


BCU PRESENTS:
BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH FUTURE WRITERS 2024
WINNERS ANTHOLOGY



BCU Presents: Benjamin Zephaniah Future Writers 2024

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

BCU's competition 'BCU Presents: Benjamin Zephaniah Future Writers', with support from Benjamin's wife, Qian Zephaniah, and *Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal*, encouraged both children and adults to submit poetry and short stories around a theme.

The theme

The theme for 2024 was inspired by Benjamin's poem 'People Need People' and encouraged poems and short stories to be written about friends, family, peers, and those in your lives and communities who you rely upon and have connections with.

The categories

Year One, Year Two and Year Three

Year Four, Year Five and Year Six

Year Seven, Year Eight and Year Nine

Year Ten, Eleven, Twelve and Thirteen

Adults (18+)

BCU Category: Staff, Students and Graduates

“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

“Benjamin Zephaniah was a Birmingham icon and a BCU Honorary Doctorate with many friends across our campuses. Following his incredibly sad passing in 2023, we knew that we had to do something to celebrate his legacy and his impact on our city, so the Future Writers competition was created.

Starting a new competition is no mean feat, and we promoted it far and wide. Entries started coming in almost instantly, and our long-listing team were taken aback by the sheer amount of talent across the six categories. By the time we closed the competition, we had received over 2,500 submissions, and we soon got to work with our judges to choose the final shortlist and the overall winners.

The Future Writers competition was brought together by colleagues across BCU, but it wouldn't have been possible without the amazing support from Benjamin's wife, Qian, our judges, and the Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal (PBLJ).

The Awards Ceremony in December 2024 was one of the most moving events we'd ever hosted and been a part of. To see so many people in the room celebrating their pieces and what they had achieved was incredibly special. To be joined by the Birmingham Poet Laureate, Ayan Aden, who wrote and performed a new piece inspired by the competition theme, was fantastic too.

We're so delighted that the Future Writers 2024 competition gave a platform to so many budding writers, and we are so excited to continue to build upon the competition's success in the coming years.

We are very pleased to share all the winning pieces in this

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anthology, and hope that our 2024 winners will continue to write in the future! We can't wait to see what they do next."

—Bethan Challoner and Karolina Schab
BCU Future Writers Team

People Make People

‘Far Keliya fool ma dhaqdo’

‘One finger cannot wash a face by itself’

Ayan Aden, Birmingham Poet Laureate 2024–2026

My mother would say to me and my siblings
when we would go out to play,
a reminder that only in holding each other
together can we find our way.
And in togetherness we can build foundations strong,

for when the fortune of wind blows,
my brothers’ shoulders are there for me to lean on,
and my shoulders are there for them too.

You see this life lesson extends
beyond childhood blessings.
Life will give you hurdles,
on the path to your purpose,
but throughout these testings—
it is people that will hold you afloat—
anchor you in calm.

It is the smile of a friend,
or the hug of a loved one,
That will allow you to brace the waves of commotion—
oxygen, food and water may nourish the body,
but connection—connection is what nourishes the soul.

Warmth against isolation's cold.
As far back as stories were told,
And ink placed on pen,
One message remains constant from beginning to end.

We
We
We are nothing without each other.

We need one another.
So much so that,

We
We
We become parts of one another.

Lingo from a friend,
mannerisms from a cousin,
facial expressions like my sister,
I walk like my uncle.

I take the teabag out of my cup the way
I saw an elderly lady do it when
I was 17 in a coffee shop.
I put crisps into my sandwich the way
my uni friend showed me and I
will never stop.

I roll my eyes the way
I saw my older friends do when i was 12 in the canteen,

I learnt to close my eyes whilst praying the way
my teacher showed us when he taught us about grief.

My face carries stories from many generations
of people who I am yet to meet,
but people made me.
And people need people.
Because people make people.

And people have made you.

So find strength in needing one another,
And comfort that collectively we are one.

Zephaniah told us people need people—people
To uplift, to carry, to share, to laugh, to cry, to grieve,
to love, to cherish, to need, to argue,
to make up, to disagree, to come together,
to fix each other, to guide one another,

And as long as blood runs through your veins,
and a beating heart carries your soul,
you will need people, they will need you
People need people.
Because people make people.

And people have made you.

Year One, Two and Three Category

First Place

Edward Booth

'Connections'

Stone Age, Iron Age, Neanderthal
What is it that connects them all?
Romans, Greeks, and Vikings too
They have all said, "I love you."

On English mountain, Jamaican beach
Different food and different speech.
Different sport and different names,
It doesn't matter, we're all the same.

We need each other and always will,
From Indian jungle to Somali hill.
Showing love is the start
To friendship, laughter, and joyful heart.

Second Place

Evie Bailey

'Family of Friends'

Friends come in all shapes and sizes. Some small and quiet and some tall and very loud. I have many friends in my life but some of them stick out more than the others.

They never argue or make me sad and are always there for me whenever I need them. That is what friends are for, and I am so lucky to have them.

I have six really good friends, who I think of as my family. I hope they think that I am their family as well. We are not related in any way, and we all look completely different, but I love them all the same.

My most important friend is called Binny, and I have known her for nearly eight years. She has grey hair and slightly large ears, although I wouldn't tell her that. She is the first friend I ever had, and she comes with me whenever she can.

Another one of my friends is a boy called Zebra. He always wears a striped jumper, even in bed, and he is a chaser who runs all over the place. He looks a bit like Donkey, and they are special friends.

Similar to Zebra, there is my other friend, Hippo, who is the son of my dad's friend. He's quite large but very soft to cuddle up to.

One of my girlfriends is called Unicorn and she has a golden, glittery horn and black shiny eyes. On her body she is a blush colour and she has hooves which are made up of different colours, just like her hair. Her best feature is her designer shoes.

Finally, but still much loved, I have Pug, who is very old at 48, and has grey patches on him and a blue nose. Because he's very small, at bedtime, he sits in between the big ones so he's not cold or lonely during the night.

I feel happy to have my friends. I love them and I hope they love me just as much. Even though I get older, I am sure that they will be my friends forever and, one day, they may become friends with other members of my family who may need a cuddle and a hug just like me.

Third Place

Aoibhinn O'Leary

'We're Close and Far Away'

My friends are close enough to play.

But my family and I are far away.

Not close enough to walk.

Not close enough to talk.

It would take a year to walk there,

Take a year to run,

Oh dear oh dear, it's going to take a year!

Oh dear oh dear, it's going to take a year!

So when I go to Dublin I go in my car,

We jump on a ferry and float very far.

My family live in London and China too,

Some live in a village that smells like the loo!

They all make funny jokes because they're a very silly bunch,

When we get together, we draw pictures with our lunch!

I love them so much. They are very precious.

Very kind and caring.

Everyone one of them is very daring!

When I see my family, we love to hug,

Dance and do puzzles,

Then have more and more cuddles.

They are all quite far away.
I don't see them every day.
So before I go to bed,
I look out my bedroom window,
See the sunset orange, pink and red,
Wondering when I will see them again.

Year Four, Five and Six Category

First Place

Dulcie-Bella Hackley

'Together But Not Together'

In cities that bustle, crowds that sway,
We're lonely souls in a digital day,
Our eyes on screens, our hearts astray,
We've searched for connection, but it's all gone away.

The 21st Century has tech galore,
And corporations keep making more and more,
But that isn't exactly what we're looking for,
Yes, people and kindness are what we adore.

Please leave your device for just a bit,
And take a break from the cyber hit,
You'll feel refreshed, you must admit,
That being with real-life friends is lit!

Feel the warmth of a real human hand,
Some programmed AI would never understand,
And look around at nature's wonderland,
With friends and family, 'likes' don't matter,
And trust me, you won't regret it after!

Second Place

Arunan Maheswaralingam

‘Threads of Love: A Tapestry of Friends and Family’

In the tapestry of life, threads intertwine,
Friends and family, a bond so divine.
Through laughter and tears, joy and strife,
They are the essence, the heart of life.

In the morning light, as the day begins,
Their presence is felt, like a gentle wind.
With every heartbeat, with every breath,
They stand by our side, in life and in death.

Friends are the stars that light up the night,
Guiding us through, with their radiant light.
In moments of darkness, when shadows fall,
Their love is a beacon, a clarion call.

Family is the root, the anchor, the base,
A haven of love, a warm embrace.
Through the storms of life, they hold us tight,
Their love is a fortress, a guiding light.

In the garden of life, they are the flowers,
Blooming with grace, in sun and showers.
Their laughter is music, a sweet serenade,
A melody of love, that will never fade.

With friends, we share our hopes and dreams,
Together we navigate life's winding streams.
In their company, we find our true self,
A treasure of love, a boundless wealth.

Family is the hearth, the fire that glows,
In their warmth, our love grows.
Through the seasons of life, they remain,
A constant presence, in joy and pain.

In the book of life, they are the pages,
Filled with memories, through the ages.
Their love is the ink, that writes our story,
A tale of love, of pain, of glory.

Friends are the wings that help us soar,
With them, we find what we're looking for.
In their laughter, in their tears,
We find the strength to face our fears.

Family is the heart, the soul, the core,
With them, we find what we're searching for.
In their love, in their care,
We find a home, a place to share.

Third Place

Alice Brown

'As Long As I'm With You'

As long as I'm with you
We can play card games
Or make paper planes
I don't mind as long as I'm with you

We can play ball or
Swim in a swimming pool
We can be cooks or
Read some books

We can learn to dance
Or fly to France
We can take pics
Or eat pic and mix

We can eat Cadbury's Twirls
Or give ourselves curls
I don't mind as long as I'm with you

You're the person I rely on
You're the shoulder I cry on

You're someone to eat with
You're someone to meet with
You're someone to play with

To spend every day with
I know we argue sometimes
But all friends do
So believe me when I say
I don't mind as long as
I'm with you.

Year Seven, Eight and Nine Category

First Place

Lucy Backhurst

'Joseph'

The soldier's footsteps echoed in the sickening silence. Every minute he paused, inspecting a Jew, scowling at them like they were worthless, before returning to the same torturous routine. Joseph glanced up at his mother. She was shaking with fear—eyes darting in the soldier's direction. In her cut and bruised hands, she hid the crust of bread she had stolen for her son.

He was getting closer to her, only a few seconds away. He stopped. Turned. Eyes fixed on her. He was scanning every inch of her body. The eyes locked on to where the bread was hidden. He reached for the whip. Crack. A short, singeing snap was all that was needed to reveal the bread, now sinking in the mud. Joseph's heart skipped a beat. Then it happened. He heard the click of the trigger—saw the gun pointing at his mother. Time seemed to stand still, and the bullet sliced through the air. His mother fell. Her lifeless body hit the floor.

Inside, Joseph screamed with rage. The world felt like it was pointless now. Deep down he knew that they would both be killed in the concentration camp but until now nothing had seemed real. He wished, wished with all his heart, that Hitler, the Nazis, and the war, were all just a bad dream. But it was now he realised it was a nightmare that he couldn't be woken from. Now his mother had left

him to suffer on his own. A single tear rolled down his cheek as he fought back the emotion, desperately trying to remain invisible.

The soldier walked on, unfazed. It was then he felt a little tug at his trousers. He looked down and beside him stood a girl, he guessed no more than four or five years old. She had deep chocolate brown eyes that stared up at him, filled with fear. Her hair—if it hadn't been all cut off—he assumed would be a dark chestnut colour. She was dressed in rags and extremely thin. That was when Joseph realised that she must be alone too. A little voice whispered to him "I'm scared, can I hold your hand?" Cold, tiny fingers slid into his palm, and he held them close.

For the first time since his mother's death, Joseph felt a tiny spark of hope—a driving force telling him to keep on living. Hitler could annihilate everything, but he could not destroy the human need for others. And although life could be cruel, it was the people around him that Joseph needed. That little girl needed him more than ever. So, on that dark and stormy night, Joseph had lost his mother, but he had gained the will to live on. Looking down at the girl's tiny face he felt the deep connection they shared and the need for companionship they both desired. He felt comfortable knowing Hitler could never take away the fact that people will always need people.

Second Place

Poppy Sinclair

‘Soulmates In Friendship’

If you were a shadow
I would cast you
If you were a question
I would ask you

If you were a horse
I’d be your stable
If you were a baby
I’d be your cradle

If you were sick
I’d bring you flowers
And sit by your bed
For hours and hours

If you were an astronaut
I’d be your rocket
If you were a plug
I’d be your socket

If you were a flower
I would plant you
If you were a wish
I would grant you

If you were you
And nothing else
I'd still love you more
Than life itself.

Third Place

Patience Crane

'Threads of Three'

In a garden where soft winds play,
Two hearts met on a sunlit day.
His eyes, like stars in the evening glow,
Found her, where gentle rivers flow.

Their love a melody pure and sweet,
Danced to the rhythm of their heartbeat.
With time, three stars lit up the sky,
Daughters born from a love so high.

Each child thread, woven so tight,
In the tapestry of their endless night.
Their love now they fold, strong and deep,
In every laugh, in every sleep.

Together they walk, hand in hand,
On paths of gold, through life's vast land.
Through daughters, the jewels they see,
Love's legacy, in threads of three.

Year Ten, Eleven, Twelve and Thirteen Category

First Place

Silva Gornell

'Gravity in the Orchard'


I have seen a lone tree,
its roots clutching earth in silence,
branches stretched like fingers aching
for the press of another's skin.

What good is it to grow alone,
the sky swallowing your words,
only crows and dust to witness
the bloom that nobody else smells?

We are small suns in orbit,
spinning each other into being,
a dance of weighted stars and murmurs,
held by invisible threads.

When one of us drifts too far,
the pull of an old laugh, a hand,
the glance of an eye lit with knowing
tugs us back into the light.

I know this: even the river
seeking its journey alone
finds itself braided in places
where other waters meet.



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There is a soft urgency in us,
like vines twining on fence posts,
like planets pulled close by the magnet of need,
the way fire asks for air.

Second Place

Maia Roe

'Origins'

There has never been a time where we were solitary creatures.
Even when we roamed a world of the softest, endless, untouched
green
Before the cities,
Where we were forced to all draw closer,
We always stuck together.
Because people need people.
I am reminded,
Looking at the crack of orange and the spill of scarlet on the harsh
stone wall,
The lines etched by the fingers, mere instruments that depicted the
memories of the body they belonged to,
Of those first people that hunted in packs, together,
Their array of collected handprints, big and small, immortalised
together,
Their collective cry, the shared and inherent human desire, to be
remembered by those after you
Even if that is simply by leaving a reminder on the walls where not
even time or the battering of nature can lick away at it
Not much has changed really.
Those people cannot see how their world evolved, but they solidi-
fied their experiences in the remnants of their belongings we now
claw from the soil,
Their paintings on the caves,
Even their faces, passed down to their children, and their children,

Until those around us now share the faces of people none of us
have ever met
The same eyes, the same glimmer of laughter that has echoed over
centuries.
Our lives are built on all those people who came before us, their
lives a web that weaved ours into existence.
We've still got our people,
Our packs of friends we laugh with
Our families we come home to—the living, breathing reminders of
our shared past, those who have made us who we are
Because never once has there been a time where people have not
relied on other people, and never will there be.

Third Place

Aisha Qureshi

'Threads of Our Souls'

People need people, like rivers need rain,
A dance of connection, in joy and in pain.
We're woven together, in threads soft and tight,
Bound by the whispers of day and of night.

People need people, like roots need the earth,
For laughter and sorrow, for joy and for mirth.
We hold one another through tremors and tears,
A compass that points to where warmth perseveres.

Each hand that we hold, each gaze that we meet,
Fills hollows within us, makes circles complete.
In the silence between, a pulse starts to form,
A rhythm that steadies, that keeps our hearts warm.

People need people, like fire needs air,
To keep us ignited, to show that we care.
A light in the darkness, a hand in the cold,
A story retold through the young and the old.

We mirror each other, like skies mirror seas,
Bound by compassion in life's shifting breeze.
Our voices entwine in a symphony pure,
A song that reminds us our love will endure.

When shadows grow heavy, when hope feels thin,
It's others who find us, who help us begin
To feel once again that we're part of a whole,
That life's richest beauty lies deep in the soul.

People need people, like stars need the night,
To make sense of the darkness, to bathe us in light.
Alone, we are flickers, but together, we blaze,
A constellation of love in eternity's gaze.

For without one another, we drift, we erode,
Yet together we carry the heaviest load.
We're pieces of something far greater, profound,
In others, the fragments of self are found.

So hold close this truth as you walk through the day:
People need people, in all kinds of ways.
In touches and glances, in laughter and cries,
We find our reflection in each other's eyes.

Adults Category

First Place

Fiona Salt

'My Father Never Wore Jeans'

My father never wore jeans.

He called men in leather jackets members of the divorced and separated club.

He rang from the pub on Friday nights to see if we wanted Indian, when we'd already had our tea.

I didn't know until after he died; 'I'm going to pay some bills' meant a trip to The Bookies.

He rang a big brass school bell at street parties on New Years Eve.

He sang Wild Rover.

He liked steak; he'd give me a corner. Fry's chocolate and Everton mints.

Cheese on toast with an egg on top.

I don't have any Birthday cards with his writing in, but he drew Chad all the time.

He hated motorways so getting anywhere took twice as long; he didn't believe in travel sickness.

I saw him put cardboard in his shoes and always walk to work. His eyes were blue.

He sang Latin at Midnight mass.

He opened a cab door into oncoming traffic in New York. He got tangled in a sheet in a youth hostel in North Wales.

I hitched hiked with him to university, we played pool.

It was better than the trips to the tip.

My father loved football, Airplane, Goldie Hawn and Father Ted,
newspaper quizzes and Scrabble.

We talked late at nights.

My father was terrible in a temper and clipped us round the ear. He
could strike the fear of God into us as we tried to hide. He said sorry
when I was ten.

I saw him cut up his credit cards and count his small change. I'd like
to buy him a pint.

My father was late for dinner every Sunday and we had to phone
the pub.

He brought home black pudding every Christmas Eve.

He shaved in cold water with proper foam.

My father left before he could grow old, but even when young; my
father never wore jeans.

Second Place

Danielle Free

'A Jacket Full of Pockets'

I've had a jacket since the day I was born. It's had some alterations over the years, but it still fits. The best thing about it is the amount of pockets. When I was younger, I only used two of them, the big ones on the front. They had zips and a waterproof liner on the inside—safe and secure. Perfect for all of my earthly treasure. In the right one, I put my mum, with her mossy eyes and pearly skin that I adored kneading with my hands. Her mum, and my dad's, went in there too—one red and one yellow rose.

Whenever I was sad, my felt-tip covered fingertips fiddled with the comfort filled fibres of that pocket. Even now, I roll lint full of love between my thumb and index when I'm anxious. However, the problem with old clothing is that it's fragile. Stitches come loose and holes appear. One evening when I was about eight, I reached into that pocket for reassurance that there wasn't a monster under my bed, and I found the first hole. Heart racing, 'one, two, th...' My gran had fallen out.

For years I searched: first in the playground, sports hall, lost property, then as time went on, I started looking in nightclubs, plunging my hands so quickly into the pockets of lovers, rummaging for a familiar feeling, willing to catch the culprit who'd stolen her from me. I've only had to sew up that pocket once.

Contrarily, my left pocket always has holes. I've lost tumbled

Jades, Sapphires and Ambers over the years. Each unique and irreplaceable, yet sometimes only a Jasper or Ruby will send you the motivational texts you need late into the night when you're feeling delicate. I sew it occasionally, leaving a gap just small enough so chipped fragments can fall out, but for at least five years I've had a reliable handful of magical rocks within grasp.

It wasn't until my late 20's, at a Pride parade, that I realised my jacket had a secret inner pocket. It was quite small but became the perfect space for some tender herbs: polyamorous paprika, bi-sexual basil, some lesbian lavender. You wouldn't think to put cis-gender cumin and a curious cinnamon together, but it works. Not everyone knows I have this pocket, because not everyone would find the smell agreeable, but I find it glorious, no matter what herbs get added to it.

As I get older, I keep finding new pockets: one snug against my chest where I keep my son and partner, and a slim one on the sleeve that I hadn't ever noticed, where I now keep my sisters of whimsy—we gather to ponder the stars and ancient stories of women. Not one pocket is my favourite. They're all integral to my being in this world.

I've got this jacket, full of pockets. A steady seam of love stitches them all together.

Third Place

Rachel Hursey

'Unbreakable Brum'

In this city of iron and steam where canals trace the memory of
industry,
people need people.

Aisha raises her kids alone and her neighbours become family:
"Ey, don't worry Bab, they're safe 'ere wi' me."

Jay laughs with strangers at The Old Crown.
The stories scatter across the table like old mates.
Cadbury's legacy still whispers: a dream where graft would mean
something more:
where people hold each other up like bricks in a wall.
A hope bound not just by work but by a shared promise:
"Ey, if you need 'elp, just shout."
The next generation rises:
Amina sketches buildings that reach for the sky,
"Look out, this is just the start."

Liam's learning his family trade.
His hands rough with work as he is proud to keep the family name.

And Priya who reads books,
stacked higher and higher.
She dreams past the city's edges,
her voice alive with hope.
"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.

BCU Category: Staff, Students and Graduates

First Place

Linzi Doyle

'Gramps'

Gramps

We always loved dancing together, didn't we?

What a mover you were

the very beat of a party

the chatter and laughs

Your stories

your tales,

your version of the past

it didn't matter the crowd

as long as feelings could be lost

and fun could be found

I wonder

if it's in the genes...

I hear a whistle in the park,

I spy a peaky cap,

a certain car

and there you are

Sometimes

it's vinegar on chips

the smell of chlorine at the baths

a pint of Guinness on draught

the pools or the name game
from that dirty rag
Hair combed
legs thin
cufflinks
pin in
handkerchief
striped tie
tunes to lift you up
No one ever asks why
always the Rat Pack,
unless you were swaying back then
Tony Bennett ruled the world
that was the Wood
some say rogue
or was it good
in repose more chance of the latter
but when you're dancing
it does not matter.

Second Place

Laura-Beth Green

'In the City of a Thousand Trades'

If I retrace my steps,
I find all the memories I painted with you.
That togetherness lasts,
Even when the relationships have ended,
Like a rope that forever binds us
To that moment in time

To the science museum, where I met
My best friend, amongst
The cogs and crackling pistons,
Whispering centuries old stories and listening,
As others, unfolded.
A marriage proposal beneath the stars,
Ambitions formed and shared in awe of space suits and engines.

To the pubs, once the haunt of factory workers,
The bustle of life, the barman with his smile, his tale,
The quick kisses after work
The smell of red wine as we talked.

To the universities, where I studied,
Traipsing in the footsteps of others
To my own path,
The lecturers that guided me, the people who inspired me,

From different corners of the country, the world.
Bright lights on a dark ocean.

To the walk home, in twilight,
Beside you, your coat billowing behind you,
Smoke in the air, on our breath, on our clothes,
On our laughter, in tendrils, clinging
To the exuberant sparks of life in the city.
To the streets, the man selling the Big Issue,
The workers passing by,
Life glowing, like a beating heart.
From above, we looked like bright bees,
crawling in a hive. As one.

Third Place

Harry Wlyd

'The Drag Kings'

O blessed be the drag kings
Huddled over mirrors in communion
Make up bags exploded on the pain tattered tables

Here is where we transform
It is a ritual
Skin of our faces, become a new face
Yet one born inside us
I recognise this one more than my own some days
It is a coming home

We pass cheap mascara wands like communion wafers
Whisper gossip like we are in church pews
This is a delicate operation, before the lights
I feel your hand caress my skin
As you place the wig on my head

O blessed be you who see me
Vulnerable
As I bind my chest in ceremony
As we bond over Madonna
And who is the best at lip syncing to It's Raining Men
As drunk hen parties heckle,
Our laughter fills the holes inside me
Fills me up, back up to the brim
So, I can dance

Whilst they think I am
Dancing for them,
I am thinking of you
Half dressed; half make up
Shining
You remind me how we
Never have to be binary
How sequin in hand
And jock strap on I
Can be a spectrum
In a whole human being

O blessed be the drag kings
Who huddle
Pray at each other's feet
As we wait by dark alleyways and passageways
For carriages in the form of taxi men
Who look at us and sit in silence
Whilst I'm still humming your third number

O blessed be the places
We worship on dancefloors
Run by titans who are
Just hungry, for more money
In their pockets
If I were Jesus I would overthrow the tables,
But we can't desecrate the only shelter we have
From the even hungrier world

O blessed be the drag king
Twirl, twirl, twirl.

Competition Judges 2024

Professor Gregory Leadbetter

Professor of Poetry at BCU

Gregory is Professor of Poetry at BCU. His books and pamphlets of poetry include *Caliban*, *Balanuve*, *Maskwork*, *The Fetch*, and *The Body in the Well*. Recent work for the BBC includes *Metal City*, and a song-cycle featuring poems from *The Fetch* has been performed internationally. As a critic, he publishes on the history and practice of poetry, and his book *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination* was awarded the University English Book Prize.

Casey Bailey

Poet, Writer and Educator, and former Birmingham

Poet Laureate

Casey is an award-winning writer, performer and educator. Born and raised in Nechells, Birmingham, Casey was the Birmingham Poet Laureate from 2020–2022. His second full poetry collection *Please Do Not Touch* was published in 2021. His debut play *GrimeBoy* had a sold-out run at The REP, Birmingham, in 2022. He was commissioned by the BBC to write ‘The Ballad of The Peaky Blinders’ in 2019, winning a Webby Award. In 2022, Casey won a Royal Television Society award for a film for his poem ‘Dear Brum’. Casey has performed his poetry nationally and internationally. He was named BCU’s Alumnus of the Year in 2024.

Jonathan Davidson

CEO of Writing West Midlands

Jonathan has worked for over thirty years in arts management and literature development. He is joint founder of the Birmingham Literature Festival and Chief Executive of Writing West Midlands. He lives in Birmingham.

Madeleine Kludje

Deputy Artistic Director at The REP Birmingham

Madeleine is Deputy Artistic Director at The REP, Birmingham, and is an alumna of The Regional Theatre Young Directors Scheme. Her recent directing work includes *Swim, Aunty, Swim* (Belgrade Theatre), *Sky Comedy Rep, City of a Thousand Trades* (Birmingham Royal Ballet and The REP), *Grimeboy* (The REP) and *Park Bench Plays* (The REP). Madeleine also leads The REP's Talent Development programme.

Naush Sabah

Lecturer in Creative Writing at BCU and Editor of Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal

Naush is a writer, editor, and educator. In 2019, she co-founded *Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal* where she is currently Editor and Publishing Director. She was shortlisted for the Royal Society of Literature's 2021 Sky Arts Writers Award. Her debut pamphlet *Litanies* was published in 2021 and shortlisted for the Michael Marks Poetry Award. Naush was Birmingham Literature Festival's

inaugural Poet-in-Residence in 2022, and she is currently Poet-in-Residence at the Birmingham and Midland Institute. She is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at Birmingham City University.

Dr Catherine Gale

Owner of The Heath Bookshop

Catherine is co-owner of The Heath Bookshop in Kings Heath. Following 25 years of working with children, having completed a BSc (Hons) degree at Birmingham City University in Speech & Language Pathology and Therapeutics, and a PhD in Behaviour Analysis with Oslo Metropolitan University, Catherine followed her dream of owning a bookshop. Catherine, with her business partner Claire Dawes, opened The Heath Bookshop in 2022.

Dr Martin Glynn

Senior Lecturer at BCU, Poet and friend of Benjamin Zephaniah

Dr Martin Glynn is a criminologist, dramatist, screenwriter, children's author, and data storyteller with over 40 years' experience of working in criminal justice, public health, and educational settings. Dr Glynn is currently a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Birmingham City University and is a member of the Crime Writers Association (UK).