Queens’ College invites submissions for the Estelle English Prize 2021, which will be awarded to the best essay submitted by a Year 12 (Lower Sixth Form) student. Entries should answer one of the attached three questions, should be no longer than 2,500 words (including footnotes, references, illustration captions, and any other text), and should reach the College’s Tutorial Office no later than Friday 15 April 2022. **The main focus should not be on something that has been or is currently being studied in the classroom or offered as A-level coursework.** The winner will receive a £500 prize; depending on the strength of the field of submissions, honourable mentions may also be made.

Each entry should be accompanied by a completed cover sheet, and submitted no later than 5 p.m. on Friday 15 April 2022 to the Tutorial Administrator, Tutorial Office, Queens' College, Cambridge CB3 9ET; essays and cover sheets may instead be scanned and submitted (as a single PDF file) by email to tutorial.secretary@queens.cam.ac.uk. **Entries received after 5 p.m. on 15 April 2022 will not be considered. Entries that are over the prescribed maximum length will not be considered. Entries submitted without a cover sheet will not be considered.**

Please note that entries will not be returned and entrants may therefore wish to keep their own copy of the submitted essay.

Receipt of entries will be confirmed by email. The winner and any honourable mention(s) will be notified by letter in May 2022 and will be invited to attend the Queens' College Open Day in July 2022.

**The College does not enter into correspondence about any aspect of the competition or the results thereof. Feedback on the essays submitted is not provided.**
Prescribed essay topics for the 2021 competition (please choose one)

1. ‘Forcing twentieth century America into a sonnet – gosh I hate sonnets – is like putting a crab in a square box. You’ve got to cut his legs off to make him fit.’ (William Carlos Williams, Speaking Straight Ahead)

Discuss the forcing or fitting of words into form, in any English verse that interests you. (You may but need not restrict yourself to the sonnet.)

2. ‘In illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other – a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause – which the poet, knowing words to be meagre in comparison with ideas, has strewn about his page to evoke, when collected, a state of mind which neither words can express nor the reason explain. Incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness, more legitimately perhaps than the upright will allow. In health meaning has encroached upon sound. Our intelligence domineers over our senses. But in illness, with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poem by Mallarmé or Donne, some phrase in Latin or Greek, and the words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having travelled slowly up with all the bloom upon its wings.’ (Virginia Woolf, ‘On Being Ill’)

Write about the pleasure and the value of incomprehensibility, in the reading of any poetry or prose that you cherish. (You may but need not refer to the Woolf passage in your answer.)

3. Consider the representation of the weather in one or both of the following poems.

(i) Elizabeth Bishop, Song for the Rainy Season (1960)

Hidden, oh hidden
in the high fog
the house we live in,
beneath the magnetic rock,
rain-, rainbow-ridden,
where blood-black
bromelias, lichens,
owls, and the lint
of the waterfalls cling,
familiar, unbidden.

In a dim age
of water
the brook sings loud
from a rib cage
of giant fern; vapor
climbs up the thick growth
effortlessly, turns back, holding them both, house and rock, in a private cloud.

At night, on the roof, blind drops crawl and the ordinary brown owl gives us proof he can count: five times — always five — he stamps and takes off after the fat frogs that, shrilling for love, clamber and mount.

House, open house to the white dew and the milk-white sunrise kind to the eyes, to membership of silver fish, mouse, bookworms, big moths; with a wall for the mildew's ignorant map,

darkened and tarnished by the warm touch of the warm breath, maculate, cherished, rejoice! For a later era will differ. (O difference that kills, or intimidates, much of all our small shadowy life!) Without water

the great rock will stare unmagnetized, bare, no longer wearing rainbows or rain, the forgiving air and the high fog gone; the owls will move on and the several waterfalls shrivel in the steady sun.
The Sun woke me this morning loud and clear, saying ‘Hey! I’ve been trying to wake you up for fifteen minutes. Don’t be so rude, you are only the second poet I’ve ever chosen to speak to personally so why aren’t you more attentive? If I could burn you through the window I would to wake you up. I can’t hang around here all day.’

‘Sorry, Sun, I stayed up late last night talking to Hal.’

‘When I woke up Mayakovsky he was a lot more prompt’ the Sun said petulantly. ‘Most people are up already waiting to see if I’m going to put in an appearance.’

I tried to apologize ‘I missed you yesterday.’

‘That’s better’ he said. ‘I didn’t know you’d come out.’ ‘You may be wondering why I’ve come so close?’

‘Yes’ I said beginning to feel hot wondering if maybe he wasn’t burning me anyway.

‘Frankly I wanted to tell you I like your poetry. I see a lot on my rounds and you’re okay. You may not be the greatest thing on earth, but you’re different. Now, I’ve heard some say you’re crazy, they being excessively calm themselves to my mind, and other crazy poets think that you’re a boring reactionary. Not me.

Just keep on like I do and pay no attention. You’ll find that people always will complain about the atmosphere, either too hot or too cold too bright or too dark, days too short or too long.

If you don’t appear at all one day they think you’re lazy or dead. Just keep right on, I like it.

And don’t worry about your lineage poetic or natural. The Sun shines on the jungle, you know, on the tundra.
the sea, the ghetto. Where you were
I knew it and saw you moving. I was waiting
for you to get to work.

And now that you
are making your own days, so to speak,
even if no one reads you but me
you won’t be depressed. Not
everyone can look up, even at me. It
hurts their eyes.’

‘Oh Sun, I’m so grateful to you!’

‘Thanks and remember I’m watching. It’s
easier for me to speak to you out
here. I don’t have to slide down
between buildings to get your ear.
I know you love Manhattan, but
you ought to look up more often.

And
always embrace things, people earth
sky stars, as I do, freely and with
the appropriate sense of space. That
is your inclination, known in the heavens
and you should follow it to hell, if
necessary, which I doubt.

Maybe we’ll
speak again in Africa, of which I too
am specially fond. Go back to sleep now
Frank, and I may leave a tiny poem
in that brain of yours as my farewell.’

‘Sun, don’t go!’ I was awake
at last. ‘No, go I must, they’re calling
me.’

‘Who are they?’
Rising he said ‘Some
day you’ll know. They’re calling to you
too.’ Darkly he rose, and then I slept.