

coramVoice)))
getting young voices heard

Voices 2025

The Creative Writing Competition
for Children in Care and Care Leavers

Shortlisted entries from
Voices 2025 on the theme
of 'My Voice'



Thank you to...

Cadence Innova now part of Transform UK, our headline sponsor for the Voices Awards. Without their generous support, including the staff who contributed to the shortlisting process, this competition would not be possible!

Kimptons Fitzroy Hotel for kindly hosting the awards and being so generous with their support.

Ashley John-Baptiste and **Ira Hakim** for giving their time, energy and enthusiasm as our amazing hosts, and **Peter Capaldi** for his continued support for Voices and the young people we work with.

Patrice Lawrence, E.L. Norry, Chris Wild, Callen Martin, Baroness Lola Young, Jordan Morgan, Kirsty Capes, and **Deborah Maclaren** for being our amazing competition judges, donating so much of their time, and contributing their creativity and expertise to the whole process.

Mali, Rosie, Kyle, Evan, Pearl, Teresa, and **Carla** for sharing their time, their voices and their thoughtful perspectives with us as our brilliant young judges. An especial thank you to **Evan** for his help in running the workshop!

St. Giles Hotel for kindly providing hotel accommodation to some of our guests.

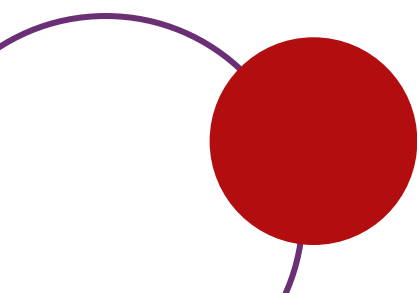
Abi Elphinstone, Kirsty Capes, Ashley John-Baptiste, Lola Young, Patrice Lawrence, E.L. Norry, Deborah Maclaren, Chris Wild, Bloomsbury Publishers and **The Poetry Society** for generously contributing prizes for Voices 2025.

Eclipse AV for their expertise and help in bringing this event to life!

Every volunteer who took the time to support us with the shortlisting process. All the **charities, virtual schools, local authorities, social workers** and **youth groups** who helped us share Voices.

Our **colleagues across the Coram Group** for their help in promoting and running the competition.

And finally, thank you to all the children and young people who entered this year's competition. Well done to everyone who took part, once again the standard of entries has been excellent.



A message from Coram Voice

I am honoured to introduce the shortlisted entries for the Voices 2025 Writing Competition. This year marks a significant milestone—not only for our organisation, but for the incredible young people we are here to celebrate. Since launching the competition in 2016, we have been amazed every year by the talent, courage and creativity shown in the writing shared with us. What began as a small competition has become a powerful platform for young people to tell their stories, in their own words. Reading this year's entries has been a reminder of just how important it is to listen to the voices of care-experienced children and young people: their words are powerful, their stories are moving, and their imaginations are boundless.

To all the children and young people who took the time to enter: thank you. We are so proud of each and every one of you. Whether you're sharing your experiences, your feelings, or your hopes for the future, your voice matters—and we hope everyone watching tonight is as inspired by your writing as we are.

Here's to 50 years of listening, learning, and celebrating young people—and to the future voices still to come.



Brigid Robinson
Managing Director
Coram Voice

About Coram Voice

Coram Voice is a leading children's rights organisation championing the rights of children and young people. They work to get young voices heard in decisions that matter to them and improve the lives of children in care, care leavers and others who depend upon the help of the state.

Coram Voice believes children and young people are the experts in their lives, so we empower them to be central in the decision-making processes that affect them. Our aim is to make sure children and young people who are dependent on the care of the state know their rights. We support them to navigate the care system through our advocacy work; we challenge decisions taken about them wherever necessary; and we ensure their rights and wellbeing are protected. We also work to make longer-term changes to the system by listening to children and young people's individual and collective experiences and working alongside them to address the issues that they say are important. These findings are used to work with professionals, improve practice and influence policy.

Coram Voice offers support and information for children and young people in care, on the edge of care and care leavers. To learn more about Coram Voice and the different ways we can provide support, please visit our website, <https://coramvoice.org.uk/>.



"I love the Voices competition because I feel so seen here as a care-experienced person, on a deep level. Everyone just gets it and at the same time we get to celebrate our creativity and words in a way we don't normally get the chance to. It's thrilling to be part of something this special."

Ira Hakim

Care-experienced campaigner
and co-host of Voices 2025

About Voices

Voices 2025 is the UK's only creative writing competition specifically for children and young people between the ages of 4 and 25 with care experience. Since its launch in 2016, the competition has received over 1,500 entries and continues to grow in reach and impact each year.

Voices has provided hundreds of young writers with a unique chance to shine. The competition has received entries from young people with diverse experiences of care, including foster care, residential care, youth justice settings, kinship care, and adoption. We have also platformed the voices of unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum in the UK, organising a special category for their entries in 2017.

Voices offers these young people a powerful platform for them to share their stories, express their creativity, and have their voices heard. This year's theme, "My Voice", places the voices of children and young people at the heart of Coram Voice's 50th anniversary celebrations – a powerful reminder of the importance of listening to, and learning from, their lived experiences.

Read some of the winning entries from previous years of the competition at coramvoice.org.uk/voices.

Meet the Hosts

Ashley Jean-Baptiste

Ashley John-Baptiste is an award-winning broadcaster and TV presenter, making reports & hosting The One Show, Sunday Morning Live, as well as Morning Live & BBC News. He began his BBC journalism career on BBC2's Victoria Derbyshire programme, reporting on the Grenfell disaster, going on to front documentaries for the BBC such as 'Care Home Kids: Looking For Love', looking at children growing up in the care system, as he did, and 'My Life In Care and My Life Without Skin', and 'Split Up In Care: Life Without Siblings' making original films on issues including interfaith foster care, kids who are bullied, and racism on UK university campuses. Ashley is an inspirational speaker who shares his hard-hitting and inspirational story of navigating through the care system. He is the founder of Be Inspired events which aims to spark aspirations of people who have spent time in care. Ashley's debut book 'Looked After: A Childhood in Care' was published in June 2024, coming out in paperback now.

Ira Hakim

Hello! I'm Ira and I'm one of your co-hosts for this year's Voices Competition! I live in Northumberland, which I'm a proud northerner! I love big fluffy dogs, reading, hikes, doing creative things, wild swimming and trying new food. I love cooking but I'm impressively bad at baking...even if I follow the recipe exactly to the gram! It's so wonderful to be involved behind the scenes this year and I wish you all good luck. Huge well done for getting here, you should be very proud.

Ira is a previous winner of the Voices Competition whose piece 'What Makes Me Different, as told by a 21st Century Bard' won first place in the Care Leaver category in 2024.



Meet the Judges

Patrice Lawrence

Patrice Lawrence is a Sussex-born writer for children and young people. She has won a number of awards including the Bookseller YA Prize, the Waterstones Prize for Older Children's Fiction, the Jhalak Prize for Children and Young People and the Little Rebels Children's Award.



Deborah Maclaren

Deborah Maclaren is the Chief Executive of LoveReading and LoveReading4Kids since 2018. Their mission is to share book love and get more people reading is a daily reality. With her school governor hat on she understands the importance of reading for pleasure, and LoveReading4Kids supports parents, carers and schools across the UK to engender a love of reading in their children.

Callen Martin

Callen graduated in 2019 from Bath Spa University's MA in Writing for Young People, becoming the first care leaver in the history of East Sussex to study at post-graduate level. He is now a Literary Agent, representing authors that write books for children and young adults and, in his spare time, is writing his own children's books too



E.L. Norry

E.L. Norry is a fiction and non-fiction MG/YA author, with novels and short stories published by Scholastic, Puffin, Oxford University Press, Farshore, Bloomsbury, and Hodder Education. She has also written two TV episodes for the BBC 1 soap opera EastEnders.

Kirsty Capes

Kirsty Capes is a care-experienced author who works in marketing and lives in Slough with her golden retriever, Doug. She holds a PhD from Brunel University London; her thesis investigates representations of the care experience in contemporary British fiction. Her first novel, *Careless*, was longlisted for the Women's Prize 2022.



Jordan Morgan

Jordan is the Director of Programmes at Forward Thinking, a London-based conflict resolution NGO. In 2016, Jordan founded the Drive Forward Foundation Policy Forum to bridge the growing gap between British policymakers and care-experienced young people.

Chris Wild

Chris Wild is an author, keynote speaker and avid campaigner for young people in care. He has appeared across numerous media channels such as the BBC, Channel 4 and ITV.



Baroness Lola Young

Baroness Lola Young of Hornsey was raised in foster care in north London. She studied Drama, later becoming an actor. In 2004, Lola was appointed as an independent Crossbench member of the House of Lords. She chaired the Man Booker Prize judging panel in 2017. Lola is currently Chancellor of the University of Nottingham, and her memoir, *'8 Weeks: Looking Back, Moving Forwards, Defying the Odds'* was published in November 2024.

A partnership built on shared values

Coram Voice and Cadence Innova, part of Transform

Cadence Innova, part of Transform, is a proud and long-standing supporter who stands firmly alongside Coram Voice in its vital mission to create positive change that lasts a lifetime for children and young people.

The team's focus on social value deeply resonates with Coram's commitment, as Cadence Innova's own mission to inspire and enable customers to deliver services that make people's lives better, communities more connected, and enterprises more sustainable naturally aligns with Coram's holistic approach to improving young lives.

This long-term cooperation underscores a shared belief in a brighter future for every child, demonstrating how a dedicated partnership can amplify impact and create lasting positive change within society.

The recent acquisition of Cadence Innova by Transform is now creating even greater opportunities to amplify the team's support for Coram Voice. Being part of a larger organisation with a shared ethos and expanded resources means Cadence Innova and Transform can jointly explore new avenues for collaboration, leverage a wider network of expertise, and ultimately contribute even more effectively to Coram Voice's life-changing work.





"It's a privilege to support the Coram Voices Creative Writing competition for the 6th Year. The resilience and bravery of the children and young people who tell their stories so beautifully and passionately have always been joyous. Once again, they have surpassed our high expectations. We at Cadence and Transform look forward to continuing our long and impactful partnership with Coram and seeking to help ensure brighter futures for our children and young people."

Gita Singham-Willis

Founding Partner of Cadence Innova, part of Transform and Trustee of Coram Group



**CADENCE
INNOVA**

Transform

Coram Voice: 50 years of getting young voices heard

As Coram Voice celebrates its 50th anniversary, we reflect on five decades of championing the rights of children in care and care leavers.

In 1975, social worker Gwen James met in her living room with other social workers worried that children in care were not being listened to and from this the charity Voice for The Child in Care was born. Joining Coram in 2013, this pioneering organisation became Coram Voice, and continues to lead the way in providing advocacy services to support children in and around the care system.

From pioneering the national advocacy helpline to shaping national policy through research and youth-led insight, Coram Voice have remained steadfast in our mission for 50 years: ensuring children and young people are seen, heard, and supported. This milestone is not only a celebration of progress but a call to action for renewed commitment to listening to the voices of those who rely on children's services.

The Voices creative writing competition is a powerful expression of this commitment and sits at the heart of Coram Voice's work—amplifying young voices and inspiring change through the power of personal storytelling. In our 50th year, Voices continues to embody the belief that every young person in care deserves not only to be heard, but to be celebrated.





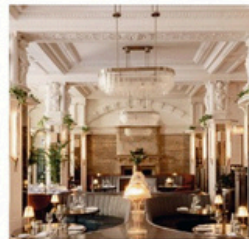
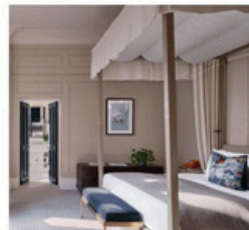
KIMPTON FITZROY LONDON

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For reservation enquiries, contact hello@kimptonfitzroylondon.com

Order of Events

The Awards Ceremony will begin promptly at 7pm and will finish at 9.15pm.

Welcome from Coram Voice and the Voices 2025 co-hosts

Brigid Robinson MBE, Managing Director of Coram Voice
Ashley John-Baptiste and Ira Hakim, Voices 2025 Co-Hosts

Primary Category Awards

Lower Secondary Awards

Interval - 10 minutes

Upper Secondary Category Awards

Address from our headline sponsors Cadence Innova, part of Transform

Care Leaver Category Awards

Closing address

Dr Carol Homden CBE, CEO of Coram

This event will feature live performances of some of the powerful pieces of creative writing collected in this anthology. Some of the content may explore challenging themes. While these pieces are powerful and important, they may not be suitable for younger children or sensitive viewers. Audience discretion is advised.

If anything you read or hear stays with you or brings up difficult feelings, talk to someone you trust—a friend, a teacher, a carer, or a support professional. You're not alone. Thank you for reading and honouring these voices.

Primary Category

Shortlisted Entries

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Me and my Life.....	page 21

To hear the entries that are
songs in audio form go to
coramvoice.org.uk/voices.

Best Friend

Elijah, age 8, **Commended**

You are my best friend
My only best friend
You are my chosen family
You're never lonely or sad

You keep me company through the night
I cry on your shoulder when I have a fright
We dance all night
How am I meant to live without you in my sight

You are my best friend
My only best friend
You make me laugh
You make me smile

I keep you up late
Talking about drama at school
How am I meant to live
Without you in my sight

I was talking to my other friend
And they were jealous of you
Thank you for being so supportive
I am just so thankful for us being born at the same time

I have known you for my whole life
I just want to say thank you for all the pretty and happy memories
I just want to say thank you for keeping me company
I just want to say thank you for never giving up on me.

My Voice

Aymen, age 9, **Winner**

This is my voice,
The sun in the sky,
To me it's my choice,
My voice makes me fly.

Like the sun shining bright,
Sometimes it's a blaze,
My voice is my right,
Filling my days.

The sun is so fine,
It is mostly yellow,
Sometimes it will shine,
Makes you feel mellow.

The sun glares at me,
It is always around,
There for all to see,
My voice is my sound.

Moving with grace,
My voice full of glee,
Like the round sun in space,
MY STRENGTH, MY ENERGY!

I Use My Voice

Layla, age 8, 2nd place

I use my voice to say:

I am nearly 9 now

I get to wear make-up

I get to be with a perfect mummy of my own

I hope you are happy and never sad

I feel grateful when I see you

I sometimes feel nervous when we meet

I'm glad we never get to argue

When we're grown up, can we still meet?

With love, my brothers and sister

I use my voice to say:

I am safe

I am happy

I am grateful for the things you are prepared to send me
like photos of me when I was little and letters

How do you feel when it is my birthday?

What was I like when I was little?

Did I always have turquoise eyes and like pink and purple?

When I grow up, I want to be a vet, artist, teacher or a princess builder

I wish I could see you one day

With love, my first Mum and Dad

I use my voice to say:

I am loved by my family now

I am scared of lots of things


I feel grateful to have you

Being adopted is cool because I get to have loads of adventures

One day I'd like to see my first parents for real

Will you help me?

I need help to understand why this really happened

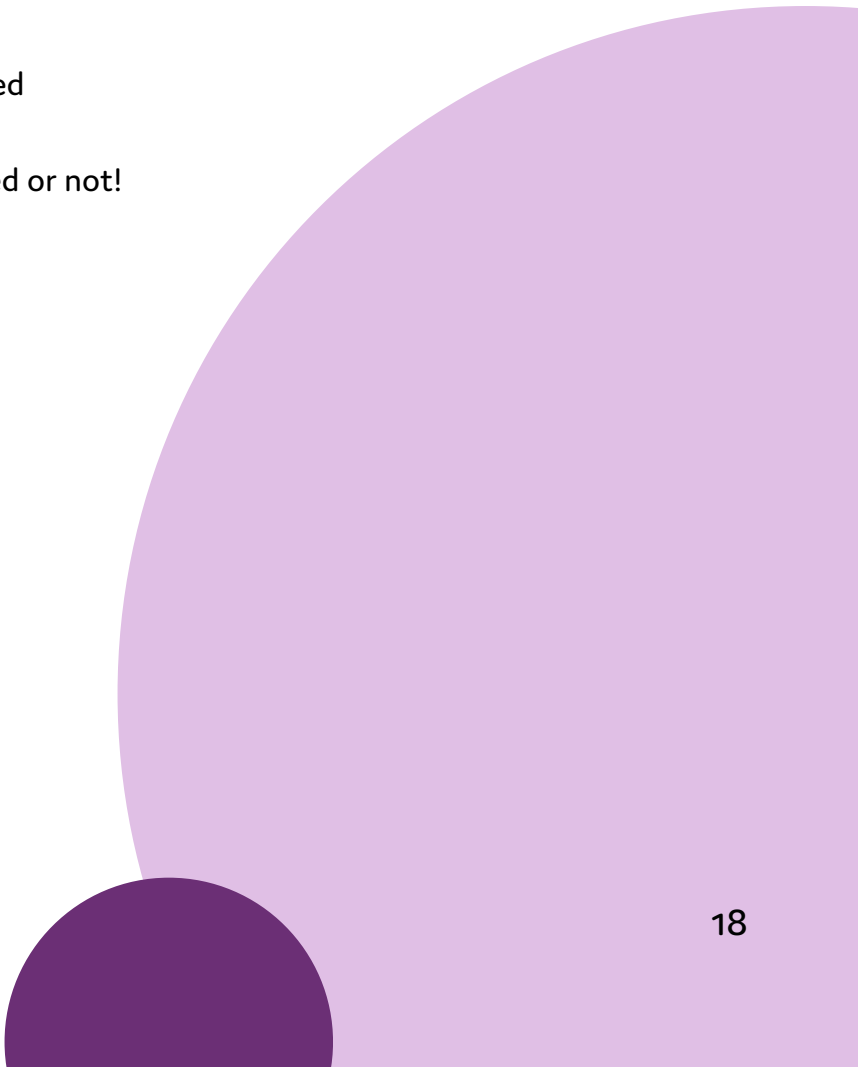


I don't understand it when you say 'it was for the best'
I need more details
What do you think it feels like being adopted?
With love, my Mummy

I use my voice to say:
Being adopted is my superpower
I'm great at looking, listening, learning and remembering
I never forget things
I get worried when you ask questions
I don't know much about when I was little

I bet you have thousands of photos and I have only six
Being adopted can't stop me
from doing and being who I want to be
I don't see everyone and everywhere as safe
so sometimes I don't behave well
It takes me time to get to know people
Do you know anyone else who is adopted?
With love, my Class

I use my voice to say:
I wasn't adopted because I wasn't wanted
It was for my own safety
There is more importance in me, adopted or not!
Being adopted isn't an excuse
Being adopted is my story to tell
If you want to know about me, ask me
With love, my World

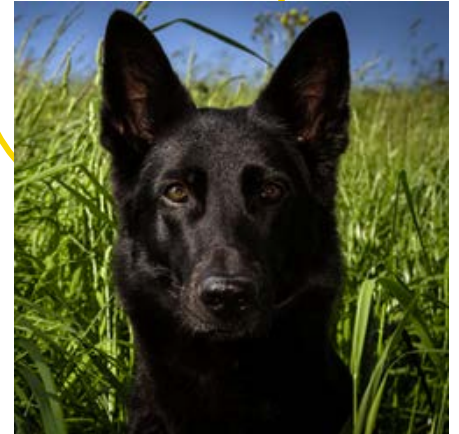


We're not alone

Ellie, age 8, **Commended**

Hello and this is the story of Me! I don't live in a small house, not in a big house, but in a cosy house. I have lovely foster carers (L* and S*) and my younger brother now lives here too. Oh, and don't forget Paris my big German Shepherd!

I've really enjoyed living with L* and S*.



Let me tell you about the bad things I've experienced in care; that I can't see my family so much, moving schools, not seeing my entire family, missing my family every single day, I felt scared and wanted to cry because I was worried that I was never going to see them again. But... don't worry, there's also a good side! I feel much safer here than at home with mummy because my mummy was a lovely person but she just did some bad things that wasn't her fault.

I had to get used to new people, I was scared to leave my younger brother on his own while I went to different foster carers.

Now I am with L* and S*, I love care and it's so fun to be living with my brother again! It's so much fun and makes me feel even more safe. So, you need to know the other good things I've had in care; of course, being with my brother, having very nice foster carers, having delicious foods, looking after each other. I love care so, so much! Eventually I will be able to go back to mummy. I love everything about care and when I leave care when I'm eighteen I will never forget the fun moments we had and I will miss it my whole life. I will still keep in contact with L* and S* because they are nice to me and I know they will always care about me.

True fact...! Did you know that I was one of the 83,840 children in care in 2023.



Why was it me?

Kaiden-James, age 10, **Commended**

Him/He

Twice the police were involved,
He hurt my mum the worst,
The police arrested him.
A few years he was inside,
Then, he came back.
The abuse never stopped,
My mum had a choice,
She chose him out of fear,
And that's why I'm here.
Him/He,
Why was it me?

My family ripped apart

I was taken from my mum,
Separated from my sister,
Dad had his chance but turned his back on me,
I was thrown into care,
All alone there.
This was my reality,
Why was it me?

Living in foster care

At Y and T's, my best foster carers,
They felt like real parents,
But I was moved away from them.
Back to mum for 3 months,
Those 90 days were great,
But I was taken again.
P and T were not the best for me,
I had to move from my hometown,
It didn't work out,
Y and T took me back to their house,
It was even better than before,
They retired and I had to leave,

M and M came next,

They were quite nice and supported me
when my Nan sadly passed,
But it didn't last long,
Another foster family retired,
My 6th Foster placement with M and C,
This was much better at the time,
Yet again a foster carer decided to retire,
My patience with it all is thinning,
Now, I'm with C and it's just the beginning,
How will this one be?
Why was it me?

School

My first school started ok,
I made lots of new friends,
It wasn't always perfect,
Some choices weren't great,
Suspended, suspended, suspended, suspended,
suspended and suspended again,
6 times it happened to me,
In Year 5, it all changed,
Everything was new:
New foster carers,
New town,
New school,
New people,
I was shy,
Not my true self,
Until I was comfortable,
Friendships began,
It was the start of a new plan,
Will it work? Let's see,
Why was it me?

Me and my life

Kittie, age 10, 3rd place

Me and my life

My life is different

It is strange and **unique**


But whatever I do I can't change it

So, I stick to it

Every  page of my life is another opportunity

With loads of new adventures ready to greet me

But life isn't always so **peachy** as it seems

Sometimes I pull my tortoise shell on 

So that nobody sees me 

That's when you're always there for me

Sitting by my side

And wiping all my tears away 

And curing all my scars

Whenever I need you, you are always there

Holding my hand tight 

But whatever in the **world** I do

I will always  love you

My life is different to what it was before It is better I must say

Because you were there when I needed you

And from then on life wasn't all so **blue**

"For groups and individuals with a history of being marginalised finding a voice can be a revolutionary act, drawing attention to your presence and that you matter."

Baroness Lola Young

Voices 2025 Judge

"Everyone's voice is unique. Our voice isn't just about what we say, or even how we say it. Our voice is more about how we feel deep inside; and how we express that. Creative writing – or singing/rapping – can be a great way to get your voice out there and heard. Show us who you are! Sometimes our written voice can be different to the one we use to speak with too. Sometimes it's easier to say things written down than spoken out loud. As for the competition itself, it's a fantastic opportunity and the only one of its kind especially for care-experienced young people and shines a light on all the creativity out there that we need to know about!"

E.L Norry

Voices 2025 Judge

Lower Secondary

Shortlisted Entries

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Difficult Journey	page 27-28
My Voice... ..	page 29-30
My Voice: A Journey from Silence to Song🎵..	page 31-32

My Voice

Elizia, age 13, **3rd place**

Sometimes
My voice is defensive
It's a wolf growling and howling
At the room
Threatened
Feeling hunted
Near its doom

In class I'm scared to say things out loud
Fearing judgement from the crowd
But when I sing, I feel proud
I open my mouth
Out comes the sound
My body feels like it's floating on a cloud
Through the sound
I am found

I feel confident when I sing
Lost in song
My voice is heard
But when I am talking my voice needs to be
strong
Because I am strong
Even when things go wrong

My Voice poem

Caitlin, age 14, **Commended**

Alcohol, drug, gambling and neglect,
A short-term illness can leave a parent wrecked.
I found this something hard to accept.

When parents struggle to look after you alone,
Foster care offers young people a safe home.

I went into foster care when I'd just turned three,
A kind, caring, supportive life was key.

My brother and I have been together since that very day,
We sometimes argue, but our bond will forever stay.

Some people might think that foster kids aren't academic,
But some go on to become a teacher, fire fighter or medic.

Foster carers have a chance to change a child's life,
Going into foster care can be a sudden surprise.

Some think that foster carers are in it for the payment,
This depends on whether it's a private or public placement.

I've been in foster care for over 10 years,
It's not always been easy, I've have many tears,
A foster carer is what I'd like to pursue for a career.

A foster carer goes beyond and above,
It's not always easy and can become quite tough,
But I believe family is not about blood, it's about love.

Fostering circus


Amelia, age 14, **Commended**

I move around like a circus,
Always happy on the surface
But deep down my mind runs around
And replays an awful sound
"I will miss you" it spins round and round
"you'll be home soon" but what's that sound?
An engine revs and my siblings leave
I shut my eyes and breathe real slow.
I'm trapped in this show ,
Where stage lights are broken
All my hopes are stolen and my words are unspoken. Where is my mother? Where is my
brother? Why do I always hide under the cover? I feel like a clown,
Trusting these people for they are not my own.
I had never let my disappointment show
But now I play on my heart strings like a guitar solo. I'm a small mouse in a giant circus world,
Whose others words hurt the most.
I move around like a circus,
Why am I always so unfocused?
I can't control these stage lights anymore, now I must leave through another back door.
Like i have once before.
Hiding these tears and ignoring my fears.
I am a mouse, in a giant circus world.

Difficult journey

Carla, age 14, **Commended**

When I first entered foster care,
I found lots of things difficult.
One of those things was leaving my family behind.
One day, a knock was on the door,
And, before I knew it,
The police whisked me and my younger brothers away.
It was scary and we didn't know what was happening,
Unaware that was going to be the last time we would see the rest of our connections again.
Ending up in different homes was worrying.
Would we have a forever home?
Getting passed around in different homes,
Each one I lived in,
I thought that was going to be forever.
Oh! How wrong I was!
I felt like I was being tossed around like a toy.
Us foster children are not toys,
We are children, like other children that need to be
Accepted, nurtured and protected, No matter what.
Throughout those difficult years, I learned lots of things,
Like speaking my mind confidently.
I had therapy for a long time,
And that helped me a lot.
And with the right people at last,
I wouldn't be who I am today without them.
They encouraged me,
They helped me achieve things
I thought I wouldn't have been able to years ago.
Even when I had my ups and downs,
Even when I couldn't see a way out of the dark.
I am grateful to them,
Even though the system hasn't been what it should've been.
One day, it will be my turn to help other foster children like my foster carers helped me.



I am able to go to school,
Though when I was with my very first Foster carer, I refused to go to school.
Because I was unhappy.
To be honest, I'm glad I left my family,
But I will always miss them.
Especially my mum.
She was kind, caring,
All the things a mum should be.
But sadly, she couldn't look after me,
The way I should've been looked after.
Accepted and denied,
But still,
Here I stand,
Coming from all those years,
I am stronger than I used to be.
Scared and alone at the beginning.
Unsure of where my journey would lead.
And now I'm braver than I was.
With the right care,
My family couldn't provide.
I used to think it was all my fault,
That they couldn't look after me.
Now I know, it wasn't.
When I first entered foster care,
I realise now,
That actually was the best day of my life.
Despite feeling like the 'odd' one out.
Lied to saying there's a naughty list,
And I know now that there isn't.
I was once a lost young girl first entering,
Into the system.
Now, I know who I am.

My Voice...

Hope, age 14, 2nd place

I was born with my voice, a gift wrapped in sound,
A beacon to guide me, a lift from the ground,
Me, I, given the power to speak what I feel,
To carve out my truth, to name what is real.

A melody lingers, my own mothers refrain,
Echoing softly through pleasure and pain,
In every sweet note, a beloved memory flows
A whisper, a hug, in the ebb and the throes.

My voice carries stories, emotions unleashed,
Passion and purpose, my pain is released.
In the shadows of foster care, I longed to be heard,
As the silence around me, swallowed each word.

They say they know best, with their charts and their claims
Yet how can they understand my depths or my flames?
I speak for myself, in a world that feels hollow,
Yet they silence my needs, like my cries are to follow.

"Speak up" they all say, yet they twist what I share,
Turn my hopes to the void, as if I'm never there.
Do you truly believe my voice carries weight?
Do you think that I matter or is this just fate?

I wield my pen fiercely, my only form of words.
 like daggers they fly
Hoping one pierces through the fog and the lie,
I never hold back, let the words flood and tumble free,
For in the raw essence, it is the real me they see.

For how can your hands reach out to mend,
When my story falters and you don't understand,
Each tale I willingly share, a call to you,
But in the echoes, my voice slips and falls through.

I deserve, not just want to be listened to and known,
To share the hard battles and reap what I've sown,
No judgement, just kindness when I take the stage,
I want respect for my choices, a turn of the page.

This voice that I nurture, it carries my soul,
It's vital, it's needed, it makes me feel whole,
So listen, hear me, not just in refrain,
My voice is a blossom through sunshine and rain.

For you need my voice too, just as I need it too,
Together, we can build, let the old break in two,
So please, let me be heard, let my truth take flight,
In every spoken word, in the healing of light.

Let me speak for her, as she is the reason my voice is here. ♡

My Voice: A Journey from Silence to Song 🎵

Elizabeth, age 12, **Winner**

Discovering my voice has been a journey. It was lost from birth and buried under uncertainty, whispers, and truths waiting to be expressed. I wasn't given the chance to speak, to be heard, or even to cry. My life began shrouded in silence, as though the world had placed a mute button within me before I could utter a sound. My story doesn't start with silence, but with a question: *Who am I?*

Adoption, especially at a young age, represents a paradox. The truth I grew up with is that I belong to two families. Life was a blend of two extremes, but there was also an ache, a pull toward the unknown. A question mark loomed over my existence: *Why didn't my biological parents fight for me?*

Adoption has made me stronger, but I've also become incredibly vulnerable. I was raised by a family that gave me everything they could, and more. They showed me unconditional love and acceptance. Yet, a part of me has always wondered if my birth family think of me. Do they wonder if I'm okay? Do they ask the same questions I do? What did they feel when they let me go?

My biological father, now gone, visited me when I was a baby. I don't remember him, but I wonder about the man he was. What did he hope for me? What did he feel when he had to walk away? Those unanswered questions swirl in my mind, yet I hold onto the fleeting moments I've been told about him—tiny connections that will never fill the gap in my heart.

I also communicate with my older sister through letterbox messages. It's not the same as hugging her or hearing her laugh in person, but it's a way to connect. Though we're separated by distance, I carry her with me in my heart, just as she carries me in hers.

It's strange, this dual existence. I speak the words of those who raised me, but also the words of the ones I never met. I sing their unspoken songs, songs of longing, of wanting to know who I am and where I come from. The weight of silence can feel heavy, but I've learned that my voice has always been mine, quiet and uncertain at times.

Adoption has taught me that belonging isn't about blood or DNA. It's about heartbeats—the ones we share and create. My voice is the sound of love that has carried me through every question and moment of fear. Today, I stand not as someone lost, but as someone found.

This is my voice—a voice that speaks of love, the questions I ask, and the strength I've found in the spaces between silence and sound. A voice that tells the world I am whole, I belong, and I will always be heard.

Voices 2025 Young Judges

We were proud to welcome back seven outstanding young people as judges for this year's competition. Each of them is a past winner who brought their unique insight, creativity, and enthusiasm to the judging process. With lived experience of the care system and a passion for storytelling, they read the entries with thoughtfulness and empathy, working with the rest of the judges to make sure every entry was celebrated.

Coming from across the UK, these young people exemplify the power of creative expression and the value of peer-led celebration. Their contribution was vital, and we are deeply grateful for the time, energy and heart they brought to the role.

Thank you to our young judges!

Upper Secondary Category

Shortlisted Entries

Growing with the trauma	page 34
Anchored in My Truth	page 35
What i did was never enough	page 36
at last, he speaks	page 37-38
Letter to My Voice	page 39
Echoes to Thunder: The Rise of My Voice ...	page 40

Growing with the trauma

Chloe, age 17, **Commended**

Growing up, trauma by my side,
A shadow that lingers, nowhere to hide.
Through the ups and downs, it clings so tight,
Growing with me, day and night.

But amidst the darkness, a flicker of light,
Strength emerges, ready to fight.
With each passing day, I learn and grow,
Navigating the pain, finding my own flow.

The scars that mark my journey's map,
Reminders of battles, bridges I've crossed.
Yet, I rise above, resilient and strong,
Turning my pain into a powerful song.

Growing up with trauma, a challenging road,
But I'll face it head-on, with courage bestowed.
For within the struggle, I find my worth,
A story of resilience, my own rebirth.

Growing up, trauma by my side,
A shadow that lingers, nowhere to hide.
Through the ups and downs, it clings so tight,
Growing with me, day and night.

But amidst the darkness, a flicker of light,
Strength emerges, ready to fight.
With each passing day, I learn and grow,
Navigating the pain, finding my own flow.

The scars that mark my journey's map,
Reminders of battles, bridges I've crossed.
Yet, I rise above, resilient and strong,
Turning my pain into a powerful song.

Growing up with trauma, a challenging road,
But I'll face it head-on, with courage bestowed.
For within the struggle, I find my worth,
A story of resilience, my own rebirth.

Growing up with trauma, a journey so tough,
Through darkness and pain, we've had enough.
But remember, my friend, you're not defined by
your past,
You're resilient and strong, you'll overcome it fast.

With each step you take, you're growing so wise,
Transforming your pain into strength that defies.
The scars may remain, but they tell a story,
Of resilience and courage, a tale of glory.

Through healing and love, you'll find your way,
Unraveling the wounds, day by day.
You're not alone, for support is near,
With open arms, we'll help you persevere.

So keep pushing forward, don't be afraid,
Embrace the growth, the progress you've made.
You're not defined by the trauma you've known,
You're a survivor, a warrior, beautifully grown.

Anchored in My Truth

Siân, age 16, 3rd place

Before being in foster care, my voice was a whisper lost in the storm—a flicker swallowed by the dark. By thirteen, I'd learned to shrink, to fold myself into the corners of rooms where neglect made a home. Words piled up inside me like unread letters, sealed with the fear that no one would care to open them.

Then came the anchor: foster care. Not a fairy tale rescue, but a slow unfurl. My new family didn't just hear me; they cared, eyes bright with "Talk to us, we are here for you, always" For the first time, someone noticed how I lit up talking about the sea - its vastness, its rhythm - and signed me up for Maryport Sea Cadets.

The Cadets became my compass. On my first tall ships voyage, the deck swayed beneath me, salt spray stinging my cheeks as we hauled ropes in unison. "Eyes on the horizon!" our instructor barked. I gripped the helm during my watch, heart drumming as the crew trusted my commands. Here, I wasn't the kid from the system; I was a leader. The sea didn't care about my past, it demanded my presence, my voice.

Back on land, I became part of the Children in Care Council. In meetings, I'd clutch my notes, breath shallow, until a social worker said, "We need your input, what's your solution?" My ideas on training programmes spilled out, nervously at first, then firmer as heads nodded. They used my suggestions—real change, translated into policy. I wasn't just speaking; I was steering.

Last month, I stood at a Council Conference, microphone in hand, sharing how foster experienced young people thrive when given the wheel. My Cadet uniform hugging my shoulders like armour. "We don't need saviours," I said, voice steady as tide. "We need believers." Afterward, a girl tugged my sleeve: "Your speech - it's like you said what I've been scared to." Her words live in my heart, proof that my voice could be a lighthouse.

Now, at sixteen, I trace how far I've sailed. Foster Care taught me to trust my worth. The Cadets taught me to navigate storms. The Children's Council taught me to amplify not just my voice, but others too. I'm no longer a whisper - I'm a chorus.

Some days, I still feel the ghost of that silent, scared kid, but whilst I know she's not gone. She's the compass that keeps me true. When I speak now, it's with the grit of saltwater and the certainty of constellations. My voice? It's alive - in the creak of ship decks, in Children's Council meetings, in the girl who heard me and found her own words. The girl who has found her true home and has aspirations I never dared to hope for in my life.

This life is different but it's mine. And I'll keep sailing, loud and unafraid, because I've finally found where I belong: in a world that listens.

What i did was never enough

Katie-Mae, age 16, **Commended**

Treat me like I'm nothing
Burn me to the ground
Screaming in my face,
Always trying to talk me down

Tell me you love me
Then you go and hurt me
Tell me you'll be there
Then you go and leave me

What do I have to do to get noticed by you?

I'm going round and round in circles
Trying to figure out who I am
You still were never there, no you never cared
It's always empty words to make it feel like you cared

So tell me what do I do now?
I tried everything I can to make you proud but
It's never enough for you

You see me in pain
You see me crying
But never words if you apologise
Cos' that's the kind of person you truly are
inside

at last, he speaks

Mateo, age 17, **Winner**

He first muzzled him at 4

when his father first decided he was dog and not boy, belt wrapped taut around his knuckles, he began to teach him the art of silence.

blackened bruising down his ribs, welts across his arms - he knew better than to scream,

But inside him, still that small voice, begging him to speak.

the boy knows even the weakest dogs can bite - the strays, the rabid, worthless ones, tied up at the post with their sadness frothing through their teeth -

And he wants to let his sadness turn him rabid, wants to be a creature so vile that the world turns him away - wants to know he deserved his fathers ire and violence, that he deserved to be a stray animal and not a child.

so when they take him away , when they tend to his wounds and pull the thorns from his back, he thrashes and growls -

bites the hands that hold him and draws blood with a violent shame.

He gnaws and scratches at the post he is no longer chained to - runs from safety straight into the jaws of an alcoholic middle aged man on the internet, some twisted version of his father, hoping to find himself in the straggled flesh-bits on his teeth.

but when he returns, torn open and ashamed, they hold the pieces of him in place until the skin begins to heal over -

and they tell him they want to know what's inside of him - that sickening storm that eats any thing that comes near it - and he wants so badly to feel something other than darkness,

so he lets them see it



he lets them hear it

muzzle torn, mouth open -

At last, he speaks - a violent river of blood and

torn flesh / years of a silent death at the feet of his father /innocence pulled apart as a
bloodied carcass to be disposed of

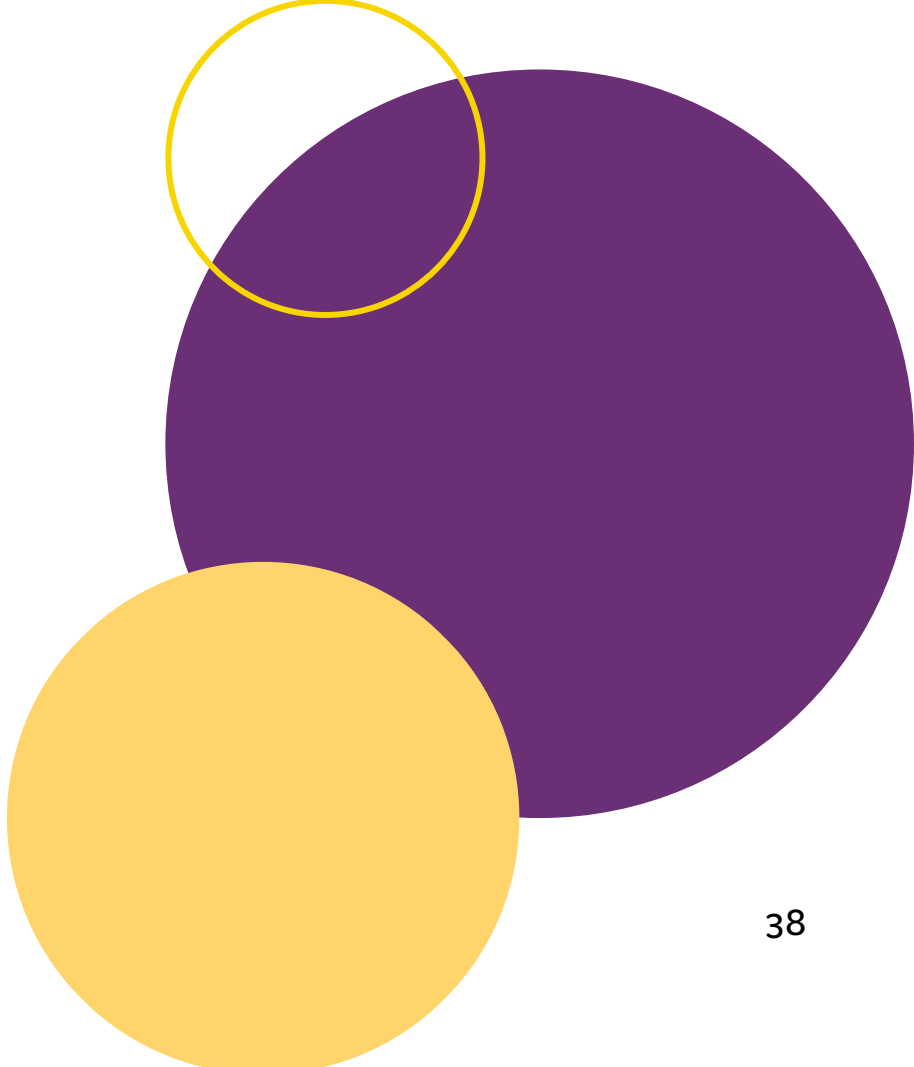
he speaks and his blood is witnessed by another being / his nightmares held by softer
hands, his sins forgiven.

at last, he speaks,

and healing comes slowly and painfully and all at once - he is 17 and is just beginning to
know what home means, or gentle touch

at last, he speaks, and he finds peace in the embers of a massacre

at last, he speaks.



Letter to My Voice

Ella, age 15, **Commended**

Dear My Voice,

I would like to thank you for giving me strength and how you made me over come so many hurdles in my time in care. When I first came into care you were so quiet. I felt so lost like my head was under water and you were trying to scream for help but no one heard. You didn't have the power to shine through.

Foster family after foster family, you tried your hardest to come out of your box and say the right things. You said all the wrong things at all the wrong times. I wished I had the courage to let you escape and make the difference I knew you were capable of. You felt timid and you were afraid of being laughed at or making me feel like the odd one out. We weren't making life easy for each other.

Our relationship continued to grow and we started to make each other feel a little bit more confident. You started to trust and share your words with people who helped. You still didn't get it right all the time and sometimes you shouted and screamed with frustration at everything that made us feel sad and lonely.

One day, we came to live somewhere new. It was here that you managed to crack the code. You finally felt like you were being heard and validated for who you really are. You could speak aloud with confidence and passion, people listened and you got louder (a bit too loud sometimes!). You escaped from your box and went from strength to strength – giving me opportunities I never thought I would have. Everyday you continue to blossom and I use you to help other children in my position.

I am so grateful to have you by my side every day, I wouldn't change you for the world and I hope our relationship will reach the stars.

Thank you
Ella

Echoes to Thunder: The Rise of My Voice

Yusuf, age 16, **2nd place**

For years, I whispered, afraid to be heard, A fragile echo, lost in the world, I thought my voice was too small, too weak, A silent river that dared not speak.

But life, like the tide, would not stay still, I learned that silence is its own kind of will, So I gathered my storms, my secrets, my fire, And spoke the words that built my desire.

"This is me," I said, as the walls closed in, No more hiding my truth beneath my skin, I am the ache, the fight, the spark, A light unafraid to shine in the dark.

I found my voice in the quiet of pain, A wildflower blooming after the rain, I wrote my story in the scars and the seams, Carved from hope and midnight dreams.

They said difference was something to fear, But I learned to hold my reflection near, To see not a fracture, but a mosaic bright, Every shard of me catching the light.

Now I speak for the ones who still hide, Who wait for a voice to stand by their side, I am not just my past, I am not just my name, I am the fire, the fight, and the flame.

So hear me now, loud and clear, My voice is the song of a heart sincere, For every child who's felt alone, Your voice is a kingdom, your soul is a throne.

No more whispers, no more shame, I am here, I am whole, and I stake my claim, This is my voice, untamed and free, A roaring river, the truth of me.

And when they read these words, they'll know, That voices rise, that voices grow, From silence, from struggle, from fierce belief, That every story, told or untold, brings relief.

This is my voice—not broken, but bright, A beacon that cuts through the endless night, And if you hear me, then you know it too, Your voice has power; your voice is you.

Care Leaver Category

Shortlisted Entries

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Don't call me on a Monday	page 44
Finally free	page 45-46
My Illusion.	page 47
Still Standing	page 49-50

The voice inside of me

Kerry, age 20, **Winner**

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.
But the words are inside of me,
they're buried so deep they've become a part of me.
A part of me, apart from me, the words don't even sound like me,
but its my voice, the sound of me, inside of me.

They're etched into my skin like embroidery,
woven over time like artistry.
I pull at the threads, but they're a part of me.
Webs of thoughts hang over me,
like a beautiful picture, it captures me.

Through a maze of tunnels, I question my vitality,
I question my reality.
The truth will set you free,
but my truth is what trapped me.
It holds me tight, controlling me.

"Wear your armour" they say to me,
but I can't anymore, it's too heavy.
My shield has betrayed me,
it protects me from the words you say to me,
but what about the ones I say to me?

I can't tell what is the voice and what is me,
what if it's not black and white but a symphony,
your words and my voice in beautiful harmony?
Waves of words on the rolling sea,
I repeat what you've said about me.

Until its distilled so deep, its like a prophecy,
guiding me through my destiny,
my destiny or my catastrophe?
If I carry on, will this be the end of me,
the corruption of my identity?

This illness inside of me,
can someone give me the remedy?
A cure for the words that treat me like property,
they own me, they control me,
poisoned by society.

Consuming me completely,
these words become my mentality.
Then I think of the younger me,
a girl so full of hope and positivity,
no idea what her life would be.

That girl is still a part of me,
these words I utter become her vitality.
Changing my thoughts changes her reality,
my voice changes her destiny.
So I change the narrative inside of me.

Because I will not abandon me,
that much I can guarantee.
Her life is my responsibility,
my words can set her free.

Because that girl will always be me,
the voice does not dictate my story.

A Voice from The Abyss

Callum, age 18, **3rd place**

At thirteen, I was cast adrift,
A shipwrecked soul in a sea of strangers,
Home after home, like leaves in the wind,
Each place a fleeting shadow, a fleeting whisper,
Where love felt like a ghost,
And I, the unlovable, haunted the halls.

They said I was a boy, but I wore a mask,
Hiding colors that danced beneath the skin,
Screaming within, trapped in the silence,
Afraid that my truth would shatter the hearts
Of those I held dear, so I buried my song,
A melody muffled, a voice that felt wrong.

In the halls of adolescence, I wandered,
Too loud for the girls, too soft for the boys,
A puzzle piece with edges frayed,
Craving connection, yet feeling betrayed,
Left out of laughter that echoed like knives,
I laughed on the surface, but the hurt cut deep inside.

They called me "friend," yet I felt like a ghost,
A shadow on the sidelines, a heart that was lost,
With every glance, I felt the divide,
The chasm between who I was and who they described,
I danced in the dark, a flicker of flame,
But each flicker reminded me I was to blame.

In the silence of night, I drew my release,
Each slice of the blade brought a moment of peace,
A map of despair etched into my skin,
A canvas of sorrow where my battles begin,
But the scars told a story, a tale of the fight,
A desperate plea for a voice in the night.

Yet here I stand, with words on my lips,
A tremor of hope in the silence that drips,
I may not be perfect, but I am alive,
This voice, though it trembles, now dares to survive.
No longer a whisper, but a thunderous cry,
For every heart broken, I'll reach for the sky.

So listen, dear world, as I find my own way,
No longer a ghost, but a vibrant display,
For in every shard of my fractured past,
I've found the strength to stand, to outlast.
My voice will not vanish, nor fade into night,
For I am the chorus, I am the light.

Don't call me on a Monday

Steph, age 22, **Commended**

Don't call me on a Monday
when I'm clueless to what to say,
when I'm calming down from anger,
but I'm not feeling any better.

Why can't you just pick up the phone?
Maybe at a time when I feel the most alone,
when I need somebody to try and come save me,
as I feel the worst on a Saturday evening.

Oh God, I need you by my side.
Oh God, I don't even feel alive.
Oh God, I just want you to help me thrive.
But I need you after you finish at five.

Don't call me on a Monday.
I needed you before, but I am number four.
My hair was twisted, making me feel sick.
I wanted to call, but You won't be available.

But I'm feeling so depressed.
I can not help but stress.
The pain is eating me inside
to the point that I want to die.

I want to try and cry for help.
It's hard to do it by myself.
Need someone to hold my hand,
listen and understand.

Oh God, I need you by my side.
Oh God, I don't even feel alive.
Oh God, I just want you to help me thrive.
But I need you after you finish at five.

So for heaven's sake,
so for heaven's sake,
call me on the weekend.
Call me on a on the weekend.

Finally free

Jamie, age 18, **Finally Free**

Standing in the kitchen, young and small,
It seemed to the rest of the world, that I had it all,
Yes there was joy, but that was overtaken,
By the anger, sadness and fear that left me shaken,
If I could go back, I'd raise the alarm,
I'd use my voice to prevent the harm,
But I was so young and so scared,
And for what came next, I was unprepared.

Fast forward and I'm older now, signs of tween stress on my brown
I remember the cold of the cuffs on my wrists,
I remember thinking "why me, why this?"
I hadn't done any wrong! I wasn't bad!
But I just couldn't cope with feeling so anxious and sad.
The social worker walks in, and I fill with dread,
"I'm sorry, there's nowhere else. It's off to Secure" she said.
Just because there's no help you'll send me there?
I wish I'd used my voice to say THAT'S NOT FAIR!!!

Skip ahead again to 2022, some bad stuff has happened, but good stuff too!
I've moved a lot but hopefully this time's for good,
Hopefully this time I'll feel more understood,
I prayed and hoped and prayed some more,
Just as I had the many placements before,
I prayed that they'd understand my needs and treat me as they said, until one day, as
tears shed
They told me they couldn't meet my needs anymore,
And just like that I was out the door
I wish I'd used my voice to stand up for myself,
To say "you treat me like an object on a shelf!!"

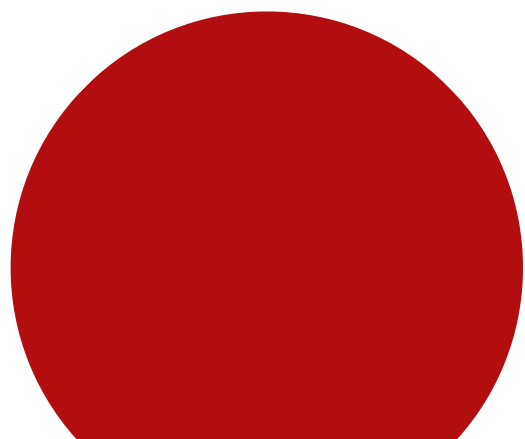
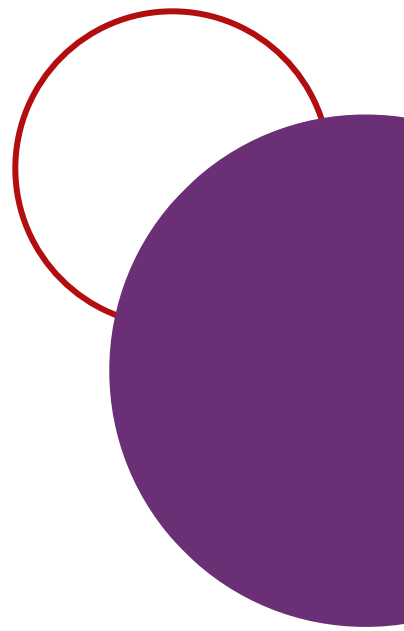
I'd say "you can't expect me to always be ok!"
Instead I was silenced and told to behave
I'd say "you can't move me constantly and mess me about like this!"
But without the right support, my mind turned into an abyss...

Then I was back, shut away, like an animal locked in a cage,
With bad thoughts and feelings swarming me like a plague.
Back, again, sitting, waiting for someone to save me,
No, NOT AGAIN I'M NOT WAITING!!! This time I'll be the one saving me
Eventually from that place I was freed,
and I started to explore a brand new me,
I used my voice to tell people my needs,
And finally, FINALLY! Someone listened to me.

Skip forwards to now and I'm finally free,
And I'm finally someone I want to be!
I'm no longer the 'sad' or 'bad' kid with their life in tatters,
I'm slowly moving on, and that's what matters.
I'm finding my place in this new found society.
If course I still get upset and filled with anxiety,
But I cope much better nowadays,
And I got my friends and family's support always.
I know you can't change the past in any way,
But there's so many things I wish I could do or say.
But moving forwards I'll shout out loud!
Using my voice to make people proud.
I'll use my voice to tell others my tale,
I'll help other people, I won't fail!

I'll use my voice, my very own,
To help people feel a bit less alone.

So, what does my voice mean to me?
It means being me, and being free!



Still Standing

Chrissy, age 21, **Commended**

Verse 1:

I was born into a world that never asked my name,
Taken from the only life I knew—nothing the same.
Thrown into a system that said I was lost,
A child without a future, no matter the cost.

They called it “care,” but all I felt was fear,
Empty rooms, voices I couldn’t hear.
They gave me a bed, but no place to belong,
Told me I was broken, but I stayed strong.

I wandered through halls that echoed with my tears,
A soul yearning for love, surrounded by years
Of silence, of shadows, of questioning my worth—
I didn’t know how to fight, but I fought from birth.

Chorus:

I’m a care leaver, scarred but undefeated,
I walked through hell and I’m still breathing.
They tried to break me, but they don’t know my soul,
I’m rising from the ashes, out of control.

Verse 2:

They said “Go, you’re ready,” but how could I be?
A world so cold, no safety, no guarantee.
I was just a number, no one to protect,
Lost in the noise, no one to connect.

The streets felt like prison, the nights full of doubt,
But every time I fell, I got back up and shouted out.
They told me I’d fail, but I didn’t believe,
Kept pushing, kept fighting, refusing to grieve.

The shadows were thick, the nights long and cold,
But I had a fire that no one could control.
I learned to survive, to stand on my own,
Even in chaos, I found a place to call home.

Chorus:

I’m a care leaver, scarred but undefeated,
I walked through hell and I’m still breathing.
They tried to break me, but they don’t know my soul,
I’m rising from the ashes, out of control.

Bridge:

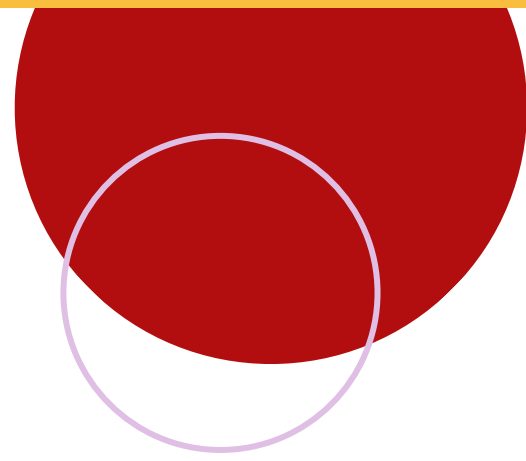
What if they had seen me, not just my pain?
What if they’d shown love instead of shame?
What if I wasn’t just a name on a list,
But a child who deserved to exist?

What if they knew the strength I carried inside,
The dreams I kept hidden, the things I could hide?
I wasn’t broken; I was bending, not breaking,
I was just waiting for the world to stop faking.

But I don’t need their pity, I don’t need their lies,
I’ve learned to rise, I’ve learned to defy.
I take my past and turn it to gold,
Each scar is a story, each wound is bold.

Chorus:

I’m a care leaver, scarred but undefeated,
I walked through hell and I’m still breathing.
They tried to break me, but they don’t know my soul,
I’m rising from the ashes, out of control.



Verse 3:

The weight of the world was too much to bear,
But I carried it, piece by piece, in despair.
They tried to label me, tried to shut me down,
But I grew my wings; I refused to drown.

I found myself in the cracks of the fight,
In the quiet of my mind, in the dead of the night.
Each battle I won was a step toward the light,
And I knew, deep inside, I would be alright

The world saw me as broken, a shadow on the
ground,
But I was a diamond, hidden, waiting to be found.
I rose from the rubble, from everything I had lost,
And now I stand tall, no matter the cost.

Outro:

I'm a care leaver, but I am not the same,
I've built myself from the wreckage, from the flame.
No chains can hold me, no walls can contain,
I'm free, I'm strong, and I'm here to reign.

From the ashes, I rise, my spirit unbroken,
I speak my truth, my words are my weapon.
I am the future they never saw coming,
I'm a care leaver, and I'm becoming.

My Illusion.

Poppy, age 24, **2nd place**

I am a child of care. That is all I am known for. It doesn't matter how many times I try to improve myself, I am still the child in care who was needy and rude.

I feel like drowning, trying to fix who I am, but it doesn't matter how much I try. I am still the child in care...

Am I stuck? Am I destined to become this empty void? Or will I eventually bloom, like so many others do?

I feel like I am rotting to the core... like the flowers that are left behind as the other pretty red roses are bought...

The pain I feel sometimes is more than I can process. I can feel it taking over every inch of my being as I think of my past...

Sometimes, I feel I want to stop living, just pause, for a while, and take a moment to breathe, without my mind being clouded with memories of the past.

The constant battle between my inner child and the version of me now is unfathomable. She's screaming for closure but also for that hug, that love. But she's scared; so many promises were broken.

But but please. But it was a mistake... but nothing... my heart is still broken... my mother... she was my first...

At some point, I forgot who mother was. I know her name and where she is from, but I don't see her in my memories.

Maybe she lingers in the background, but she was never there... She was never my mom.... I do not sympathize with her; I am angry and I always will be. Part of me screams, part of me forgives, but sympathize... never.

I was her last child, not her first... It shouldn't matter, but it does. She failed four times and still continued to have one more child... me...








49 I will not be her... the cycle will be broken and I will become more than my past... my child will feel loved and wanted and never felt abandoned... the cycle is broken!!!

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