

Reflections

By the Winners of the
First Story and LSE
Creative Writing
Competition 2013–2014

An Anthology

Edited and Introduced by
Kate Kingsley

FIRST STORY

The 2013–14 Creative Writing Competition is the result of a collaboration between First Story and the London School of Economics. It is celebrated in conjunction with the London School of Economics & Political Science (LSE) Space for Thought Literary Festival, which is now in its sixth year. The competition is open to students in state secondary schools in Bradford, the East Midlands, London and Oxford, and is promoted through the First Story, London School of Economics and Teach First networks. We are delighted to have this opportunity to involve students in a project that sources and showcases their extraordinary talent, and that invests in their futures as success stories of tomorrow.



Reflections

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An Anthology

BY THE WINNERS OF THE FIRST STORY AND
LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS
CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION 2013–14

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY KATE KINGSLEY | 2014

JUDGED BY JAMES DAWSON, KATE KINGSLEY, GERALDINE
MCCAUGHREAN, AND JON ROBINSON

FIRST STORY
Creativity Literacy Confidence

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Thank You

Kate Kingsley for editing this anthology and serving as a judge.

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Introduction

Kate Kingsley

Dear Reader,

I'm thrilled to introduce the array of bright and brave young voices in this anthology. This is my second year as a judge in the First Story and LSE Creative Writing Competition, and once again I've been inspired not only by the quality, but also by the ambition of the pieces I've read.

'Reflections' is a broad theme. After all, you could call most writing a reflection in some way. So when I heard it was this year's topic I wondered how the students would respond. The answer is: brilliantly. They rose to the challenge. In fact, they rose beyond the challenge. The winners and runners-up that we've selected come from different backgrounds and different cities. But they all have one thing in common: they've defined the idea of 'Reflections' in clever and insightful ways, exploring subjects that range from the fictional to the observational to the autobiographical, and from the playful to the lyrical to the shocking. They not only *wrote* about reflections but they *reflected*, reaching into themselves, taking risks with subject matter, and coming up with original, beautiful work.

I found some of the pieces to be witty and touching. In 'Reflection of a Friend' for instance, the writer celebrates a friendship and illustrates in the meantime how our friends reflect aspects of ourselves. Other pieces take on dark and

weighty subjects. 'Double Meanings', for example, describes a disturbing sexual encounter with grace and courage. Elsewhere, we have moving portraits of grandparents dead and alive. We have depictions of troubled souls, meditations on what lurks beneath the skin, and dispatches from the battlefields of the First World War.

While I was reading, a whole host of the writers' vivid, unique images stuck in my head. Below is a cross-section of my favourites. As I'm certain you'll see from them (and from the rest of the book), 'Reflections' has truly inspired these teenagers to look into themselves and to come up with serious stuff. It's wonderful to see the talent and creativity at work in this new generation of voices.

We breathe in unison while the landscape hangs behind us.
 Friends peeling away from me like wallpaper.
 He steals the silence and replaces it with his thumping pulse.
 She's the girl in front of the mirror pulling her hairband off again
 and again.
 The silk cloths that dangled, danced and pirouetted around the
 church.
 The sourness of a blooming self-hatred.
 A flock of bullets fly overhead.
 A rag from his jacket, cut crudely with a bayonet.
 One word transforms him from a laid-back dad to a frightening
 lion.
 Shattered glass slicing their bare backs.
 The cracks are hidden inside of me.
 They both stand proudly in the name of their past and future, but
 on different platforms.

Thank you and happy reading.

OVERALL WINNER AND WINNER OF
THE KEY STAGE 5 COMPETITION

Reflection of a Friend

Nashrath Yasmin

FROM KEY STAGE 5, AGED 16–18

LOXFORD SCHOOL OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

She's beyond anyone I know.
She's brains and an effortless knack for everything.
She's child-like and dependent and can't walk home alone.
She's the girl that can't get the Ilford out of her.
She's a genius but high maintenance.
She's the girl in front of the mirror pulling her hairband
off again and again.
She's the concert raver: three concerts left to go.
She's the one with the bag of crunchy, magic grapes for snacking
in History lessons and being healthy.
She's the sneaky giggles because she's conscious of her smile.
She's the girl with the brilliant smile and the rock band jumpers
and the odd daring dress.
She's the girl who's 'in love' with me, so I like to think.
She's my desk mate and I see too much of her.
She's ticking away and hiding her anger but you can see it
in her eyebrows.

She's comforting and caring. She's the possible relative
according to the possible-mutual-uncle-slash-dad's-friend.

She's gorgeous despite her disagreements.

She's so different to what you'd expect her to be.

She's a bunch of random and a handful of personalities.

She's my friend and I hate to sound lame, but I'm lucky
to have her.

OVERALL RUNNER-UP

Ignorance Is Bliss

Sharmin Akthar

FROM KEY STAGE 4, AGED 14–16

OAKLANDS SCHOOL

It was summer. The air sticky with love, laughter and an eternity of possibilities. But no one had noticed the girl in the thick woollen jumper, her steps whispering their secrets to the world. No one questioned why someone would be crazy enough to wear a sweater under the sun's fury. No one had noticed the falter in her stride nor the splash of blue and purple splotches painting her neck the size of hands. No one saw the fire in her eyes flicker to a meagre flame. If they had taken a second to look instead of just seeing, maybe they would have heard her soul screaming for salvation. Tasted the sourness of a blooming self-hatred. Smelt the everlasting scent of pure terror. Felt the jagged, artificial lines branding her from wrist to elbow. Maybe... But the world sees what it wants to see, hears what it wants to hear, feels what it wants to feel. And when the fate of the girl with the thick woollen jumper slithers from ear to ear, the sympathy will pour, compliments will shower over her passing, and the tale of a beautiful soul lost will haunt the world. But the world was too late to open its eyes.

RUNNER-UP OF THE KEY STAGE 5 COMPETITION

Untitled

Sania Riaz

LOXFORD SCHOOL OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Looking in the mirror at the reflection no one sees,
The one beneath my skin,
My soul,
The real me.

All the times I wished for change,
And the times I wished for hope:
The cracks are hidden inside of me,
That's just how I cope.

Reflecting on the outside,
As I am within,
The people with their laughs and jeers,
Causing me to hate my own skin;

All the times I've sat alone,
Praying for a different life,
Slowly breaking my soul,
Cutting it with a knife.

Looking at my reflection,
I see insecurity, a facade, and pain.
But how is it that I see a girl,
With so much yet to gain?

Looking at my reflection,
I see a light,
I see some hope.
I see a girl, breaking her boundaries,
Learning how to cope.

I see a soul with amazing friends
Helping her along the way,
I see a special person
Creating the smile she has day to day.

Looking at my reflection,
I begin to question life,
The answer:
Unattainable,
But that's what makes it right.

WINNER OF THE KEY STAGE 4
COMPETITION (AGED 14–16)**Reflections***Jamike Dike*

SKINNERS' ACADEMY

I had my rifle poised, determined to clear as much of the path as possible before it was time to move. Adrenaline pushed us over the trench and we charged with a little bit too much gusto into the open plain. Parallel explosions shook the ground as we hastily made the journey from one side to the other, trudging over earth worked by nameless pairs of boots. Soldiers were struck down as bullets collided with fleshy torsos and skinny legs. I gingerly trod over barbed wire caked in black. By now it was down to thirty of us.

I heard distant cries of unlucky soldiers left to an undocumented end. I was getting close now, ducking my head low and aiming at peeping heads. Sometimes I grinned when I hit a soldier who had just killed one of ours; it gave me a sense of fulfilment. *War is a competition*, is what I always told myself. All I wanted to do was win.

I sprinted the last ten metres to the mouth of the trench, beckoning to the closest two soldiers as I threw a grenade into the dark, satisfied by the splatter of bodies as we stormed into the enemy's lines.

As the smoke cleared, the face of a soldier my age, slumped

on the far side of the clotted mud walls, became a beacon for my attention. The face was hysterical, frozen in stark horror as the ragged body bled out.

It was horrifying. I had killed someone. This was the body of the person I had just murdered. Murder. This was the first body I'd seen up close. It had always felt so far away. It had always felt foreign.

We carried on through the enemy trenches. Their smell mirrored that of ours. And in a way, they were like ours: the same pits, store rooms, makeshift quarters. I found it ironic, how the occupants of this trench were made out to be almost alien. Like they weren't even human. Like they weren't men with wives or children. Like they didn't even have faces.

We soon saw a group like us, enemies picking off our advancing soldiers. But they were different. Weren't they?

No, they were men like us. Just doing what they were told. We were all part of the same crappy bunch, just on different sides of a not-so-wide ocean.

So I did not shoot those men. I dropped my gun and walked back to the place where we had entered. I looked at the body of the soldier my age. It was too beaten to hold. So I searched for a piece of his life, something sentimental. I had to make do with a rag from his jacket, cut crudely with a bayonet. Then I took the body of one of his less beaten comrades. I walked back across the field made hard by nameless pairs of boots, with the body slung over my shoulder and the rag in hand.

Distant explosions, cries of men, bullets colliding with skinny legs. All was hushed. So I took the German body to the dead pit. I dumped him there and let the rag cover his face. I said a prayer. Saluted. He played a good game.

RUNNERS-UP OF THE KEY STAGE 4 COMPETITION

Think Before You Speak!

Farzana Akter

OAKLANDS SCHOOL

'Khom khoto khor, khaz beshi khow.' These are the words that sprout out of my dad's mouth when my sister and I are having pointless fights.

'I'm going first in the shower!' my sister yells, her voice filled with hatred.

'I am!'

My dad's face scrunches up in annoyance and then he sighs. My sister and I, though, are still screaming at each other, fighting for dominance as our loud voices fill the room. And then that one word tumbles out of my sister's mouth. My dad's face turns red with anger. One word transforms him from a laid-back dad to a frightening lion.

'BITCH!'

Yes, my sister swears – speaking one of the words that are forbidden to even be thought of in my house. And now my dad is screaming, silencing my sister and me...

My sister stands there, awestruck, no words dare to fall out of

her mouth. She doesn't even think to talk back, knowing that her terrible Bengali would anger my dad even more.

'Khom khoto khor, khaz beshi khow.'

Think before you speak!

A Vengeful Mind

Anisha Faruk

WEMBLEY HIGH TECHNOLOGY COLLEGE

I imagine their shrieks
Of terror that warm
My soul.
I think of how wonderful
Torture
Can be.
I wonder about how tempting
And rewarding
Revenge and punishment are.
I contemplate what amount
Of pain is enough
For my enemies.
I decide that shattered glass
Slicing their bare backs
Is enough to make them
Bleed.

Double Meanings

Khaya Job

NOTTINGHAM ACADEMY – RANSOM ROAD

Words have double meanings and darkness is an excuse for romance.

In the darkness he steals the silence and replaces it with his thumping pulse.

In the darkness my own heart pumps out of my chest as I stumble over a comic book.

In the darkness no means yes and your apprehension can't be heard for miles.

You are (not) to blame – you (did) not speak loud enough, God dammit.

Speak Louder!

But in the darkness it doesn't matter because words have double meanings and apparently so do people. In the darkness you enclose; it's all you can do.

WINNER OF THE KEY STAGE 3 COMPETITION (AGED 11–14)

Untitled

Harriet Sutton

MATTHEW MOSS HIGH SCHOOL

On the sandy banks of Formby beach my grandad sits staring out to sea. Beneath his feet are large rocks which have barnacles clasping onto them. Not saying a word he sits in wonder while he listens to the whistling wind and the waves. Behind him sits my gran, also thinking but of different things, maybe about the way my grandad's hair flickers in the sea breeze. I ponder, too, my head filled with thoughts. I hold the moment and stare out to sea. We sit in unison, we breathe in unison while the landscape hangs behind us. So beautiful but barely looked at. Just happy to be with each other, not saying a word. Just to sit in silence is all we need.

RUNNERS-UP OF THE KEY STAGE 3 COMPETITION

Aubrey

Kenia Fenton

THE BRIDGE ACADEMY

My hood hovered over my eyes as I swiftly made my way to the church. This was going to kill me inside, all this guilt and worrying. It had to be done with.

My heels scratched against the tiled entrance of the church, creating a steady click-clack rhythm. I slid into the main hall while slowly pulling off my hood as my eyes adjusted to the new layout. I looked at the cross hanging from the peaked ceiling, the swirled designs on the walls, the silk cloths that dangled, danced and pirouetted around the church. I got a few glances, suggesting to me that they don't really get new faces. It made me feel awkward, like a fish out of water, like an outsider. I hadn't been here since I got my modelling contract. It felt slightly ironic to be returning as I always forget to pray, but I guess it was time to rekindle my religion.

I began to anxiously make my way down to the altar, taking deep breaths. The last time I confessed I was fifteen; the last time I entered this church I was seventeen. My thoughts, reflecting on my past, corrupted my mind so I didn't even realise I was directly in front of the cross on the altar. My head began to spin. Flashes back to that day flowed through my head, creating vivid pictures

filled with guilt. Deep breaths, deep breaths.

'Excuse me, um, I'd like to make a confession please, Father?' I politely asked the priest.

'Aubrey, is that you?' he replied taken aback at the change in my appearance.

'You... you remember me, Father Max?' I was genuinely shocked. Although I used to come here every Sunday, that was ten years ago.

'Of course I remember you. How could I forget? Remember Aubrey, you may leave the Lord but he will never leave you.' He smiled at me. 'Now, you said you wanted to make a confession, am I correct?'

'Yes, that is right.'

'Well, right this way.'

I trailed behind him like a lost child, hesitating as I made my way into the booth. I kneeled down. Deep breaths, deep breaths.

Father Max could see my discomfort. Anyone would be able to see it, it was written all over my conscience-stricken face. 'Are you ready, Aubrey?'

Deep breaths. 'Yes.'

'Begin.'

'In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. My last confession was twelve years ago.'

He began to repeat a passage from a familiar Holy Scripture. I realised what position I was actually in. My head was spinning, deep breaths. I took deep breaths. The pictures popped up again, the lifelike memories. Every sound I'd heard in that moment, every feeling, every scent, every petty little detail was all I remembered. Deep breaths. The scripture began to come to an end and I was ready.

'I... I lusted. I had an affair with... with my friend's husband. I cheated on my husband. I did it. I've been holding this in for

two years. If I don't tell anyone at least let me tell you, Lord. I can't take it anymore; I disobeyed the commandments of the Lord. I lusted! I committed adultery. I lied, I cheated,' I shrieked.

Deep breaths. For a moment I felt alone. I didn't even remember Father Maxwell was in front of me.

'I am sorry for these sins and the sins of my past life. I am so...'

Deep breaths.

'...so sorry.'

Untitled

Aamna Irfan

MATTHEW MOSS HIGH SCHOOL

A difference in priority; a child's heart can simply sense. He catches the stare of his grandfather, the one who steals away his anger and shadows his every sin. The concrete walls around them won't leak a word, even if they share every secret they've ever kept. He listens to every accurate quote, every ageless word, with a patience that's rare for his age and in those lucky moments when his grandfather looks away, he sweeps the wisdom from his aura under the dusty antediluvian carpets. To store it for those nights, the nights when he has given up on love and craves his grandfather's presence. They both look up towards the same star, with a different glow. They both stand proudly in the name of their past and future, but on different platforms. Awake, they'll share secrets. Asleep, they'll share dreams. So this flower will be dropped today. In a house thought vacant by many, the love of a grandfather still exists.

Man or Boy

Brooke Parrish-Carr

BASILDON LOWER ACADEMY

June 1914

I may be a boy, but I feel like a man.
Enlisting was simple; they didn't enforce the age ban.

The Sergeant entered, the call came in,
This was it: the war was about to begin.

As I looked around at the sea of faces
All I could see was excitement and fear as people stood in their
places.

Now I'm here, cramped up in our trench.
No cooking equipment, bed or even a wooden bench.

A flock of bullets fly overhead.
1 man, 2 men, 3 men dead.

August 1916

I'm not a man, I'm just a boy.
This war is no game and my gun is no toy.

As the fighting and slaughter carried on all around
Friends on the front line were not to be found.

I kneeled and prayed to God every night
Hoping this war would be over by the morning light.

Two years later and I am still alive and well.
What I have experienced is like a living hell.

Excitement, experience and 'man-making' they said
100, 200, 300 men dead.

February 1917

Until this day I never realised how cruel some people can be
I just want to go home and just want to be free.

I know it will be over soon, I can feel it in my heart
But the longer I can't see my family, the more it tears me apart.

I'm still alive, lying here night and day.
If only God would listen to me when I pray.

The war seemed easy as pie at the start.
I guess I was wrong – maybe I'm not that smart.

So hungry, so tired, wondering when will we be fed?
1,000, 2,000, 3,000 men dead.

July 1918

A boy I am, defiantly not a man.
Shouldn't have come to war, should've thought of a better plan.

Pigeons, dogs, cannons and tanks,
Soldiers wounded and dying from all ranks.

Wishing daily this will be over soon,
I'm hoping it'll be over tomorrow at noon.

In the early hours as the sun starts to rise.
The last gunshot is fired and the last man dies.

As well as the sky, the fields turn red
1,000,000, 2,000,000, 3,000,000 men dead

November 1918

Eventually the war is over, all wrapped up and done.
With blood, sweat and tears we have finally won.

The smiles and euphoria spread all around.
There's not a single cannon or gunshot sound.

The hard work and heartache were worth it in the end
But I am so sad to lose those who looked on me as a friend.

I revisit the battlefield where many men fell and lay.
The bright red poppies still grow to this very day.

Remember all those that were wounded and bled
And never forget the nine million dead.

Dramatic Monologue

Edmund Ross

THE BRIDGE ACADEMY

I won't be sad to see it all go. The bright lights, my robotic lifestyle, my hatred of this life. It burns, a pain behind my eye-sockets, refusing to go away unless I draw all the curtains of my council flat and turn off the lights. I must escape from this!

Not that I'm usually at the council flat. They know I 'live' there. If you can call my life living.

From up here, way up here, I can still hear the car horns, smell the pollution, see people rushing from one prison to the next.

Ha! They have us trapped so well, like rats scurrying around a test chamber. Except for one.

The cause comes first and then the effect – drugs, for instance. Depression is usually the cause. It was for me. Not that I regret it! Any move against them is a move for the better. But the effect – so drastic, friends peeling away from me like wallpaper being ripped off by an angry child. It left me with no choice. Spiralling into decline. I started turning to crime. They said I needed help, but they know nothing. I have my thoughts perfectly under control. But I can't continue, not under these circumstances, especially now they are watching.

So I escape; I jump.

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I'm thrilled to introduce the array of bright and brave young voices in this anthology. This is my second year as a judge in the First Story and LSE Creative Writing Competition, and once again I've been inspired not only by the quality, but also by the ambition of the pieces I've read.

KATE KINGSLEY, author of *Young, Loaded & Fabulous*, a young adult series and First Story Writer-in-Residence

First Story is delighted to be working in collaboration with LSE once again to help showcase such a fantastic collection of work. *Reflections* is stuffed to bursting with talent and features such a broad range of fresh, ingenious ideas and voices.

KATIE WALDEGRAVE, Executive Director, First Story

The ability to successfully communicate ideas and think creatively about problems, both of which are showcased in this anthology, are central to the LSE student experience. Each one of these young authors demonstrates an articulacy and originality that deserves to be commended.

LOUISE GASKELL, Deputy Events Manager and Literary Festival Organiser, LSE

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OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE

