change. A gift that was unintentional. A ring.

A ring with a rough cut stone. That was brought plummeting back into earth, into our face. Into our eye. Into our skin. Leaving a mark. An irrefutable mark from an unintentional gift.



Judges Comments

Very visual, very poignant. We were very moved by this piece of writing which is an usual angle on a negative and painful experience no-one would wish for. This is a brutal, honest and grounded exploration of personal change through pain with nothing vague or hidden in it and we would like to send our thanks for sharing it with us.



I Want A Future

Bad crowd, bad crowd,
I'm in another dimension.
Was it because my mother
didn't give me attention?
When you don't feel love at home
you seek it elsewhere.
It doesn't matter who from,
you'll accept it from anyone who's there.

Teacher, teacher,
can't you see?
I'm acting naughty for attention.
I want you to notice me.
Can't you see I'm tired?
Can't you see I've been misused?
Trafficked for drugs and sex.
I'm broken and confused.

Car parks, car parks,
night buses as well.
It's not bad sleeping here,
now I've escaped hell.
School doesn't exist anymore.
I have no money to get me there.
I'm too embarrassed to admit
my uniform isn't clean enough to wear.

Social worker, social worker,
what can I expect?

Why is this bed broken?
Why can't me and the foster carer connect?
I want her to like me,
but she doesn't care.
I'm another way to get a pay cheque,
just another kid she wants out of her hair.

Bin bag, bin bag.
Nobody buys you a suitcase.
In go your clothes,
your books and your toothpaste.
All the furniture is borrowed.
There's nothing else you own.
What's the point in cherishing possessions?
Even the guardians are on loan.

Tenth placement, tenth placement,
is lucky number ten a thing?
I stopped unpacking months ago.
I've accepted my future's hanging by a string.
I have no qualifications.
There's no hope in sight.
Age out at eighteen.
Is a family that love you a birthright?

Baby, baby,
you're growing inside of me.
Foster girls are more likely to get pregnant.
It's true. Times it by three.

Do people now think I'm just
another statistic of the system?
And can somebody please tell me
how to stop my child becoming its next victim.

Leaving care team, leaving care team,
where have you gone?

Don't you want to know
how me and B have been getting on?

We've lived here three months now.

We're stuck here alone.

Is it so much trouble
for you to pick up the phone?

Apprenticeship, apprenticeship,

I want a future.

I don't need qualifications
to access a tutor.

I'll work hard, I swear I will,

I'll do what it takes.

I'll create a future worth living
for mine and B's sakes.

Permanent job, permanent job,

I really did work hard.

I've made my own money.

I've paid off the credit card.

The house feels like a home.

I'm beginning to feel stability.

I wish I could shake my younger self -
Lauren, you had the capability.

Daughter, daughter,
you've started school.

Your uniform is lovely,
the added headband with the jewel.

You waved before going in
with a smile that could not be hid.

Your face said it all.

Look Mummy. Look at what we did.

Foster child, foster child,
you've come along way.

Turned scars into beauty marks.

Moulded yourself like clay.

Not many people know your past
and honestly, that's okay.

Because what happened back then
doesn't define your future anyway.



Judges Comments

There were some beautiful and poignant moments in this poem from a writer who isn't afraid of being vulnerable and open. This writer not only spoke about 'growing up' from a past perspective but also the future of loved ones from a positive care leaver who is clearly turning scars into beauty marks.

Growing Up Behind Closed Doors

A door and lock, a stranger knocks, the wind is seeping through the letter box.

Tears flood the eyes of the girl that needs a hug to cradle her thoughts.

A child in need of a feed, a hug is what that child might need.

What goes on behind closed doors stays behind closed doors.

Tears flood the eyes of the child, as the creature noticed and smiled.

The door goes BANG! Knock, knock, knock...

An evil presence appears almost knocking down the door.

Dark and gloom, the fear is high.

Shaking and overwhelmed by the dark, cold and frightening figure.

He stands tall and bold, his voice like a beast.

Feeds off the vulnerable and weak as he laughs at the pain he causes.

Stomachs growl and he howls and the smell of neglect fills the room.

Mother is scared to say a word, as the child is still in need of a feed.

Screaming and shouting endless abuse.

Emotions are broken and feelings are uncalled for and irrelevant.

Lost and hopeless; tired and drained.

Mother weeps for her money as he rips it into a dozen pieces.

His smile spreads from ear to ear.

The narcissist, psychopath and sadist describe this man who rules the roost.

This rude man, father to her sisters is tearing apart our family home.

Growing up was more like hurry up and grow up so you can be the parent.

That child in need of a feed grows up to have the need to feed her siblings.

Protecting her loved ones and helping them grow.

Mother's mental health is back and worse than ever.

She is scared, tired and hurt. Sleeping seemed like her only escape.

The little girl washes, cooks and cleans.

Childhood became motherhood at the age of nine.

Secrets were kept and forced to feel fine.

He pushed the table and chairs against me; he slammed the car door on my leg.

But the main scars came from the words of hatred.
Worthless, stupid, smelly and fat were only some.
Asking for help was failing.
Saving my mum from suicide was like second nature to me.
I feared she would do it anyway.
He didn't care, he screamed at me for phoning help whilst my mother was lifeless on the cold floor.
Unable to move, her breathing slowed down.
Tears run down the little girl's face as her mother goes back to the cruel man.
That man hasn't just stole her heart but her life is also on the line.
The sound of the sirens gets louder and louder as the girl's anxiety levels get higher and higher.
She saved her mum's life but she won't always be there if there is a next time.
A door and lock, a bad man knocks.
The wind is seeping through the letterbox.
What goes on behind closed doors doesn't always have to stay behind closed doors.
That child in need of a feed is no longer me.



Erin
age 22

Judges Comments

This writer describes a very poignant and painful experience with great skill and maturity. We were very impressed that the writer was able to have the strength to share their memories with us and we would like to commend the writer for it!

Who Am I? My Identity

Who am I?

From a sweet, young *delicate* flower,
A fragment of a dying star floating *hopelessly* in a black hole,
A ticking time bomb filled with anger driven revenge on the ones we call '*support*',
A *vulnerable* prey *obeying* to its predators every request.

Viewed by society as a troublesome statistic but *is screaming* out for guidance and love,
Viewed by teachers as an irrelevant equation which serves no *purpose* or use anymore,
Viewed by '*loved ones*' as the catastrophic event that destroyed their world,
Viewed by men as the *tool* to satisfy their desires to only be thrown away in the trash when it is no longer needed,

To a bed of roses awaiting to blossom given the right care and nurture,
To a puzzle piece searching for its home in order to be complete,
To an empty cloud who has run out of rain, waiting for the sunshine to return colour to its world,
To an evolved mammal who took charge against those who abused it.
To a doting mother bear who *protects* its cubs,
To a teacher of *love*, security and guidance,
To a passionate artist, *painting* their dream

Who am I? That answer is still unknown.

The past *still* haunts me like a menacing entity who will not leave,

The past grips onto me like an incurable disease,

But I have resilience stronger than gravity itself,

I see the glimpse light through the darkest of days,

I am not just a figure or a statistic you skim past,

I am the one who you will not *forget*,

I am the one who will be *noticed*,

I am the one who will make a *change*,

I am me... But that child will always be a part of who I am.



Judges Comments

We loved the imagery this writer paints with poetry A ticking time bomb filled with anger driven revenge on the ones we call - '*support*' – what a great line. This writer shows great resilience and has reflected on some painful times with strong visual imagery and honesty.

About Coram Voice

Coram Voice champions the rights of children. We get young voices heard in decisions that matter to them and work to improve the lives of children in care, care leavers and others who depend upon the help of the state.

About Voices

'Voices' is a celebration of the creativity of children and young people in and leaving the care system. Through the competition, they can express themselves in unique ways, tell people their story and have their voices heard and celebrated.

Our theme for 2019, chosen by young people who took part in the competition last year, is 'Growing Up'. The entries have been incredible and the talent immense. We have loved reading such different interpretations of this theme and have been overwhelmed by the creativity and diversity of the work we have received.

Voices 2020 will be open for entries at the end of 2019.

Always Heard

If you are in care, leaving care, or not safe at home you can get independent help and advice about your rights. Contact Coram Voice's Always Heard helpline free on 0808 800 5792 or visit www.coramvoice.org.uk/alwaysheard, and we will get you the support you need.

Freephone: 0808 800 5792

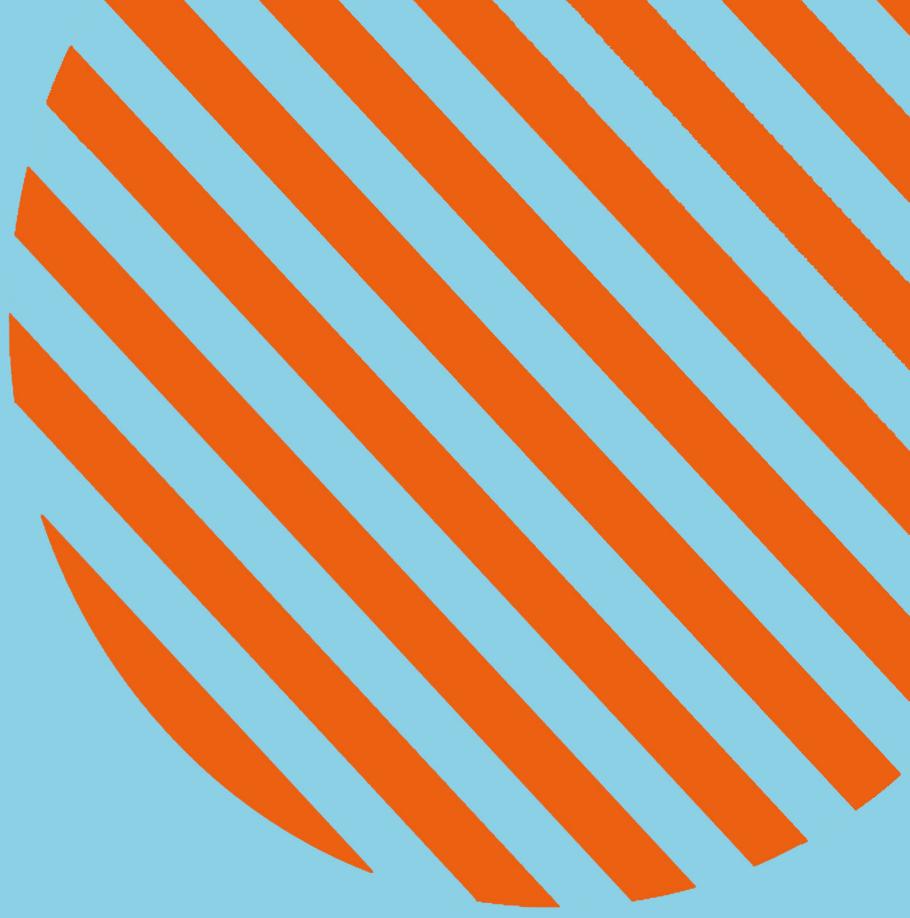
Email: help@coramvoice.org.uk

Text and WhatsApp: 07758670369

Website: www.coramvoice.org.uk/alwaysheard



All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.



coram
Voice 

getting young voices heard

© Coram Voice

Coram Campus
41 Brunswick Square
London
WC1N 1AZ

Tel: 020 7833 5792

Web: www.coramvoice.org.uk

Email: info@coramvoice.org.uk

Registered Charity Number: 1046207

Registered Company Number: 3050826

Coram Voice is a registered charity and a company
limited by guarantee

Coram Voice (formerly Voice for the Child in Care)