

It's written in the stars

A guide to choosing your own fate despite the odds being against you using 'Thirteen' by Caleb Femi.

Thirteen

You will be four minutes from home
when you are cornered by an officer
who will tell you of a robbery, forty
minutes ago in the area. You fit
the description of a man ? – You'll laugh.
Thirteen, you'll tell him: you're thirteen.

You'll be patted on the shoulder, then, by another fed
whose face takes you back to Gloucester Primary School,
a Wednesday assembly about being little stars.
This same officer had an horizon in the east
of his smile when he told your class that
you were all supernovas,
the biggest and brightest stars.

You will show the warmth of your teeth
praying he remembers the heat of your supernova;
he will see you powerless – plump.
You will watch the two men cast lots for your organs.

Don't you remember me? you will ask.
You gave a talk at my primary school.
While fear condenses on your lips,
you will remember that Wednesday, after the assembly,
your teacher speaking more about supernovas:
how they are, in fact, dying stars
on the verge of becoming black holes.

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from **Poor** (Penguin Poetry)



Caleb Femi is a poet and director who has written and directed short films for the BBC and Channel 4, and poems for Tate Modern, The Royal Society of Literature, St Paul's Cathedral, The Guardian and more. From 2016 to 2018, he served as the Young People's Laureate for London.



Caleb Femi grew up on the North Peckham estate in London where Damilola Taylor was murdered in gang violence. In this [interview](#) Caleb said: "I...think about the estate that shaped me... Nobody should have to live in fear for their lives on a daily basis... Nobody would **choose** that."

Find the metaphor in the second stanza (or verse) where the school children are stars "on the verge of becoming black holes". How might this link to the context, above? Have you heard the phrase "it's written in the stars" to suggest your fate is already decided. What factors might impact on your life decisions? (Poverty. Discrimination. Peer pressure) How can we all make positive **choices** and choose our own fate?

The speaker of this poem is a 13 year old Black British boy. What racist assumption (or stereotype) is the police officer making? What is racial profiling? Which adjectives suggest the boy's innocence? How does the repetition of "You Will" make you feel? Do "you" have any **choice** in this scenario?

[Watch this interview](#) with Caleb Femi. This poem is part of his poetry collection, *Poor*. Caleb says "young boys wearing hoodies don't carry this innate threat within themselves... I am more preoccupied with structural violence... Lack of infrastructure, lack of opportunities... are the most violent acts." Discuss what this means.

Caleb suggests we can't **choose** where we live but we can choose *how* we live. Growing up on "an estate" doesn't mean you'll be a gang member and poverty doesn't always lead to violence - we all have a **choice**. Caleb **chose** to write and became the Young People's Laureate. "This is about the good that came despite the hardship."

EXERCISE:

Think about where you live?
How has it shaped you and the choices you've made in life?
What do you want to be when you grow up - how will you choose to shine?
Write a poem (or a rap) about this.

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