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Foundation and Higher Tiers

Pre-release booklet: Section B Insert

For use with Section B of the question paper

The booklet that follows is:

- Section B of the pre-release booklet: Poems from Different Cultures and Traditions.

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SECTION B: POEMS FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES AND TRADITIONS

Apart from being a distinguished Scottish poet, Norman MacCaig (1910–1996) taught in schools and universities during his long career. Although he was brought up in Edinburgh, it was his mother's Gaelic heritage, experienced during visits to her family in the Highlands of Scotland, which had an enduring influence on him.

Aunt Julia

Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic
 very loud and very fast.
 I could not answer her —
 I could not understand her.

She wore men's boots
 when she wore any.
 — I can see her strong foot,
 stained with peat,
 paddling with the treadle of the spinning wheel
 while her right hand drew yarn
 marvellously out of the air.

Hers was the only house
 where I've lain at night
 in the absolute darkness
 of a box bed, listening to
 crickets being friendly.

She was buckets
 and water flouncing into them.
 She was winds pouring wetly
 round house-ends.
 She was brown eggs, black skirts
 and a keeper of threepennybits
 in a teapot.

Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic
 very loud and very fast.
 By the time I had learned
 a little, she lay
 silenced in the absolute black
 of a sandy grave
 at Luskentyre.
 But I hear her still, welcoming me
 with a seagull's voice
 across a hundred yards
 of peatscapes and lazybeds
 and getting angry, getting angry
 with so many questions
 unanswered.

NORMAN MACCAIG

In the following poem, the Indian poet Trilokesh Mukherjee remembers his grandmother's story-telling. He was born in India in 1938. Damayanti, Bheema, Bishma and Krishna are characters and gods from Hindu religion and mythology.

Memories

We children listened to the untiring chirping of crickets and nightjars,
The hooting of the night owls and howling of the distant jackals,
The glow worms added golden firework sparks on the dark canvas,
Smelled the smoke of the fire and the food being cooked,
The smell of the rice boiled over the hot earthen oven....
Much later, after the meal shared with all the children,
Lying down on the cool straw mats in the dark, listening to the stories
Grandmother told, her reassuring voice transported us
To another far away unknown, yet familiar, world;
The stories heard again and again, yet never quite satisfying.
"... And then, Grandma! What happened then?" We all knew,
But wanted to hear it again from Grandma's lips, the stories of
Sad Damayanti, valiant Bheema, wonderful Bishma, Krishna -
We never knew when we fell asleep with wet eyelids
For the dreamworld was not much different,
Except that there we met the heroes and the heroines
And spoke to them and played with them.

Grandmother is no more. But the dreams are still with us.
I can still hear her voice and feel her presence.
I need only shut my eyes to hear the whispering,
To feel the presence of the stories and our lost lives.

That's what the memories are about.

TRILOKESH MUKHERJEE

Wole Soyinka is a highly political writer. He is a 1986 Nobel Prize winner who has been imprisoned on several occasions for his challenging of the Nigerian government. He went into exile in 1994 and in 1996 he wrote *The Open Sore of a Continent*. In 1997 he was sentenced to death, was later granted an amnesty, and he returned to Nigeria to live in 1998.

After the Deluge

Once, for a dare,
He filled his heart-shaped swimming pool
With bank notes, high denomination
And fed a pound of caviar to his dog.
The dog was sick; a chartered plane
Flew in replacement for the Persian rug.

He made a billion yen
Leap from Tokyo to Buenos Aires,
Turn somersaults through Brussels,
New York, Sofia and Johannesburg.
It cracked the bullion market open wide.
Governments fell, coalitions cracked
Insurrection raised its bloody flag
From north to south.

He knew his native land through iron gates,
His sight was radar bowls, his hearing
Electronic beams. For flesh and blood,
Kept company with a brace of Dobermans.
But – yes – the worthy causes never lacked
His widow's mite, discreetly publicised.

He escaped the lynch days. He survives.
I dreamt I saw him on a village
Water line, a parched land where
Water is a god
That doles its favours by the drop,
And waiting is a way of life.
Rebellion gleamed yet faintly in his eye
Traversing chrome-and-platinum retreats. There,
Hubs of commerce smoothly turn without
His bidding, and cities where he lately roosted
Have forgotten him, the preying bird
Of passage.

They let him live, but not from pity
Or human sufferance. He scratches life
From earth, no worse a mortal man than the rest.
Far, far away in dreamland splendour,
Creepers twine his gates of bronze relief.
The jade-lined pool is home
To snakes and lizards; they hunt and mate
On crusted algae.

WOLE SOYINKA

Jón úr Vör is an Icelandic poet who was born in 1917. During the winter months in Iceland there is very little daylight and a great deal of ice.

Late Winter Months

And do you remember the long,
 milkless midwinter days,
 the near rotten fish,
 little cod, watered in a bucket,
 a wellhouse
 and the simple song of the water's flow,
 boats indoors
 some covered with canvas,
 sheep on a beach,
 and cold feet,
 and the evenings long as eternity itself,
 one waited impatiently then
 for good weather
 and fresh fish.

And do you remember
 one evening near dusk.
 You stood on a beach with your fostermother.
 You looked with fear at frozen oarlocks,
 out at the fjord,
 toward the sky –
 you were expecting a small boat behind the headland,
 and it did not come.
 And the dusk became thick darkness and stormsounds,
 silence
 and tears on a pillow,
 and you fell asleep alone in a bed that was too large.

And do you remember
 your happiness in the middle of the night,
 when you awakened and on your head
 was a workhardened palm
 and the back of a soft, warm hand
 was stroking your cheeks.

Your fosterfather was there
 – and kissed you when you laid your hands on his neck.
 And his sea-wet moustache was still cold.

And next morning there were blue catfish
 on the ice-covered doorstep,
 and the sun glistened on silver haddock scales –
 and on happiness in a poor man's house.

JÓN ÚR VÖR

Choman Hardi was born in Iraqi Kurdistan before her family fled to Iran. They returned to their homeland when she was five, but when she was fourteen in 1988, the Kurds were attacked with chemical weapons and her family were forced into exile once again. Choman Hardi now lives in Britain and writes in English.

Escape Journey, 1988

They force you to crawl, these mountains,
even if you are only 14.
Who made the first journey over them?
Whose feet created this track?

The exhausted mules carry us
along with the smuggled goods.
Sitting on their backs, climbing mountains
feels much safer than going down.
The steepness makes me lean backwards,
my back nearly touching the mule's,
then holding on becomes impossible
and I dismount.
It is easier, safer to walk sideways.

And from high up, I can see the white valley.
'A valley of plaster,' I tell my sister.
The mule owner says: 'It is snow.'
But I cannot imagine being rescued from this rough mountain
only to walk over the snow, covering the river.
I cannot imagine listening to the rushing water
passing by holes where the river exposes itself.

'You are too young to complain,'
the mule owner says,
and I look at my father, his little body,
and listen to his difficult breathing.
But then again, he's been here before.

CHOMAN HARDI

Taufiq Rafat was the first Pakistani poet choosing to write in English about the Pakistani experience, and *Wedding in the Flood* is a classic poem in Pakistan.

Wedding in the Flood

They are taking my girl away forever,
sobs the bride's mother, as the procession
forms slowly to the whine of the clarinet.
She was the shy one. How will she fare
in that cold house, among these strangers?
This has been a long and difficult day.
The rain nearly ruined everything,
but at the crucial time, when lunch was ready,
it mercifully stopped. It is drizzling again
as they help the bride into the palankeen.*
The girl has been licking too many pots.*
Two sturdy lads carrying the dowry
(a cot, a looking glass, a tin-trunk,
beautifully painted in grey and blue)
lead the way, followed by a foursome
bearing the palankeen on their shoulders.
Now even the stragglers are out of view.

I like the look of her hennaed hands,
gloats the bridegroom, as he glimpses
her slim fingers gripping the palankeen's side.
If only her face matches her hands,
and she gives me no mother-in-law problems,
I'll forgive her the cot and the trunk
and looking-glass. Will the rain never stop?
It was my luck to get a pot-licking wench.

Everything depends on the ferryman now.
It is dark in the palankeen, thinks the bride,
and the roof is leaking. Even my feet are wet.
Not a familiar face around me
as I peep through the curtains. I'm cold and scared.
The rain will ruin cot, trunk, and looking-glass.
What sort of a man is my husband?
They would hurry, but their feet are slipping,
and there is a swollen river to cross.

They might have given a bullock at least,
grumbles the bridegroom's father; a couple of oxen
would have come in handy at the next ploughing.
Instead, we are landed with

a cot, a tin trunk, and a looking-glass,
all the things that she will use!
Dear God, how the rain is coming down.
The silly girl's been licking too many pots.
I did not like the look of the river
when we crossed it this morning.
Come back before three, the ferryman said,
or you'll not find me here. I hope
he waits. We are late by an hour,
or perhaps two. But whoever heard
of a marriage party arriving on time?
The light is poor, and the paths treacherous,
but it is the river I most of all fear.

Bridegroom and bride and parents and all,
the ferryman waits; he knows you will come,
for there is no other way to cross,
and a wedding party always pays extra.
The river is rising, so quickly aboard
with your cot, tin trunk, and looking-glass,
that the long homeward journey can begin.
Who has seen such a brown and angry river
or can find words for the way the ferry
saws this way and that, and then disgorges
its screaming load? The clarinet fills with water.
Oh what a consummation is here:
The father tossed on the horns of the waves,
and full thirty garlands are bobbing past
the bridegroom heaved on the heaving tide,
and in an eddy, among the willows downstream,
the coy bride is truly wedded at last.

TAUFIQ RAFAT

* a *palankeen* is a palanquin or passenger litter for one passenger: a covered box on two horizontal poles carried by four bearers.

* a Pakistani proverbial expression says that a girl who licks the pots in the kitchen will bring rain.

James Berry was born in Jamaica in 1924 and emigrated to Britain in 1948 on the ship following the *SS Empire Windrush*, which was the very first ship bringing Caribbean people to live and work in Britain after the Second World War.

Beginning in a City, 1948

Stirred by restlessness, pushed by history,
I found myself in the centre of Empire.
Those first few hours, with those packed impressions
I never looked at in all these years.

I knew no room. I knew no Londoner.
I searched without knowing.
I dropped off my grip at the 'left luggage'.
A smart policeman told me a house to try.

In dim-lit streets, war-tired people moved slowly
like dark-coated bears in a snowy region.
I in my Caribbean gear
was a half finished shack in the cold winds.
In November, the town was a frosty field.
I walked fantastic stone streets in a dream.

A man on duty took my ten-shilling note
for a bed for four nights.
Inflated with happiness I followed him.
I was left in a close-walled room,
left with a dying shadeless bulb,
a pillowless bed and a smelly army blanket –
all the comfort I had paid for.

Curtainless in morning light, I crawled out of bed
onto wooden legs and stiff-armed body,
with a frosty-board face that I patted
with icy water at the lavatory tap.

Then I came to fellow-inmates in a crowded room.
A rage of combined smells attacked me,
clogging my nostrils –
and new charges of other smells merely
increased the stench. I was alone.
I alone was nauseated and choked in deadly air.

I walked without map, without knowledge
from Victoria to Brixton. On Coldharbour Lane
I saw a queue of men – some black –
and stopped. I stood by one man in the queue.
'Wha happenin brodda? Wha happenin here?'

Looking at me he said 'You mus be a jus-come?
You did hear about Labour Exchange?' 'Yes – I hear.'
'Well, you at it! But, you need a place whey you live.'
He pointed. 'Go over dere and get a room.'
So, I had begun – begun in London.

JAMES BERRY

Grace Nichols grew up in a small country village on the coast of Guyana from where she absorbed a wealth of Guyanese folk tales. She has lived in Britain since 1977, worked as a teacher and a journalist, and published many books of poetry which draw on her Caribbean roots.

Island Man

(for a Caribbean island man in London who still wakes up to the sound of the sea)

Morning
and island man wakes up
to the sound of the blue surf
in his head
the steady breaking and wombing

wild seabirds
and fishermen pushing out to sea
the sun surfacing defiantly
from the east
of his small emerald island
he always comes back groggily groggily

Comes back to sands
of a grey metallic soar
to surge of wheels
to dull North Circular roar

muffling muffling
his crumpled pillow waves
island man heaves himself

Another London day.

GRACE NICHOLS

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