

Lament of An Arawak Child

Pamela Mordecai

Once I played with the hummingbirds
and sang songs to the sea
I told my secrets to the waves
and they told theirs to me.

Now there are no more hummingbirds
the sea's songs are all sad
for strange men came and took this land
and plundered all we had.

They made my people into slaves
they worked us to the bone
they battered us and tortured us
and laughed to hear us groan.

Today we'll take a long canoe
and set sail on the sea
we'll steer our journey by the stars
and find a new country.



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With its emphasis on the need for refuge and promise of it, Pamela Mordecai's moving poem, 'Lament of an Arawak Child', is a perfect poem to learn for National Poetry Day.

Use this poem starter to help you learn it by heart.

A 'lament' is a poem or song that expresses deep sadness. The sad child in this poem is an Arawak – start by finding out more about the Arawak people.

The poem tells a story in three parts, each part marked by a word to do with time: 'Once', 'Now' and 'Today'. Find these words. Read the poem aloud, emphasising the time words.

Then think about how to speak each section. What tone of voice will best express what the child is telling us? Serious? Sad? Cheerful? Formal? Conversational? Matter-of-fact? Nostalgic? Angry?

Try out different tones until you find which ones work best where.

About Pamela Mordecai

Pamela Mordecai's first poem was written when she was nine, about a hurricane that hit the island of Jamaica in that year. She was born and grew up there, also studying in the USA. Returning to Jamaica after college, she taught, became involved in theatre and modern dance, and began writing seriously. At the University of the West Indies she subsequently did two teaching degrees, and eventually a PhD. She has written newspaper editorials, dance criticism, textbooks, critical articles on Caribbean literature, studies on Caribbean culture, education, and publishing, poems and stories for children, poems and short stories for adults.

About Poetry By Heart

Poetry By Heart is the national poetry speaking competition for schools. It is open to all schools and colleges in England and invites young people to choose poems they love, learn them by heart and perform them in a school or college performance event.

School staff then select students to enter the national round of the competition, submitting videos of their poem performances at the end of the Spring term.

The 2024 competition launches on National Poetry Day, 5th October 2023 and the final deadline for entries is Thursday 28th March 2024.

Registration, participation and competition entry are free, and the Poetry By Heart website offers a wealth of resources and support materials for teachers including a wide range of suggested poems, classic, contemporary and diverse, including many written by living poets.

Find out more poetrybyheart.org.uk

