


BCU PRESENTS:
BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH FUTURE WRITERS 2025
WINNERS ANTHOLOGY





BCU Presents: Benjamin Zephaniah Future Writers 2025

In celebration of the life and rhymes of
Birmingham City University Honorary
Doctorate and national treasure Benjamin Zephaniah,
who was an extraordinary poet, a passionate writer
and a Birmingham icon.





About Benjamin Zephaniah

Born and raised in Handsworth, Birmingham, Benjamin Zephaniah became a national treasure through his writing and extraordinary poetry, later becoming an actor, a musician and a professor of poetry and creative writing. His love of animals, nature, and his strong beliefs in human rights, made him popular with many. Benjamin drew on his lived experiences of dyslexia, incarceration, racism and his Jamaican heritage, and he aimed to make his work accessible for all. His writing shaped generations of both adults and children, and he left a remarkable legacy on the city he was born and the nation he called home.

The Competition

Returning for its second year, BCU Presents: Benjamin Zephaniah Future Writers encouraged both children and adults to submit their own poems around the theme. This year's competition was kindly supported and sponsored by the National Trust, Birmingham Botanical Gardens, Birmingham REP, *Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal* (PBLJ), Apples and Snakes and Benjamin Zephaniah.

The Theme

This year's theme was inspired by Benjamin Zephaniah's poem 'Nature Trail', encouraging budding writers to submit poems about the environment, the spaces where they spend their time, the impact of nature on their everyday life, and the importance of looking after the planet.

The Categories

Year Three and Year Four

Year Five and Year Six

Year Seven, Year Eight and Year Nine

Year Ten, Year Eleven, Year Twelve and Year Thirteen

Young Adults (18-29)

Adults (30+)

The Judges

Ade Adepitan: BCU Chancellor, TV Presenter, Author and Wheelchair Basketball Player

Shaherazad Umbreen: Director of Brand and Marketing at National Trust

Ayan Aden: Birmingham Poet Laureate 2024–2026

Professor Gregory Leadbetter: Professor of Poetry at BCU

Madeleine Kludje: Deputy Artistic Director at Birmingham REP

Selina Brown: Founder of the Black British Book Festival and Author

Naush Sabah: Lecturer in Creative Writing at BCU and Editor of *Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal*

Ty'rone Haughton: Artistic Director at Apples and Snakes

“Congratulations to all the winners. Your talent, passion, and words reflect the spirit of Benjamin’s mission to inspire, to provoke thought, and to bring about change. The Future Writers competition is a beautiful testament to how his work continues to inspire.”

—Qian Zephaniah

After the incredible success of the first year of the BCU Presents: Benjamin Zephaniah Future Writers competition in 2024, it wasn't long until we decided to run the competition again, but this time, bigger and better.

From promotion far and wide to doubling our shortlisting team, establishing sponsorship from the likes of the National Trust, securing a panel of esteemed judges, and the awards ceremony taking place in the beautiful Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, this year felt like a huge step up from the competition's inaugural year, and it has once again exceeded all expectations.

The competition, named in honour of Brummie legend and BCU Honorary Doctorate Benjamin Zephaniah, celebrates the late poet's legacy and impact on our city, but the competition has since reached each corner of the UK, with budding writers from near and afar inspired by Benjamin's life and rhythms.

This year's theme, Nature Trail, gave way to thousands of beautiful poems submitted by all ages, from pieces about insects in a child's garden and the wonderful sights they see on their forest walks, to the view from a top floor apartment building in Birmingham City Centre, this year's theme really opened up the imaginations of those taking part, and our shortlisting team and judges were amazed by the creativity, and absolutely loved reading each and every one of them.

This competition wouldn't be possible without the incredible ongoing support from Benjamin's wife, Qian Zephaniah, and our headline sponsors, National Trust. A very special thank you goes to

Shaherazad Umbreen, Director of Brand and Marketing at National Trust, who has supported us in taking the competition to a whole new level this year. Additional thanks go to the amazing team at Birmingham Botanical Gardens, who not only supported promotion of the competition, but are also hosting a 'Nature Trail' with this year's winning pieces in the beautiful gardens in 2026, as well as ongoing support from the Birmingham REP, Apples and Snakes, and *Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal* (PBLJ), who this anthology wouldn't be possible without.

Thank you to this year's judges; Ade, Shaherazad, Ayan, Greg, Madeleine, Selina, Naush and Ty'rone, who came together on a beautiful autumn day at Coughton Court in Warwickshire to choose this year's winners. They have been so much fun to work with! A massive thank you goes to the hardworking teams across BCU who have helped bring this competition together for another year, from our hardworking events team, the design team who worked on every single asset, to our dedicated longlisting and shortlisting teams, who read every single piece submitted. A special thanks goes to our colleagues in BCU's Communications Team, who worked tirelessly in promoting the competition, and bringing this year's awards ceremony to life too.

This competition wouldn't be possible without the many teachers, parents and guardians out there who encouraged children of all ages and abilities to submit their pieces of poetry, it was a total joy to see their poems submitted every day throughout the competition. But we can't forget about the adults too, who this year came out in their hundreds to submit poems inspired by the

theme. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy everyday lives to take part.

And this year's winners...wow! You have been incredible. Your pieces brought smiles to our faces, left tears in our eyes, and motivated us to do better. Congratulations on this immense achievement, you should be so proud of yourselves, so take the time to celebrate and shout about your success!

We are so delighted that the Future Writers 2025 competition gave a platform to so many budding writers, and we are excited to continue to build upon the competition's success in the future.

We are very pleased and completely honoured to share all the winning pieces in this anthology, and hope that our 2025 winners will continue to write in the future. We can't wait to see what they do next.

—Bethan Challoner and the Future Writers Team



Year Three and Four Category

First Place

Alya Abdulla

“Nature’s Love”

I love the trees that twist and grow,
The ones that whisper soft and low
I love the way the rivers glide,
With sparkling ripples side to side.

I love the cliffs that meet the sea,
Standing tall and wide and free,
The ocean waves, they crash and roar,
Then race back laughing to the shore.

I love the sun when it starts to set,
It paints the sky like a silhouette,
The birds fly home, the foxes yawn,
As fireflies flicker on the lawn.

I love the paths where flowers bloom,
And fill the air with sweet perfume,
Each petal sways without a care,
Like nature's song floats through the air.

I love the fields so big and wide,
Where grasses waves from side to side,

The wind runs fast with playful cheer,
Then disappears and reappears.

A beetle crawls beneath a stone,
A deer walks by, but not alone,
Then pause, then vanish in the trees,
As leaves all rustle in the breeze.

The sky, the earth, the light above-
It all belongs to Nature's Love,
No walls, no rules, just sky and ground,
With beauty and peace all around!

Second Place

Jack Smith

“What is Nature”

Is it the green leafy trees?
Or the sound of the buzzing bees,
Is it the air we breathe in?
Or the warmth of the sun on my skin.

Is it the clouds above?
Or two Emperor Penguins in love.
Is it the rain that falls from the sky?
Or the falling leaves that turn brown and die.

Is it the deep blue sea?
Or is it me, having a nature wee,
Is it the food we grow from the land?
Or the scorpions and lizards that pop up in the sand.

Is it the wind blowing through my hair?
Or the family of birds nesting up there,
Is it the flowers that grow?
Or the volcanoes that blow.

Is it the spinning of the earth?
Or is it the miracle of birth,
Is it the thunder and lightning?
That can be very, very frightening.

Nature is all around me,
I am boy living in a city
This makes nature sometimes hard to see!

Third Place

Vraya Mistry

“Walks in the Wild”

I saw some animals, just today,
It was a rainy Spring’s day,
In the field, the lamb and sheep,
Up the hill, they run and leap.

I saw some animals, just today,
It was a warm Summer’s day,
In the trees, the birds call,
All different sizes, big and small.

I saw some animals, just today,
It was a windy Autumn’s day,
In the bushes, the hedgehogs scurry,
When predators arrive, they turn and hurry.

I saw some animals just today,
It was a cold Winter’s day,
On the floor, the foxes prowl,
In the night, they watch and growl.



BCU Presents: Benjamin Zephaniah Future Writers 2025



Year Five and Six Category

First Place

Zoe Griffiths

“What’s wrong with us?”

Once we had a green world,
Where animals lived alone.
But then the humans came along
And turned them all to bone.
They put oil in the rivers
And tipped water down the drain
And judging from what I've seen,
They must all be insane.
The poor creatures that we are hurting,
They cannot fight back,
The only thing that we can do
Is form a protest pack.
It could be the people in parliament
Or the kids just down the road
And to get our desired turn out,
We must be in persuasion mode.

Second Place

Annika Cullwick

"The Sea"

The sea's a mirror
All shiny and cold
You can see your reflection
That it may hold

The sea's a home
A cosy, warm house
Soft and safe
As quiet as a mouse

The sea's a beast
A dangerous killer
It steals and hides
Gnaws through a ship's pillar

The sea's a dump
A giant bin
Full of old stuff
Plastic and tin

The sea's an army
Nature's protector
Fighting a war
A bravery collector

Third Place

Clara Atkins

"Just a tree"

Just a tree,
That's what I am,
Nothing more, nothing less,
Just a tree.

A dream once dreamt
In a lullaby
By a child, a small child,
Like me once,
For I was a little tree,
Nothing more, nothing less.

A word of calm
Sprouts out my branches
Like sap from a tree,
Bleeding peace into our rough world.

I have seen generations
Of birds
As they lay in my branches.

I am old,
Very old,
As old as you,
Older.

Some call me
A peaceful giant,
Others call me
A bringer of life.
For I am.

I am a tree,
Just a tree,
Nothing more, nothing less,
I was once dreamt in a lullaby.

Year Seven, Eight and Nine Category

First Place

Mimi Amjad

“Things That Grow Here”

There’s a rosebush in a broken fridge
by the fence where the foxes slip through.
No one planted it—still, it came.

A single feather on the bus seat,
soft white against cracked leather.
Maybe it fell from something watching.

The drain at the corner sings
when it rains hard enough.
Even the gutters have voices.

I found a worm curled
in a crisp packet,
surviving like it always does.

We play football near the nettles,
run past thorn and glass
like they’re part of the rules.

The trees here lean sideways,
reaching for whatever light
makes it past the high-rises.

Our grass grows in patches—
some soft, some scorched,
some tough as old trainers.

Once, a girl picked daisies
on the estate's edge
and tucked them in her laces.

Even in smoke and sirens,
the wind still smells of rain.
Even here, things grow.

And that counts for something.

Second Place

Alayna-Jannah Adam

"The Trail Knows"

The trail don't care what name you say,
It don't ask class, creed, or pay,
It don't clock race, badge, or war
It just unfolds its ancient floor.

Roots like riddles twist the ground,
Soft with stories, never loud.
Each leaf's a line, each bird's a beat,
Nature rhymes beneath your feet.

I walk this way with open skin,
The trees breathe out, I breathe them in.
No borders here, no concrete lies,
Just sky above and truth that flies.

The nettles sting like words we hide,
The brambles scratch what's locked inside.
But peace don't come in polished steel
It comes in soil, it comes in feel.

A fox moves silent as a thought,
A truth the city never taught.
The stream don't judge the path I take,
It bends and breaks and still it makes.

So walk with me, where roots reclaim,
Where wind forgets your given name.
Where difference dies in emerald flame
And we are kin, not kept the same.

The trail knows more than maps can show,
It leads you out to lead you home.

Third Place

Charis Chan

"Pulse of the dead"

I walked where the wind goes blind,
Down the valley and under ash boughs blackened,
And there,
By the breath of old seasons past,
Mother earth turned her face sideways,
Half-hidden in dew-sodden moss.

Yo,
Mother earth seh,
"Mi cyaan breathe no more,
Too much smoke in mi chest,
Too much plastic in mi shores."

She watches,
Not with eyes,
But with a hush so immense,
Not kind, not cruel.

She seh,
"I can feel di taste of concrete,
Mi trees fall like lost soldiers,
And di rivers dem cryin' out loud."

You bleed green and raw,
Swell with seed and yet bear our poison.

I felt your spirit this night,
A black lilt in moonlight,
A tremor of the owl-flight.

Year Ten, Eleven, Twelve and Thirteen Category

First Place

Zara Amjad

“Nature’s Lost and Found”

I grew up where buses wheeze like old men,
where parks wear litter like second skin.
Still, birds nest inside hollowed bins.
Still, the daffodils push through beer cans,
still, there’s sky.

My nan calls it “our bit of green,”
a patch behind the flats,
where foxes hold midnight meetings
and moss climbs walls like it belongs.
She says nature never leaves us
we just forget to look.

A snail slid by the coffee’s stain,
unbothered by the spilled remains.
Life finds a way through loss and gain.

This is nature too
the cracks, the weeds, the city view.

We’ve got hawthorn by the alley,
moss between the bricks,

sunlight flickers past the high-rise walls,
scribbling poems on cold concrete.

The city is where it survives loudest,
in weeds that break the rules,
in boys who plant trees
instead of fists,
in girls who name each star
above the sirens.

This city breathes in hidden ways,
in rusted gates and flower sprays.

The Earth still speaks beneath our feet—
a softer beat, a green heartbeat

Second Place

Isaac Omotosho

"Another Day"

Yo, listen up, let's set the scene,
Nigeria's lands, lush and green,
Rivers roll, the forests rise,
But human hands blur the skies—

The lion roars, but the trees fall fast,
The eagle soars, but how long will it last?
The fish in the delta, the crops in the soil,
The people working nonstop, the sweat and the toil.

They're running out of time,
The earth is sick and tired.
They keep chasing what they want,
But forget what they require.

Another day, another chance,
To break the cycle, change the dance.
The world ain't done, it's not yet through,
But history has its eyes on you.

Lagos buzzes, hustle never stops,
But beneath the towers, nature drops—
Oil spills, heat waves rise,
Elephants fade before our eyes.

Deforestation's got a grip,
But the land fights back, won't let it slip.
The rivers still whisper, the roots still grow,
The future ain't set, we write the show.

What if we replant? What if we care?
What if we listen and make it fair?
Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?
The land remembers—so build with glory

Another day, another fight,
Stand for trees, stand for light.
The sun still rises, hope ain't through,
Nigeria—history has its eyes on you.

Third Place

Amber Sarwar

"Trees Don't Lie"

A tree can't fake its smile,
or nod its head when it means no,
It won't conceal illness in shame,
a mosaic of damaged leaves spreading slow.

It shows its age in every ring,
each scar worn with grace,
No need for retinols or surgery.
No embarrassment for the colour of one's bark.

It doesn't contort or stretch to please the crowds,
shrink or cower to make you stay,
It grows in the way it knows it must,
an unaltered, fateful path of simplicity.

Trees don't change just to blend with seasons,
they allow the wind to take their leaves,
knowing the roots are firm,
no need to bow or grieve.

People twist their words like vines
and call it being kind,
But trees don't lie. They're stand and wait
letting you decide what's wise.

We still cut them down in rows,
as if honesty's a ready thing to burn,
Then wonder why the world feels wrong,
and nothing sounds the same in turn.

Young Adults Category

First Place

Deontaye Osazuwa

“brummie magic”

as a child, magic was
the bendy woods that hid corner shops, or the
glowing snail trails that stained asphalt hills.
nature, breaking and entering, squatting,
in ladywood, amongst abandoned people.

the canals fascinated me the most.
that young, i only saw them with mum, hand held.
and there was something about them, the waters
were dark. unsettled. provoked a familiar wanting-
hunger for the hidden spells that also made the
snail trails sparkle and bent the trees’ bodies.

the wave of craving would:
dilate my eyes,
hang off my jaw, drag it groundward,
open and close my fist.

i think mum noticed this.
and it’s why we hardly visited the canals.
she told me i had my own magic,
that we came from a people that knew how to

make something out of nothing:
breath into bread, sigh into song.
you shouldn't thief what you already had.
older now, i walk by the canals
and see only dirty water. no lurking magic.
maybe dragonflies. mayflies.
nothing that could satiate wanting. but
my shaking hand reaches out all the same
and i think i imagine the ripple.

Second Place

Zainab Imran

"Commute"

The sky was spread open like a wound,
an animal caught in its final frantic moment.

A formation of birds uncurled as a ribbon does.
I'd caught sight of my face in the train window,

staring hard and long enough to see my pores.
In the glass, nostrils grew on my face, expanded

like warren entrances. Two eyes became four,
became tree hollows where robins appeared like

blood vessels. I moved back. To avoid being invasive.
Stopped watching for small things and rabbits.

The trains dedicated path is not the same as my
treading. The brown legs straying, as they do,

onto national green. I see placards on my phone say
'No Black in the Union Jack'. I see Easter Island heads

as garden décor emerging from a bungalow's front
garden. In tall fields, when weathered paths cross,

I think of being at the intersection and refused
a greeting. 'This is my only way home'. Landowners

tell me to turn back. Behind them, a deer made
of iron is outlined by the lowered sun, contorted

into grazing. I concentrate on making myself
disappear, be nowhere. Silent as a hedgerow.

Third Place

Elijah Denning

“What Grows Here”

The greys fade into greens
as I step off the curb,
moss curling like graffiti
at the edge of broken pavement.
This isn't wilderness—
but it breathes.
Between bin-day and billboard,
the fox still runs.

A sapling leans from a littered verge,
roots wrapped round a rusted can.
A robin sings on a traffic cone—
makes no distinction
between branch and plastic stem.

Nettles press against the Tesco fence.
Worms turn the soil behind the substation.
The wind carries a crisp packet,
then the scent of rain.

A lamppost split with lichen,
a bench swallowed by bramble.
Someone's name carved
into the bark of a streetlight.

I used to think nature lived elsewhere—
in parks, in pictures,
places without bins.
But here,
among the sirens
and chicken shop bones,
it waits...
Not wild. Not gone.
Just growing.
“One day, I’ll bring the world back here.”
People needing people
carry the heart of Birmingham within them.
Each individual a thread in the city’s quilt,
held close with bold, strong stitches.
Unbreakable.

Adults Category

First Place

Tavia Panton

“My Guyana”

Provision ground,
Where jungle trees
In baying breeze
Encircle around,
It's warm, it's kind, the calm resounds,
The sort of rural unknown by this town.

Ancestral land where cassava grows
Through tropical downthrows, steadying the sinking sand;
The land of many waters understands the parts of me lost
in the ignorance of England.

Source amniotic, saviour from the grind,
The pleasant platitudes preserved in brine,
I don't call this exotic
I call it home too,
The less chaotic
With a heartbeat so deep it's profoundly hypnotic,

My Guyana is within these acres
My clarity lives in nature
Under the binap

Beneath the stars
Out by the creek, the setting sun,
Far away from this reality
Existing in parallel, some kind of duality,
Where repetitive days,
Slow ways,
Doing things just to do and not because it pays,
Are the reason I return
And why I'd like to stay.

Second Place

Laura-Jo McConnell

"Untamed"

As I rage, she rages too.
I roar, and she roars back.
The storm inside me is in her—
Waves come crashing down,
Drowning cries I cannot contain.
The anger, wild and free,
Devours all in its path.
Nothing is left untouched.

But like storms,
Fury can't last forever.
The sea, once screaming, breathes,
Sighing through soft sobs,
Quiet, heavy breaths,
Growing still.
The tide retreats,
She ebbs, gently now.
My heart slows.
She calms,
So I calm too.

For she is I, and I am her.
We must protect what calms and cries—
The earth, the sea, the wildness inside,
For when she is broken, so am I.

Third Place

Barbara Elaine Sandiford

“White Coral Island—A Caribbean Historical Tale of Barbados”

Thousands of years before Columbus, before the Amerindian/Olmec
Chiefs;

up from deep beneath the tropical reef,
was a lonesome coral Island, below the level of the sea,
this once lonesome coral Island, started without you or me.

A lot of palm and coconut trees,
fig trees, vines and shrubbery.

Birds like the Barbados Bullfinch, the bird known as sparky roamed
the air,

and other flamboyant birds that hum, full of fancy and flare.

Small animals such as green lizards, skinks, tarantulas, land snails,
beetles, bats, whistling frogs, leaf toad geckos in a flurry,
Barbados racer a tree snake, the thread snake which is the world’s
smallest snake, centipedes, the giant rice rat now extinct and crabs
in a hurry.

The waters had flying fish, mackerel, tuna and turtle babies,
sharks and thousands, what the world knows as guppies.

The first human settlers were the Amerindian/Olmec tribes,
mainly gatherers, not much meat for the hunters to pick up a vibe.
As they sailed over in their canoes, they were inspired to give the
Island a name,

“Iche Ruba Naime” “red land surrounded by white teeth” twas
theirs to claim.

They would have docked to a chorus of whistling frogs if they
arrived at night,

with fire flies sparkling, they would have loved the beautiful sight.

With them they brought cassava, cactus, breadfruit, amaranth
grain and tobacco,

the red leg tortoise, noni (dog dumpling) and sea island cotton
did grow.

They brought stow away scorpions, believe it or not,
only a few traditions continue from their legacy, like roasting
breadfruit, cassava pone and at Christmas and the famous
pepper pot.

Less than four hundred years of peaceful existence, a man named
Columbus came,

and had the audacity, to change the Island's name.

he called it "Los Barbados" which means "The Bearded Ones" as
our fig trees are known,

he was clearly in a hurry or felt that there wasn't much going on;
because before you could say "cheese on bread" he had already
pack ship and gone!



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