



Forward
Prizes
for Poetry

2023 FORWARD PRIZES CEREMONY

16 October |
Leeds Playhouse, Leeds



Illustration by Stephanie Sy-Quia

**ABOUT
FORWARD
ARTS
FOUNDATION**

The first Forward Prizes were awarded in 1992, with the Best First Collection that year going to a young poet called Simon Armitage. He was joined on the stage by Thom Gunn (winner, Best Collection) and future Scottish Makar Jackie Kay (winner, Best Single Poem). Since then, the Prizes have lauded some of the most ground-breaking names in poetry including Seamus Heaney, Claudia Rankine, Kei Miller, Danez Smith and Caleb Femi.

Over the last 30 years, Forward has broken down barriers in the poetry world, and we have become the most influential awards for new poetry published in the UK and Ireland. We situate ourselves at the vanguard of new poetry, and we have a particular interest in supporting emerging poets to ensure fresh new voices reach wider, more diverse audiences.

The four Forward Prizes shortlists this year open up new territories for the form, highlighting poetic conversations with society, history, culture and the past that challenge and inform our present. Renowned for championing new poetic voices and internationally celebrated writers alike, the shortlists announced today represent the diverse excellence of contemporary poetry, and all its boundary-pushing innovations.

This year, we welcome a new category to the Prizes: Best Single Poem – Performed.

Alongside the Prizes, our strong publishing track record (which includes the Poems of the Decade series, one of which is on the A-level syllabus) and National Poetry Day enable us to reach around 123 million social media feeds per year. *The Daily Telegraph* has called the Prizes 'the most coveted awards in British poetry', and *The Guardian* has said our shortlists 'address the world head-on'.

**2023
BEST
SINGLE
POEM
JUDGES**



Joelle Taylor is an award-winning poet. She is the author of *C+NTO & Othered Poems* which won the 2021 T.S Eliot Prize. She's a former UK SLAM Champion, founder of SLAMBassadors, and accomplished curator.



Khadijah Ibrahiim is Artistic Director of Leeds Young Authors, Producer of Leeds Youth Poetry Slam Festival, and has written two collections: *Rootz Runnin* and *Another Crossing*. Hailed as one of Yorkshire's 'most prolific' poets by BBC Radio, she continues to perform across the world.



Caroline Bird is a poet and playwright. Her sixth collection, *The Air Year*, won the Forward Prize for Best Collection 2020. She was one of the five official poets at the 2012 London Olympics. As a playwright, Bird has been shortlisted for the George Devine Award and the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize.



Chris Redmond has performed in twenty countries on five continents. He is the founder of Tongue Fu – the UK's leading spoken word, music and improv show – and co-director of Hot Poets – an award winning international project exploring the intersection of climate science, poetry and hope.



Susan Roberts is the Head of Culture Arts and Music programmes for BBC Audio North which includes Radio 3's flagship poetry strand *The Verb*. She has directed over 200 radio dramas winning many awards for this work, including a Sony Gold and an Amnesty International Media Award.

**FORWARD
PRIZE
FOR BEST
SINGLE
POEM
WRITTEN**

FORWARD PRIZE FOR BEST SINGLE POEM – WRITTEN SHORTLIST

Kathryn Bevis

'My body tells me that she's filing for
divorce'

Second Light Poetry Competition

Malika Booker

'Libation'

The Poetry Review

Kizziah Burton

'Oh do you know the Flower Man'

Mslexia Women's Poetry Competition

Breda Spaight

'The Curse'

Southword

Eric Yip

'Fricatives'

National Poetry Competition

This £1,000 prize celebrates poems that have not yet been collected in a book or pamphlet.

FORWARD PRIZE FOR BEST SINGLE POEM WRITTEN



KATHRYN BEVIS

Kathryn Bevis started writing poems in 2018, after decades of reading, studying and teaching poetry. 'That year, I landed a summer job teaching creative writing to young people,' she writes. 'Beginning to write poems with my students made me realise I had things I wanted to say and that poetry could help me to say them.' Competition success and magazine publication followed, and a full collection is forthcoming with Seren in 2024. Her debut pamphlet, *Flamingo*, came out in 2022.

'My body tells me that she's filing for divorce' was the first poem Bevis wrote after her diagnosis of stage four/metastatic breast cancer. 'The poem arrived very quickly, almost fully formed, which is rare for me,' she notes.

Kathryn Bevis

'My body tells me that she's filing for divorce'

Second
Light Poetry
Competition

My body tells me that she's filing for divorce

She's taken a good, hard look at the state of our relationship. She knows it's not for her. The worst thing is, she doesn't tell me this straight up or even to my face. No. She books us appointments with specialists in strip-lit rooms. They peer at us over paper masks with eyes whose kindness I can't bear.

They speak of our marriage in images: a pint of milk that's on the turn, an egg whose yolk is punctured, leaking through the rest, a tree whose one, rotten root is poisoning the leaves. I try to understand how much of us is sick. I want to know what they can do to put us right. She,

whose soft shape I have lain with every night, who's roamed with me in rooky woods, round rocky heads. She, who's witnessed the rain pattering on the reedbed, the cut-glass chitter of long-tailed tits, the woodpecker rehearsing her single, high syllable. How have we become this bitter pill whose name I can't pronounce?

Soon, she'll sleep in a bed that isn't mine. That's why, these nights, we perform our trial separations. She, buried in blankets, eyelids flickering fast. Me, up there on, no — wait — *through* the ceiling, attic, roof. I'm flying, crying, looking down. Too soon, I whisper to her warm and sleeping form. *Not yet. Too soon. Too soon.*

Kathryn Bevis | Second Light Poetry Competition

FORWARD PRIZE FOR BEST SINGLE POEM WRITTEN



MALIKA BOOKER

Malika Booker is the co-founder (with Roger Robinson) of the writers' collective 'Malika's Kitchen'. Her first collection, *Pepper Seed*, was shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Centre Poetry Prize; she is a Teaching Fellow in creative writing at the University of Leeds.

Her shortlisted poem, 'Libation', responds to Kevin Young's poem 'Dreams the Day After Easter' and explores the Caribbean tradition of Nine Night wakes (a subject Booker also drew on for 'Nine Nights', shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem in 2017).

'Libation' also explores the mechanism by which ritual is passed on: 'You there / schooling these youth men in how to be ancestors / in the afterlife.'

Malika Booker

'Libation'

*The Poetry
Review*

Libation

You climb into everlasting and so it begins
ancestor, nine nights of praise, of honour,
white spirits poured into the ground to feed
your thirsty mouth. The sting of alcohol
at the back of your throat. And so, it begins
you join our ancestor's altar. Your existence
now relies on memory and traction. How you
make your displeasure known through dreams
dropping food as it approaches the lips
of the family member's mouth, *feed me*,
you say we are hungry, so we create plates
and water, plus candles to light your feast
of favourite food from this short life.
My aunt favoured smoked herring, the salt
of it (like the sea, like the salt of the earth)
with dumpling and hard food. How
we feed you to protect us, age-old customs
slinking through slavery to remain. The
youths might have forgotten every ritual
but remember the classic – to throw spirits
for the soul of their fallen brothers. Even these
killed by the hands of kin, skin black like theirs,
whose lives became full stops, from knives
or gunshots, and today parents bury their young
men. While youths too young to know your ways,
fling down rum, pour whole bottles of spirits
by gravesides, part homage, part ancestral, part
knowing that they could easily be in there,
part thankful for another day. You there
schooling these youth men in how to be ancestors
in the afterlife – there is no language
in the landscape of our ancestors to contend
with all this loss. So, pour the rum, just pour.

FORWARD PRIZE FOR BEST SINGLE POEM WRITTEN



KIZZIAH BURTON

Kizziah Burton was born in Jackson, Mississippi, and has spent much of her professional life working in the motion picture industry in Los Angeles. She is currently working on her first collection.

Her shortlisted poem, 'Oh do you know the Flower Man', explores coercive control and toxic relationships through the myth of Persephone's abduction by Hades – the 'flower man' of the title. 'The first draft of the poem was overrun with flowers,' Burton writes. 'Like a real garden, the flowers needed to be managed with fences or boundaries, limitations. Once I found the structure, the poem found its container.'

Kizziah Burton

'Oh do you know
the Flower Man'

Mslexia
Women's Poetry
Competition

Oh do you know the Flower Man

He watches flowers. He admires flowers. He draws near flowers.
He tenders flowers. He caresses flowers. He picks flowers.
He weighs baskets of flowers. He weighs my face of flowers.
He offers a night of flowers. He threads a string of flowers
for my door and for my altar. Flowers of devotion. Flowers
for an evening fire. Flowers for a Pluto moon. He lays flowers

across my long bed, my long hair, my longing for him. Flowers
for a collarbone. Flowers for a throat. Until my voice flowers
in this flower dress. This mons of flowers. This cup of flowers,
this perfumed breast, this canticle, this rose cloister of flowers,
this anthologia. He provides moths and bumblebees for flowers.
He provides lemon grass and slender stalks. He strings flowers

through my lily bells and flowerheads of chrysanthemum flowers.
He provides waters drenched in honeycomb. He showers flowers
with kisses, showers of praise – into a breathless litany of flowers.
He says I am the fragrance of hyacinth, the essence of all flowers.
He says I am the fragrance of earth, of rain, of sun, sun flowers,
of musk, of patoulli, oud, and civit. He says, “with these flowers.”

He proposes flowers. He sews a sash around my waist of flowers.
He provides a ley of huckleberries for my bridlepath of flowers.
He escorts me in a brief pageant of cereus grandiflorus flowers.
He composes eulogies. Says, “I author you with these flowers.”
He sighs soft falling flowers. Beglamours my speechless flowers.
He beguiles me with his dew wet flowers. His eyes of sad flowers.

A looming mist of flowers. Elaborate aching delphinium flowers.
Flowers of misdirection. Rows of trembling paperwhites flower.
He injures me with leaves, with grasses, slant stems of flowers.
He destroys me with seeds, roots, rhizomes – with riling flowers,
masses of memoried flowers, ruptured petals. Veiled in flowers,
he turns them into extending, rounded violent equations of flowers.

He extends the lengthy verse needling nipples pink with flowers.
He says, “I stay you with flowers, a shrine of flowers.” Wildflowers.
He hems my mouth shut in flowers. Lengthens my neck in flowers.
A long daisy chain of flowers. Swaying me above heirs of flowers.
He encircles the throats of my wrists in lianas of clematis flowers.
He stems me in a chassis of tallow for cold enfleurage. Flowers

lay across my long bed of earthlace in fields of ashphodel flowers.
Or he merely continues to tease petals from my lost bits of flowers.
Or at night he urges quince thorns into my laurel wreath of flowers.

FORWARD
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POEM
WRITTEN



BREDA SPAIGHT

Breda Spaight's shortlisted poem, 'The Curse', explores many of the same themes as her debut collection, *Watching the Hawk* (Arlen House), and is centred around shockingly vivid glimpses of coming-of-age in rural Ireland. In 'The Curse', the birth of a calf recalls what Spaight describes as 'a moment of innocent cruelty between siblings that originates in misogyny'.

Spaight's favourite poets include Anne Sexton, Sharon Olds, Ellen Bass, Dorianne Laux, Danusha Lameris, Tony Hoagland, Stephen Dunn and Li-Young Lee. 'They invite me to enter their open doors,' she writes. 'I love entering the world of the I.'

Breda Spaight

'The Curse'

Southword

The Curse

My father slathers the vulva
with lubricant, the fat lips glossy
as a chestnut, while my brother holds the tail
from which clinkers of dried shit dangle,
her ginger flank also matted in shit. She stands
in the cattle crush, head clamped in the bail,
looking like a tourist admiring the view
through the open window of a train, as though
her head has nothing to do with her body
and her body is all about what she carries,
as my father grasps and grapples with the slithery, banana
-yellow hooves spreading the vulva, as only the vulva can
spread, flap to the world girdled in fibres spun to burn;
my brother holding the tail's butt now, raising it up as my father
nooses the calf's legs with ropes, first one, then the other,
naked to the waist, glimmer of mushroom-white flesh
in the February light of the barn; my brother, like a
referee in a boxing match, shuffles close to the action
as though he has done this for all the twelve years of his life,
born to it, born to do, to be, the man in his voice the day he curses
me for losing his blue marble, *I hope you've twins,
four of them, all in one go!* My body already a future
to fear, blood that's not stopped by a cold key; sorrow
and dread that I'll be a woman. The vulva pulses its signal
for my father to pull; arched back, neck, head, arms
racked, feet rooted to the ground for traction, ropes
wound through bloodless fists, the vulva
like the mouth of a child spewing; remnants
of the water sac drool like dribble, as if she's drunk,
as though she sings this new life into the world.
The vulva drawn now to its polished unwrinkled purity,
the last fierce fibres suctioning out what longs for life;
the calf's snout, eyes, ears framed in an umber aureole,
its rude, puce tongue, its tawny body a bag of bones
as it tumbles to the ground and steams; my father breathless,
hands on his hips, my brother his mirror
as they stand over all creation.

Breda Spaight | *Southword*

FORWARD PRIZE FOR BEST SINGLE POEM WRITTEN



ERIC YIP

Eric Yip grew up in Hong Kong. 'Because English wasn't the language I used with family and friends, writing in it gave me a remoteness that I found freeing,' he writes; the tensions between that freedom and the colonial baggage of the language feed into his shortlisted poem, 'Fricatives'. In the poem's words, 'You must learn to submit / before you can learn. You must be given a voice / before you can speak.'

Yip is currently studying economics at the University of Cambridge. 'If I could talk to myself from two or three years ago, I'd tell him to read adventurously, to be curious and empathetic, and to always have a beginner's heart,' writes Yip. 'Nothing is unimportant.'

Eric Yip

'Fricatives'

National Poetry
Competition

Fricatives

To speak English properly, Mrs. Lee said, you must learn the difference between *three* and *free*. Three men escaped from Alcatraz in a rubber raft and drowned on their way to Angel Island. Hear the difference? Try this: you fought your way into existence. Better. Look at this picture. Fresh yellow grains beaten till their seeds spill. That's threshing. That's submission. You must learn to submit before you can learn. You must be given a voice before you can speak. Nobody wants to listen to a spectacled boy with a Hong Kong accent. You will have to leave this city, these dark furrows stuffed full with ancestral bones. Know that death is thorough. You will speak of bruised bodies skinnier than yours, force the pen past batons and blood, call it fresh material for writing. Now they're paying attention. You're lucky enough to care about how the tongue moves, the seven types of fricatives, the articulatory function of teeth sans survival. You will receive a good education abroad and make your parents proud. You will take a stranger's cock in your mouth in the piss-slick stall of that dingy Cantonese restaurant you love and taste where you came from, what you were made of all along. *Put some work into it*, he growls. *C'mon, give me some bite*. Your mother visits one October, tells you how everyone speaks differently here, more proper. You smile, nod, bring her to your favourite restaurant, order dim sum in English. They're releasing the students arrested five years ago. *Just a tad more soy sauce please, thank you*. The television replays yesterday on repeat. The teapots are refilled. You spoon served rice into your mouth, this perfect rice. Steamed, perfect, white.

**FORWARD
PRIZE
FOR BEST
SINGLE
POEM
PERFORMED**

FORWARD PRIZE FOR BEST SINGLE POEM – PERFORMED SHORTLIST

Zena Edwards

'Human: This Embodied Knowledge'

Michael Pedersen

'The Cat Prince'

Bohdan Piasecki

'Almost Certainly'

Roger Robinson

'The City Kids See the Sea'

Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe

'And our eyes are on Europe'

A prize of £1,000 will be given to the author of the best new performance or a new poem to camera.

The following transcripts have been reproduced for accessibility but are intended to be performed.

FORWARD
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SINGLE
POEM
PERFORMED



ZENA EDWARDS

Zena Edwards has been performing poetry for more than 20 years at venues across London and beyond. Her innovative solo shows – *Security*, *Travelling Light* and *The Fury Project* – combine poetry and theatre; André Naffis-Sahely has described her as ‘more an orchestral conductor than a solo performer’.

Edwards is currently working towards her first collection. ‘It’s a story of embodiment of the ancestral line,’ she writes. ‘It will touch on themes of the body and personal sovereignty, belonging and home, spirituality and faith, nature and environmental awareness.’

Zena Edwards

‘Human: This
Embodied
Knowledge’

Human: This Embodied Knowledge

This body
Lone, separate, but knowing myself connected
To 7.8 billion parts of humanity
Multiply this by 100 billion neurons of the average brain
What can I not know?
When all exists in this ever present now
And in the past belonging to the future
Everything at once in the space between a second's
Tock from its tick
And every generation should believe this

Self-belief releases the future from between the pages
Scripted and well-thumbed by scholars deemed
The last empire prime sages
Men who squander the wealth of our Home
Hound the underclass, and swear their civilisation
Of wizards and patriarchs brought all technology

In reality it was a dark enlightenment that murdered for gems
And portions of the terra firma fertile
While the poor stayed clean in squalor mass industry created,
Blood-let guilty because their poverty was inherited
And that story lives on

But my eyes record and decipher
The beauty and horror of this frail existence
Wrapped in the weight of flesh
I sight codes that bar the mind
Intoxicate it with shopping aisles of stuff we equate
As making or breaking the make-up of us
As if in our naked vulnerability we are not enough

This is the heist of the century
A deception of moonlight's shadow sent to scare us tough
To bury our authentic selves blind to trust
as if love is a fathomless trough where we bottom feed disappointed
Told lies of how some are appointed more equal inside the matrix

So when we buy and consume by the light of a lunar trick,
While the lunatics feed the bellies of their insatiable pride
We push on in the half-light of brand headlights
Our bodies, vehicles of source energy,
Spellbound within the limits of toys made for grown ups
And jails for the imagination of the children

I am not considered one of the chosen ones
I am thrown scraps of aid, Ted Talks made of my need
My father and my father's father born
In the derelict wake of greed

I am quota in queues to brain institutes
With ambition to win the accolades squeezed
In the tightest fists of a myopic elite
Who equate war with peace
And hands that grip whips or pens that police
Borders of my dreams and ancestral lands
Both strike across the back of my name
To make me bow under the oppressors' game

I am everyone's neighbour
I am the boy in low-slung tracksuit
Whose eyes are chained to the ground
The girl whose jaw chews its own tongue
The mother whose knuckles strain white
Carrying her home on her back
And the man whose cheeks crack
With the drought of smiles in his wallet

I am refugee and asylum seeker
I am fast food server, sex-worker, shelf packer,
Uber-driver, nurse, child carer, artist
Social worker, lorry driver,
I am the one who carries the deceased to the morgue
And the Doula who champions life into the world
I am also home to hand-held devices ignited
by chips gouged violently by the poorest hands from the earth
I am poverty's complex complicity
And I know this vile riddle has end

This 'I am' is the science of 'effect relative to cause'
There must be a 'Cause Ultimate'
If this is so, then I sign up to Her school
And feel my connection to the centre of the Earth's Labyrinth
Before colonizers quested to make Her their bitch
She will not stand for this
She made us in Her image
She is no slave
She is tyranny and home

My ear to Her ground
I hear secrets in the dust on my cheek
Hair, rooting as antennae,
I hear reverberations, ruminations about us

Her the Philosopher's stone
Her Opus Magus,
Us can turn war scars on the heart into Gold

I dream I fall into Her magic
Feel the milk of Her finest silk silt on my skin
Dream of returning to water,
Each drop with genius within
I melt into mineral - iron fleck, porcelain clay
And saltpetre, the spark-catcher,
The seed vessel of the flame

I, human, pull the edges of despair together
Find tin cans, a bicycle wheel, plastic sheeting
Water bottles, bra under wire, parcel string
I dream of planting spinning flowers to capture the wind

I leave the frontal lobe of intellect
Step into a new Eden
This replenished Garden painted
The colours of my determination and clever hands
I may be poor, born on the wrong side of the digital divide
But I do, I have clever hands

I am no victim or poverty statistic
I am the technology of necessity
I am the 'not' and the 'am'
I am imagination and the manifested
I am revolution
I am a soldier who marches
On a stomach full of simple bread
A stomach lined with the comforting fat of faith
I am authority on everyday resistance
I know progress
I know how to make
I create everyday
To remind myself
I am no embodied in creation
All humans are its reflection
Knowing this makes the heart of me explode

And I know I must settle in the knowing
And make something, anything
To counter the destruction
Anything to keep life going

Zena Edwards

FORWARD
PRIZE
FOR BEST
SINGLE
POEM
PERFORMED



MICHAEL PEDERSEN

Michael Pedersen started out writing poetry in Scots for his school magazine. 'The beautiful quirks of the language offered up masks and obfuscations to keep the emotional beat of what I was writing hidden away from prying eyes,' he writes. But 'it was the discovery that poems could be profane and political, as well as supremely soppy and sincere, that really got me hooked – I guess it's akin to kittens having sharp claws.'

Pedersen is the co-founder of Neu! Reekie!, a literary production house organising live shows, festivals and anthologies. He has recently published his second poetry collection, *The Cat Prince & Other Poems*, as well as a memoir, *boy friends*.

Michael
Pedersen

'The Cat Prince'

The Cat Prince

I am the Cat Prince I declare,
already on all fours, already balls naked
in the house of Hastie, where's there's Adam
(Hastie), Daniel & me—the Cat Prince.

We're boyhood budbursts, twelve years
of silly in us. Adam laughs frantic
gasps, guffaws, then pegs it
to his bedroom anticipating the chase.

Daniel, wavering between cat & laddie,
compañero & fugitive, succumbs
to the gnostic glamour—strips
for a full feline transformation.

Down to our little furs, little bloods,
ready to breenge past the chide
of absent classmates, who might well
hear of this and smite us with shame.

We are cuddle kings hankering
for Adam's adulation—all moggy moxie
we embrace the cat life, vow
inurement to the side-effects:

carpet burns, wind-lashed pimpling;
the sacrifice of language in each
falsetto yowl. As hunters we're tasked
by the Creator: our gaze

a crosshair; our pounce a ripple
of bravura. Who else so guilefully stalks
sunbeams? We'd do well here
—*it's those damn cats again*

the neighbours would learn to yawp,
as I raced by with a robin redbreast
between my jaws & Daniel finished shitting
in their rhubarb patch. It's convenient

not to think of the killer in us,
holding back our purr, assassin still.
As we coil our new cat bodies to a spring,
Adam clammers feart atop his bed.

What happens next is louder
than we hoped for. Adam's mum, startled
by the cacophony, arrives then screams,
curtailing the playdate. Later that night,

she calls my mum concerned.
Though my mum never mentions this.
I can only assume she was wise to it
—the mythos, the hieroglyphs—fathomed

we'd soon meet the type of trouble
that could really shake boys down:
long days when the teeth tear it out of us
& the claws don't stop coming.

But not yet I hear her whisper,
not without this moment's orchestra
of feeling. As a boy I was whiskerless,
weighed down by the nest of knots

squat in my belly. As a cat,
I was so much more. Of course,
as mother to the Cat Prince,
she knew all this.

Michael Pedersen

FORWARD
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BOHDAN PIASECKI

Bohdan Piasecki founded Poland's first poetry slam. He currently lives in Birmingham, where he is an Assistant Professor in Creative Writing, having been for many years the Midlands producer for Apples & Snakes.

'We build poems out of bits of language,' Piasecki writes. 'My bits come from three different languages: Polish, my family's language, the one with which I grew up; French, the language of my education (a long story); and English, the language I chose, the one in which I live. In my daily life all of these are mixed up. We like to talk of first languages or mother tongues, but my experience – and, I have been assured, that of many migrants like me, and those who live in societies that use more than one language – is different. The languages aren't separate. They are one set of words, one big bag of bits.'

Bohdan Piasecki
'Almost Certainly'

Almost Certainly

It's almost certainly impossible to appreciate the beauty of an explosion but I like to think of it as a game of pinball: an atom propelled forward bouncing through the gaps in what we see as a solid thing, a unit. A grain of gunpowder, say. Then – multiball. A flash of manycoloured light. The others come alive too fast to follow, they turn restless, frantic, twitchy, they twist and tumble together, leave behind them trails of searing light, weave them into a flower you can only see bloom once.

It's almost certainly unbearable to hear music in the noise of an explosion, but I like to think of it as that moment in a song when the bass line finally kicks in, after the introductory clicks and clacks of the drumsticks smack the edge of the snare and the closed hi-hat. We've heard too many songs not to know what's coming. Still, when the power-chord is detonated by the kick drum, sounds reach through your throat down to your stomach. You can never be ready for this.

It's almost certainly immaterial what the weather was like at the time of an explosion but in my mind, I see a sepia snapshot of a perfect summer afternoon the weather all the better

because you have to supply your own blue
for the sky, your own white for the clouds
your own red for the bricks, your own brown
for those stains on the pavement.
There are no people in the picture,
the exposure was too long:
a hand that lingered on a doorknob
a hesitating foot, a hint of presence
but no more.

It's almost certainly irrelevant
one life lost in an explosion. I like to believe
that someone somewhere refuses
to acknowledge numbers like two hundred
thousand or eighty-five percent, and instead
they chronicle meticulously the pattern
of displaced cobblestones, the frantic flight
of startled birds, the words still legible
on letters spilled from a leather bag
the balletic grace of a body flying through the air
trailing blood like an afterthought
on this perfect summer afternoon.
They will know she was twenty-nine
that she hadn't seen her two sons for a week
that she woke up lightheaded
believing against all evidence
that this time things will work themselves out.
I like to believe that just before the shrapnel hit
she stopped with her hand on a doorknob,
balancing on one foot,
thinking she had just heard
the beginning of a song.

Bohdan Piasecki

FORWARD
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ROGER ROBINSON

Roger Robinson won the 2019 TS Eliot Prize for his debut collection, *A Portable Paradise. Home Is Not A Place*, from which his shortlisted poem is taken, documents in poems and photographs a road trip with the photographer Johnny Pitts in a rented red Mini Cooper, in search of the history and traces of Black Britain. Robinson is also the lead vocalist and songwriter for the band King Midas Sound.

Robinson's favourite poets include Kwame Dawes, Natalie Diaz, Pascale Petit, Li-Young Lee, Malika Booker, Terrance Hayes, Aireya D. Matthews: 'They all have an innovative sense of craft and grace.'

Roger Robinson
'The City Kids
See the Sea'

The City Kids See The Sea

For many the first time;
these kids of the tower block
and tarred playgrounds

now running towards this scene
of sea with its blended blue sky
and wave breaks of silver tipped froth

Most never even bother
to take off their shoes
or roll up their pants

Instead they run right in
splashing each other
with arcs and sprays of delight.

Sunlight threading gold
along the seas rippling
swells all around them

till the sea became the colour of smoke
and the sky lead; hijabs dripped
and Nikes squelched back to the bus

O city children you are as ancient
as water, as warm as the evening sun
as calm as the tide slowly pulling away

Roger Robinson

FORWARD
PRIZE
FOR BEST
SINGLE
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PERFORMED



NIDHI ZAK/ARIA EIPE

Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe's shortlisted poem, 'And our eyes are on Europe', was commissioned by Poetry Ireland, the Museum of Literature Ireland, ANU and Landmark Productions as part of a year-long project to celebrate the centenary of the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The poem incorporates phrasing from the novel's 'Cyclops' episode, in which 'Joyce considers questions of citizenship, belonging, identity and cosmopolitanism still relevant today.' Eipe hopes 'that the poem's echoes might invoke the possibility of responding to acts of inhospitality with advances of love.'

Eipe's debut collection, *Auguries of a Minor God*, was published by Faber in 2021 and described by Seán Hewitt as 'heralding the arrival of an assured and compassionate new voice'.

Nidhi Zak/Aria
Eipe

'And our eyes are
on Europe'

And our eyes are on Europe

twin fingers trace the map — and here, you say,
is where the Armada went astray, under cover of
dark horses took flight — we have only just found

each other, in this sheltered glade, come round
to spiderdew and mossdamp shade; draw me,
with ancient words, into this hidden copse of jade

bellies pressed up wet against an acorn bronze loam,
figments sparkle in the soil colours through the gloam,
eggblue dry, a butterfly, crushed chitin staining dye

quiet my eyes so vibrant while your fingertips slide
winged pigment wide across my shy lids; in the light
above my iris, everything seems bruised, then bright

take my hand, love, fasten us as bride and groom,
lie with me now Ireland, a promise deep in bloom,
weaving in with all this green below a nascent moon:

hazel, beechmast, bayleaf, catkins of willow,
ivy, holly, quicken shoots and sprigs of mistletoe,
marry me among the trees, in dreams of our own

making landfall off the coast, amidst Atlantic waves,
that night we stepped together, both feet into the fray,
hearts alight as winebark on the winedark waterway.

Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe

**2023
BEST
COLLECTIONS
JUDGES**



Bernardine Evaristo won the Booker Prize 2019 with her eighth book, *Girl, Woman, Other* (Penguin, 2019), the first black woman and black British person to win it. Her writing spans fiction, poetry, non-fiction, literary criticism and drama. She was named 'Person of the Year' by *The Bookseller* magazine in 2021.



Kate Fox is a stand-up poet, writer and broadcaster regular on Radio 4 and Radio 3's *The Verb*. She has been Poet in Residence for Glastonbury Festival and the Great North Run, completed a PhD in Northernness and performance, and published *Where There's Muck There's Bras*, stories of Northern women (Harper North, 2022).



Karen McCarthy Woolf is the author of two poetry collections and the editor of six literary anthologies. Her latest, *Seasonal Disturbances*, explores gentrification, the city and the sacred, and was a winner in the inaugural Laurel Prize for ecological poetry.



Andrés N. Ordórica is a queer Latinx writer based in Edinburgh. His writing maps the journey of his diasporic experience and unpacks what it means to be from *ni de aquí, ni de allá*. He is the author of *At Least This I Know* (404 Ink, 2022).



Jessica Traynor is a poet, essayist and librettist, and poetry editor at *Banshee*. Her latest collection *Pit Lullabies* (Bloodaxe, 2022) is a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. Her awards include the Ireland Chair of Poetry Prize, the Listowel Poetry Prize, and Hennessy New Writer of the Year.

FELIX DENNIS
PRIZE
FOR BEST
FIRST
COLLECTION

FELIX DENNIS PRIZE FOR BEST FIRST COLLECTION

SHORTLIST

Susannah Dickey

ISDAL

Picador

Rowan Evans

A Method, A Path

Bloomsbury

Safiya Kamaria Kinshasa

Cane, Corn & Gully

Out-Spoken Press

Momtaza Mehri

Bad Diaspora Poems

Jonathan Cape

Kandace Siobhan Walker

Cowboy

Cheerio Publishing

This £5,000 prize, generously supported by the estate of the late Felix Dennis, is for the Best First Collection published in the UK or Ireland.

FELIX DENNIS
PRIZE
FOR BEST
FIRST
COLLECTION



SUSANNAH DICKEY

Susannah Dickey's debut collection *ISDAL* arose out of earlier attempts to write about the Isdal Woman, an unidentified woman discovered dead in Norway in 1970. 'About a year, and many bad poems, later, I realised this was a failed endeavour,' writes Dickey. 'The poems were bad and the thinking that was going into writing them was increasingly making me uncomfortable.

Frustrated, I asked myself why it was that I even wanted to write about the Isdal Woman, why I was so fixated with her, with consuming material about her, and it was from that question that the book emerged. The book is one long attempt to explore that question.'

Dickey is the author of two novels and four pamphlets, most recently *Oh!*. Her advice for anyone starting out writing poetry today is to 'seek Susannah Dickey out at the earliest opportunity and give her a £20 Pizza Hut voucher.'

Susannah Dickey

ISDAL

Picador

Epilogue: You know that riddle (reopening)

Season of farrago plots and narratologies, of slippery
sky described as peach melba, of implied gesture and imagined
topography, falsified noises.

And you, your homodiegesis is what remains

in question. But you digress. You know that riddle
about a river crossing?

The first time you heard it was from the educator who'd later
make a pass at you, who'd say, You're so pretty, your hair's
so soft, but wait –

Oil droplets know best life, its movements, and so are
life. Perhaps you is trompe l'oeil, not oil on a slide
under a microscope. Maybe it's I'll and I'd in a trench
coat, hiding in a cinema, eliding hard truths of soft
demarcations and permeable membranes, of the hustle
of syntactic veracity. You know that riddle about what an I
can hold?

An I has to transport varying matters
of incompatibility across the pale grain
of a lake. There's myth of solipsism, threatening personal
accountability, but safe with the desire to shield an I
in another I. You know? I know, and so – but wait –

The wall's giving up its adhesion. You've thrown everything at it
and the lesions are shining through, and the vessel is struggling
under the weight
of ambition

Anyway. And so, you, I'll tell you – and this will come
as no surprise – *how universal* the things I bore

seemed.

But you can only hold so much, and so can I,
and so, I'll ask one last thing, and you, watching the winter
light scry through the musky proscenium between page
and eye, say: You – I – were – was –

cowardly. I – you – know – know – it's too late
for culpability. You – I – are – am – sorry, and so, forgive
me.

Grubby hands press a soft consciousness
to the wall. Elsewhere, shame covers iniquity like a pink sky, like snow
over a valley, like yoghurt over the shredded skin of formerly tinned
peach.

Maybe you were frightened. Maybe you were alive.

But I just wanted to say –

[. . .]

All of this is ultimately speculative. I hope most of it is wrong.

[. . .]

There is no homogeneity of response to pain but what if there were
and it was this: standing under September's last

ripe sky. All of life in us like a migraine and asking God, please be
kind, let things improve. You're as neither yours nor ours as anybody.

Susannah Dickey | *ISDAL*

FELIX DENNIS
PRIZE
FOR BEST
FIRST
COLLECTION



ROWAN EVANS

Rowan Evans is a composer and sound artist as well as a poet; field recording, with its possibilities of translation from the non-human, is central to his work. The poems in *A Method, A Path* play with these and other forms of translation, especially from Old English (Evans' PhD thesis examined late Modernist responses to early Medieval texts). His pamphlet from Guillemot Press, *The Last Verses of Beccán*, won the 2019 Michael Marks Award.

'Working within the experimental tradition, it's encouraging to see the lyric ambiguity and formal play I've learned from older writers recognised in this way,' Evans writes. 'I'm glad that new audiences will continue to arrive at the book, and might turn to hear its spooked and many-headed call.'

Rowan Evans

A Method, A Path

Bloomsbury

Extracts from 'On Ēglond'

III

/ they told you you were singing

/ they told you you were wandering round chambers of the caves
at dawn

/ they told you you've grown old

/ they told you someone else is occupying your bed

/ they told you nothing except departure

/ they told you day is an outbreak

/ they told you 3 and 6 and 9 and 9

/ they told you many hardships, all that was taken hold of

/ they told you fucking oak trees

/ they told you the loathsome one, who travels on the earth

/ they told you you were the missing chapter from a lost epic

/ they told you you were a dog in a riddle

/ they told you you were the riddle

/ that's not what the crow told you

/ how can you misspell a name when you don't have any letters

/ the past is on fire and you are running from it

/ running with it

/ when a hard wind blows they'll know where you've been

V

The poem I hold in my hand is a single island,
a stone dropped in a river eleven centuries ago.

Shining, smoothed, altered by water.

It is also amorphous, a stringy mass of texts, pretexts,
limbs, voices, heads, manuscripts, contested grounds, false
lineages.

Both the stone and sinewy leviathan are true.
They face each other across a pool of liquid.

What is my relation to the stone and to the creature?

Holder, Guardian, Adversary, Child.

Put down the stone, it is burning in your hand.

I offer it to the creature, who holds the stone in its jaws.

A crow hijacks the stillness high above.

There is only a series of instances, a trail of sandbars
dissolving as quickly as they form.

I hold the stone above the sand. There is a deep reflection.
I say something stony, like 'this must be it.'

The many-armed and many-headed.

Rowan Evans | *A Method, A Path*

FELIX DENNIS
PRIZE
FOR BEST
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SAFIYA KAMARIA KINSHASA

Safiya Kamaria Kinshasa's poetry arises out of dance and choreography – she describes herself as a 'choreopoet'.

Cane, Corn & Gully uses labanotation (a method of scoring dance) to recreate the dances of Black Barbadian women across history. 'I wrote when I felt expansive, so every poem is tethered to a sense of triumph,' Kinshasa writes. 'The Black Barbadian women win in my collection; in the history books we are trauma victims, flesh and maybe some bone (rarely a backbone), but in *Cane, Corn & Gully* we are so special.'

Kinshasa began writing poetry seriously after an encounter with Jacob Sam-La Rose at the 2018 Forward Prize ceremony. He gave her three writing challenges; a few months later Kinshasa writes, 'we met at a poetry event, he asked me how I was doing, and I informed him I didn't just complete his challenges, but I worked on my poetry and read every single day, and I had a new notebook full of poems, ideas and, most importantly, questions.'

Safiya Kamaria
Kinshasa

Cane, Corn & Gully

Out-Spoken Press

Gully

*Riding the bacterium causing tonsilitis in William Wilberforce's throat,
1689, 1789*

a, red, and, whip, man, strip, a, gul, ly, from, my, gul, let,
my, voice, would, run, dat, way, tru. tru. tru, de, mud, de,
gunk, when, mas, sa, came, he, came, at, night, he,
would, press, his, choke, tuh, my, ear, i, was, a, low, tide,
i, tried, tuh, hack, his, his, what, do, you, call, dis, part,
ah, man, dat, em, balm, me? my, toe, nails, grew, night,
fall, my, hole, wide, ned, as, he, punched, with, his, with,
his, liz, ard, tast, ed, like, brine, my, voice, ran, but, ne,
ver, get, far, it, tried, tuh, jump, off, de, edge, ah, east,
but, he, al, ways, find, it, vis, its, me, ag, ain, and, steals,
an, ud, dah, gul, ly, his, his, his, his, sho, vel, bit, de,
right, side, ah, my, neck, my, knuc, kles, lob, bied, ag,
ainst, de, dig, ging, but, im, go, deep, in, my, rib, den,
strip, my, gul, ly, like, im, strip, my _ my,
sir, you, claim, tuh, want, all, ah, we, wid, dout, we, soft,
parts, bound, up, in, a, cart, but, you, say, man, say, man,
say, man, say, man, say, man, ag, ain, im, make, hol, low,
un, der, my, blouse, i, shrunk, seek, ing, and, push, ing, i,
am, sure, i, made, a noise, i, doan, tink, wun, na, heard,
or, yuh, heard, but, doan, know, what, i, said, i, said,
, , , i, said , , , , , , , ,
, , , , sir, can, you, re, peat, what, i, said?
wid me crouch ing in
your gul let

Safiya Kamaria Kinshasa | *Cane, Corn & Gully*

FELIX DENNIS
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MOMTAZA MEHRI

Momtaza Mehri was the 2018 Young People's Laureate for London. *Bad Diaspora Poems* found its shape over the subsequent five years; describing the book's gestation, she writes that, for her, 'the writing process begins with theoretical tussling. I think through an obsession or a wound for a while, talking it out with others, opening myself up to how it reveals itself anew in my life. I stay sensitised.'

Her advice for new poets starting out is simple: 'Seek out the nooks poets hide in. Have a healthy scepticism of genres and groupings. Go where the terror is.'

Momtaza Mehri

*Bad Diaspora
Poems*

Jonathan Cape

I Scream, You Scream, We All Scream for Ice Cream

1990. Entry point: Heathrow. Two boys.
No other way out. Handed yourself in.
Asylum- seeker. New name to get used to.
New weather to complain about.
London is a fresh calamity.
A life without cardamom in your tea is not one worth living.
Welcome to the desperate gloss of discount stores.
The burden of Bakewell tarts.
Our great land. Very green. Extremely pleasant.
Sinéad on TV. Sinéad in this poem.
Her skull a ballpoint pen.
England's not the mythical land of Madame George and roses.
It's the home of police who kill Black boys on mopeds.
Except you don't know that yet.
You don't even know that you're Black.
At least, in your bones. But you will.

You escaped into recession & riots,
into detonated towers & Irish accents turned
away at the door. More was to come.
Imported rugs & kids going cunch.
England will always keep you guessing.
In your head, your bags are still packed.

Dreamland! Your torments are so prosaic.
Cynicism turns us into locals.
Our dreams will soon be entirely monolingual.
Turn the heating off.
We're not made of money.
We weren't made to endure either.
On the FM, a pop star crumples your expectations.
An insect shattered under a heel.
I love my boy and that's why I'm leaving.
I don't want him to be aware that there's any such thing as grieving.
You wish she would shut up.

Never perfectly suited, you made the best of it.
Came with nothing and still have nothing to show
for it. Your patience is adhesive.
Your children will grow up to appreciate arthouse films.
They will pay to not understand what is going on.
A fair trade. A brilliant exchange.

Skint. Overworked. Lavish laughter.
Heavy plastic bags dig grooves into hands.
Minnow boiling in the soup of luxury real estate.
Everywhere, an argument wages about you,
around you. Your pain is agreed upon
like ice cream on a hot day.
Small joys and smaller mercies.
You are trying to survive the clutter of
a life you chose without choice.
You will get so good at this, you won't even notice the bruises.

Momtaza Mehri | *Bad Diaspora Poems*

FELIX DENNIS
PRIZE
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KANDACE SIOBHAN WALKER

Kandace Siobhan Walker won the White Review Poets' Prize in 2021 for a portfolio of her work. In a subsequent interview, she described what drew her to poetry as an art form: 'With poetry, I can be clear and inconclusive at the same time. It's more gestures than arguments. I can feel my way around a thought without feeling like I need to come up with an answer.'

Walker began writing poetry while studying creative writing at university, but she found the dynamics and machinations of the publishing world intimidating. Her solution was to decouple her writing from the need for publication: 'working in a bookshop back home, I would read at the till and spend the time I wasn't serving customers writing notes on blank receipt paper. When I felt that I was learning why the poems I admired were able to do what they did, I think then I started to feel like I was a poet.'

**Kandace
Siobhan Walker**

Cowboy

Cheerio
Publishing

Alto

I watch nature documentaries, cancel the doctor's,
listen to Nina Simone 'til my skin turns blue.
The fair packs up for winter, I knead rosaries,
dunk paper wicks in urine with the religion of a rigged game.
Glaciers and species sink into extinction. I have appropriated
loss.

Pearls running across my knuckles, mesh of a birdcage
veil brushing my cheeks, I confess: when I was fourteen
I joined the school choir to sing scales with a pretty alto.
We went swimming in our red cassocks, wet hair curling
like tongues folding over crispbread. We didn't need a word
for
her hands pulling the white surplice over my head.
We pretended we shared the same escape routes, but
loneliness was easier for her to bear than punishment.
Whenever I prayed to be discovered, she kicked me under the
pews.
I don't need to wonder if she has bled as extensively as I have.
At the spring fair I will eat cotton candy, ride the bumper cars
'til I appear in a rose window. There are all kinds of altars,
and there are just as many tables I won't ever name.

**FORWARD
PRIZE
FOR BEST
COLLECTION**

FORWARD PRIZE FOR BEST COLLECTION
SHORTLIST

Jason Allen-Paisant
Self Portrait as Othello
Carcenet

Mary Jean Chan
Bright Fear
Faber & Faber

Jane Clarke
A Change in the Air
Bloodaxe

Kit Fan
The Ink Cloud Reader
Carcenet

Elisabeth Sennitt Clough
My Name is Abilene
Salt

This £10,000 prize, generously contributed by Bookmark Content, is for the Best Collection of poetry published in the UK or Ireland.

FORWARD PRIZE FOR BEST COLLECTION



JASON ALLEN-PAISANT

Jason Allen-Paisant began writing poetry at university. 'As a boy growing up in a single parent household in rural Jamaica, and the first in my family to have done A-levels, let alone go to university, I had never dreamed that one day I would find myself at Oxford,' he says. 'Poetry was a way of reckoning with where I was from, which inevitably meant reckoning with colonialism.'

Self-Portrait as Othello, his second collection, continues and expands this reckoning through the figure of Othello and its valences both Shakespearean and contemporary. The Othello is communed with as much as created, as in the last lines of the collection's first poem: 'I conjure you / furiously'.

Allen-Paisant's debut collection, *Thinking with Trees* (2021), won the OCM Bocas Prize for poetry. He works as a Senior Lecturer in Critical Theory and Creative Writing at the University of Manchester.

**Jason Allen-
Paisant**

*Self Portrait as
Othello*

Carcenet

THE PICTURE AND THE FRAME

2.

In Veronese's *Feast at the Home of Levi*, conceived in fact as a depiction of *The Last Supper* before the artist's brush with the Inquisition, a young, dark-skinned man dressed in red tunic and turban shares the frame with Jesus and the apostles.

All of a sudden, with Veronese's hedonistic canvas, one enters a time without really entering it. The painting becomes a joke on the viewer. A door to a chamber is shown without any key whatsoever to access it. One's only consolation is to say, *I have seen that we were here, so normally here, in another time.*

Without any witness (writing, inscriptions, books, legends) tying that time to the present, all the stories have to be invented—reinvented.

*

In the window of Nardi, the jeweller's, there are Blackamoor brooches. There are rings made of diamonds and rubies with miniature heads of turbaned Moors in black marble.

*

The intervening history of the representation of my body in text.

*

For Veronese, this painting was all about invention, and for it, he took huge license with theological doctrine.

*

There are Moor heads everywhere. We're not talking about this.

*

One wonders what kind of a character he is, this red-turbaned African man present at the banquet of a Renaissance prince. He's talking to a fat white man dressed in fancier robes. The fat dude looks into the distance distractedly. One can't help but notice the wily look on African dude's face, but only after a while do you notice his hand reaching into the other man's bag. Disappointing to say the least. The other African figures in the canvas occupy subservient roles, like pages, but they're also comfortably there. They're looking people in the eye, even having conversation. Ambiguous. But with ambiguity, I find myself stepping into a different history of representation. Ambiguity is a fucking revolution. It's almost overwhelming.

*

All I have is invention. All I could ever do is invent. I was tired of invention.

*

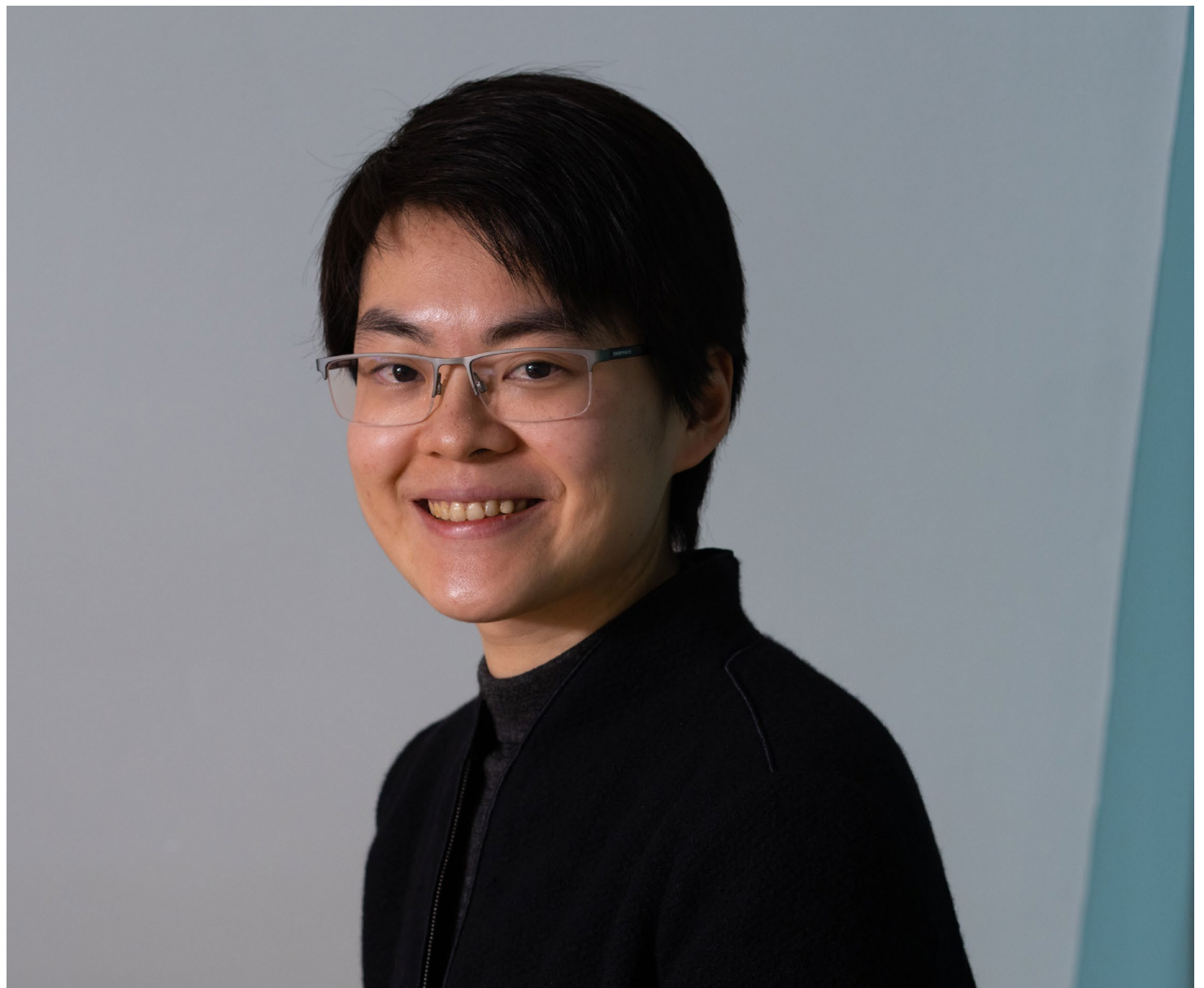
There's all the stuff that the European viewer can't see, all the stuff they haven't allowed themselves to see.

*

The Moor remains invisible, despite the obsession with his body.

Jason Allen-Paisant | *Self Portrait as Othello*

FORWARD
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COLLECTION



MARY JEAN CHAN

Mary Jean Chan's shortlisted collection, *Bright Fear*, began in lock-down. Its central sequence, 'Ars Poetica', meditates on poetry in a time of crisis; other poems explore the outbreaks of anti-Asian racism which accompanied the pandemic.

Chan began writing poetry in their freshman year at business school in Hong Kong. 'When I was supposed to be doing finance and accounting problem sets, I found myself looking up novels and poetry anthologies in the university library, where I began jotting down poems whenever I had a quiet moment to myself,' they write. This apprenticeship would bear fruit in their 2019 debut, *Flèche*, which won the Costa Poetry Prize.

Mary Jean Chan

Bright Fear

Faber & Faber

XII

my poetry students don't know
they've saved me, the lecturer
who is supposed to talk about

grief and mothers and queer
joy or shame with a sense of
critical distance, except I am

nearly moved to display deep
emotion when they read their
poems aloud, as I realise why

I value being in a small room
housed in the business school
each Thursday doing the hard

work of mending or mourning
what remains dear to each of us

XIII

As a child, I often considered the impact that falling in love with English had on my mother's happiness. She once said, don't think you can talk back to me in a colonial language, it isn't superior! I can't describe

her voice – when she speaks in Shanghainese – it is sweet like water. Her language came to me as in a familiar dream, a lotus flower sinking into my self and blooming. During my first month in England,

I learnt the art and science of speaking to reassure. How else can I survive? It's so easy to be ashamed. I am asked why my poems are so clear. I'll confess: it's what happens when you want to be understood.

Ten years ago, I found myself in Nice and learnt to dream in French, my mother's first foreign tongue. That summer, the sea was also my mother, the Bay of Angels held me in its polyphony, and I chose all

my loves – Cantonese, English, Mandarin, French – spoke with a satisfaction I had not felt in years, saw my relationship to the world through sounds again, till I was reconciled, the way rainbows exist in rain.

Mary Jean Chan | *Bright Fear*

FORWARD
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JANE CLARKE

Jane Clarke began writing poetry in her mid-40s, but since childhood it had been part of the soundtrack of her life. 'My father quoted lines from Shakespeare, Yeats, Longfellow and the Book of Psalms as he went about his farm work,' she remembers. 'My mother gave me *The Book of A Thousand Poems* when I was five and taught me to recite "The Owl and the Pussy-Cat".'

The six sequences of *A Change in the Air* are rooted in County Roscommon and County Wicklow, and range across subjects from a mother's dementia diagnosis to the area's mining heritage to a family's experience of the First World War. Clarke's advice for poets starting out is to pay attention to when 'a memory, an image or an emotion catches us like a briar snags a jersey – follow the snag.'

Jane Clarke

A Change in the Air

Bloodaxe

Spalls

To help us grow a garden, my mother and father travelled across the Bog of Allen and over the Wicklow Gap.

They'd have preferred to drive west to Galway or Mayo, they'd have preferred a husband and children

but their daughter loved a woman. We'd have the table set for breakfast: rashers, black pudding, fried bread and eggs.

When the soil had warmed, we unloaded shovels and rakes, buckets of compost and the rusted iron bar

for prising out rocks. The back seat was thronged with pots of seedlings my mother had nurtured all winter.

We worked to her bidding: *loosen tangled roots before planting, sow marigolds next to beans, sprinkle Epsom salts around roses.*

My father took off on his own to spud ragwort or clip a hedge. One day he spent hours gathering stones of different shapes and sizes.

By evening he'd built us a wall under the holly, held together by gravity and friction, hearted with handfuls of spalls.

Jane Clarke | *A Change in the Air*

FORWARD
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COLLECTION



KIT FAN

Kit Fan grew up in Hong Kong before moving to the UK aged 21; reviewing *The Ink Cloud Reader* in the Guardian, Rebecca Tamás described the ‘complicated mixture of love, danger and anguish that infuses the writer’s relationship with the city of his birth.’ He has two previous collections: *Paper Scissors Stone* and *As Slow as Possible*.

‘I’ve always been sceptical of the first person in poetry,’ writes Fan. ‘Even though I’ve used it countless times, I often feel it is it, the all-allusive I, who consumes and uses me.’ Formally innovative (every poem in *The Ink Cloud Reader* has a different, mostly invented form), Fan’s poems refract that ‘all-allusive I’ into something new and multivocal. Imagining the Chinese calligrapher Wang Xizhi washing his brush, Fan wonders, ‘Would he have seen himself / in the ink-surface that had turned into / a mirror?’

Kit Fan

*The Ink Cloud
Reader*

Carcenet

Mother's Ink

somewhere in the pre-history of ink is reproduction

– Caitríona O'Reilly

Born I was, and wasn't.
She drew breath from the breath she'd lost
to phantom explosions inside her.
Three days, three nights, all breaths
and no food or sleep.

What other mothers had done she did,
re-staging the contractions until my departure.
I saw what she saw:
a cloud of messy flesh waiting at the gate
redder than ink.

The hard plastic on the suction cap.
My misshapen head.
What she remembered I remembered.
A cloudless day at 3 p.m.
and no ink was spilled as she kept herself to herself.

Now and then words escaped from her
bleached hands.
She knew I wanted ink greedily.
She fed it to me, dark milk diluted with water
that, when it touched a page, spread.

She knew it came from the clouds
hiding the teargas and bullets.
She only wanted good ink for me but feared what it meant.
I wanted just ink for her.
I wanted ink more than her.

FORWARD
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COLLECTION



ELISABETH SENNITT CLOUGH

Elisabeth Sennitt Clough found a unique source of inspiration for the titular persona of *my name is abilene* – an internet anagram generator, given her own name, returned ‘abilene fluorescent nightclothes’, and she challenged herself to write a poem using that as a prompt. Sennitt Clough imagined Abilene as ‘a metaphorical representation of female pain when a woman is pushed too far’. ‘To a certain degree,’ she writes, ‘Abilene is such an absurd rendering of the heartbroken woman, that I had to move far away from conventional tropes. Abilene is anything but conventional.’

Sennitt Clough’s debut pamphlet, *Glass* (2016), won a Saboteur Award; she has published four subsequent collections. The landscape of eastern England, where she lives, is a constant presence across her work; fittingly, she is the founding editor of the *Fenland Poetry Journal*.

**Elisabeth
Sennitt Clough**

*My Name is
Abilene*

Salt

bormed

they stick to me, those wonky-handled years –
nights of chip fat and dripping, a briny stench
of boiling bacon from a two-ring stove,
my blazer pocket damp with sly handfuls
of *you'll sit there 'til you eat it* boiled cabbage.
mum's tongue moving over consonants
in ways us hayseeds never learned, my brothers
insult each other, sail their yellow boat
through cloudy bathwater, take turns
to skipper a safe passage between jetties
of blue band margarine tubs. the water is cold,
time slow. in the front room, mum's wallpaper
wears nicotine stains and patches of damp
on the fleur-de-lys repeat. the decorator's signature,
barry 1986, hides behind the clock in cursive pencil.
this is the world young widowhood created,
codeine bottles and cotton balls beneath her bed,
a nightstand cluttered with bottles of empty scent,
pillows splashed with gin from those times she didn't
steady me for the razor blades and condoms, the guck
and brawn of stepdaddies and uncle-daddies:
come you here, fratchy gow, come you here, their prints
in castrol gtx over the back-kitchen door –
it's been four decades and i'm still bormed
by those years, whining at inattentive gods
to just let a good rain rumble and pour.

Elisabeth Sennitt Clough | *My Name is Abilene*

YOUNG CURATORS



Annie Hayter
(BYP)

We aim to support and sustain poets' careers however we can. This afternoon at the Playhouse we celebrated the power of up-and-coming poets with the inaugural **Young Poets' Summit**. In collaboration with [Young Identity](#) and [Barbican Young Poets](#), the Summit hosted a facilitated discussion and panel event developed for and by emerging poets.



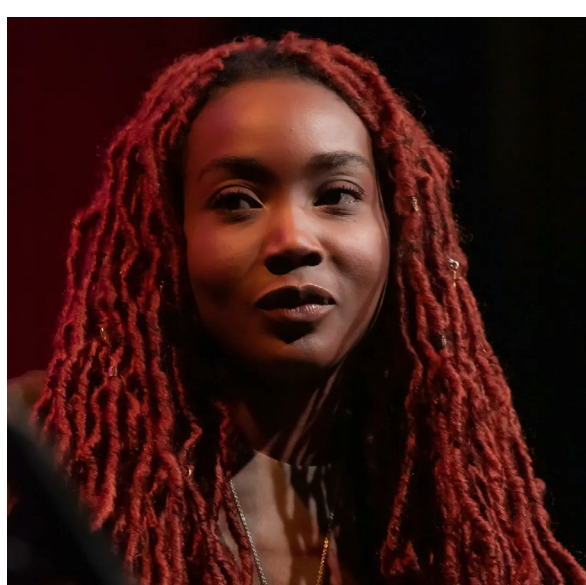
Pelumi Fatayo
(YI)

Drawing together young poets from across the UK including from [The Writing Squad](#) and [Hive](#), the discussion reckoned with the current poetry landscape, what hinders emerging poets, and how creatives, publishing houses, prizes and fellowships can help. Attendees also considered the accessibility of the publishing industry, the importance of joining writing communities, and best craft practices. Moderated by Young Curators, the subsequent panel connected a judge and shortlisted poets from the Forward Prize with Summit poets, in an enriching conversation that built on the energy and outcomes from the discussion.



Kiara Gilbert
(BYP)

The Young Poets' Summit promises invaluable opportunities for meaningful networking, creative insights, and community-building. It aims to foster a strong foundation for emerging poets, ensuring they are well-equipped to embark on journeys of artistic growth and discovery.



Princess Arinola Adegbite (YI)

We welcome young poets to propose solutions to barriers in the literary industry, enhancing poetry's relevance and accessibility for future generations.

Our thanks to Arts Council England and Richard and Alex Allsopp for funding the Young Poets' Summit.

FEEDBACK



FEEDBACK

Your views are so important – they help us improve our programme and let our funders know how we are doing.

To help us, please answer these 5 short questions to let us know what you thought of tonight's event.

Thank you!

URL: <https://uk.culturecounts.cc/s/3rCBo1>



REMEMBERING GBOYEGA ODUBANJO

Like the rest of the poetry community, we are devastated by the tragic death of Gboyega Odubanjo. Gboyega was a much-loved and brilliant talent with the world at his feet. The team at Forward joins in sending our thoughts and sympathies to his family, friends, and loved ones.

We encourage those that can to contribute to the fundraiser set up in his memory.

FORWARD BOOK OF POETRY 2024

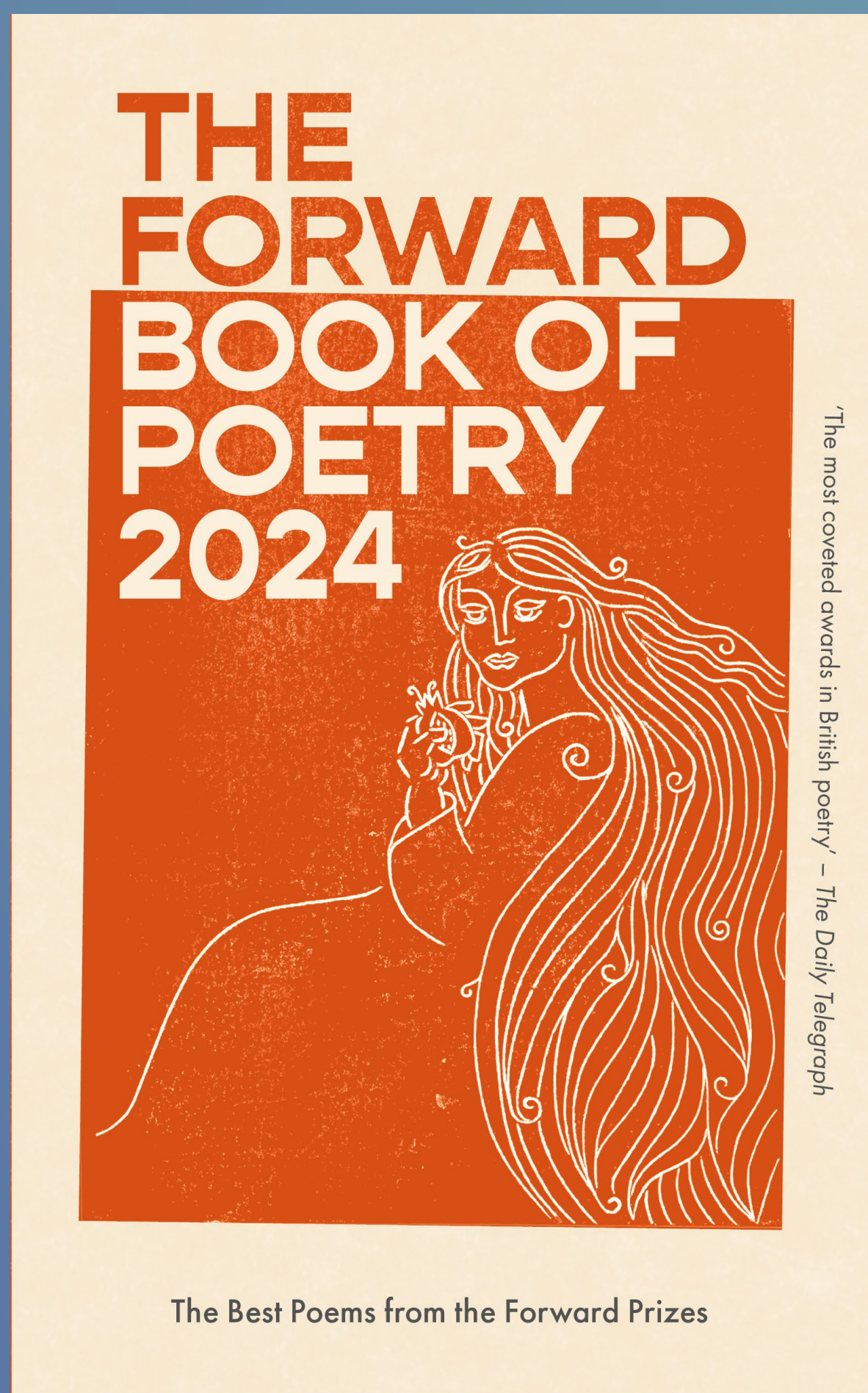
This is poetry for our times.

The Forward Book of Poetry 2024 brings together the best poetry published in the British Isles over the last year, including the winners of the 2024 Forward Prizes. In showcasing the range and ambition of today's fresh voices alongside new work by familiar names, this anthology is a perfect introduction to contemporary poetry.

The Forward Prizes are invaluable in finding the most essential, exciting voices, highlighting the contemporary poets who are at the top of their game and whose words will travel far and reach many readers.

“The Forward Prizes have established themselves as central to the literary landscape of modern Britain.

Andrew Marr



WEST YORKSHIRE YOUNG POET LAUREATE

We're thrilled also to welcome Isabelle Walker, West Yorkshire's Young Poet Laureate.

Isabelle age 15 from Bradford, is a year 10 student at Bradford Academy. Her poem, Muse is about her relationship with her mum, and she believes that with poetry, you shouldn't feel like you need to hold back. Isabelle would like to use her confidence and ability to be a leader to help people in the future. She likes living in Bradford due to its incredible diversity, which enables a better understanding of other people and cultures.

Muse

It's 5:30 in the morning and I'm out listening
for her.

A year and a half ago, she would have been
listening out for me

but since then things have changed

She's like a dying dog,

unwilling to show her vulnerability and pain
to anyone else.

But somebody notices it.

It's me.

It's 5:30 in the morning and I know what she
is getting out of her car.

A woman who swore she would never smoke
is a chimney now.

She smokes because of me,

and I smoke because of her.

She's past the point of trying to care that the
smoke doesn't just come from her.

It's me.

We are a bonfire.

THANKS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & THANKS

We would like to thank the following for their generous support of the Forward Prizes:

The Leeds Playhouse

Our BSL interpreters: Alexia Blohm-Pain and Dave Wycherley

Our guest reader: Annie Hayter

DJ Fluid who's been playing for us all evening

To Simon Armitage for getting us started this evening, and for his work championing poetry locally and across the UK

Our Best Single Poem judges: Joelle Taylor, Khadijah Ibrahiim, Caroline Bird, Chris Redmond and Sue Roberts

Our Best Collections judges: Bernardine Evaristo, Kate Fox, Karen McCarthy Woolf, Andrés N. Ordórica and Jessica Traynor

To Tolu Agbelusi and Jemilea Wisdom-Baako for producing the Young Poets' Summit

The Forward team: Mónica, Lucy, Jay and Annalise, and the producer for this evening's event Tom MacAndrew

Thanks to our funders who help make this evening possible:

Arts Council England

Charlotte Aitken Trust

the late Felix Dennis and his estate

The Garfield Weston Foundation

The Harold Hyam Wingate Foundation

The John Ellerman Foundation

Richard and Alex Allsopp

We are immensely grateful to Bookmark (formerly Forward Publishing) for supporting the Forward Poetry Prizes over the past 30 years. As we thank them for the final year, we are now looking for new sponsors for these prestigious, career changing prizes.

Please contact our Co-Executive Director Lucy Macnab if you would like to find out more: lucy@forwardartsfoundation.org.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

Congratulations to everyone Highly Commended in the Forward Prizes for Poetry.

AJ Akoto	Joseph Minden
Anthony Anaxagorou	Emma Must
Vicci Bentley	Daljit Nagra
Tara Bergin	Selina Nwulu
Liz Berry	Damen O'Brien
Laurie Bolger	Sean O'Brien
Chen Chen	Pádraig Ó Tuama
Geraldine Clarkson	Sandeep Parmar
Rishi Dastidar	Rhiya Pau
Akwaeke Emezi	Michael Pedersen
Katie Farris	Geoffrey Philp
Salena Godden	Stav Poleg
Em Gray	Jacob Polley
Elle Heedles	Shivaneer Ramlochan
Selima Hill	Yvonne Reddick
Emma Jeremy	Deryn Rees-Jones
Majella Kelly	Dean Rhetoric
Victoria Kennefick	Roger Robinson
Karl Knights	Declan Ryan
Zaffar Kunial	Jacqueline Saphra
Nick Laird	Celia A Sorhaindo
Vanessa Lampert	Ahren Warner
Fran Lock	Nerys Williams
Adam Lowe	Anna Woodford
Arji Manuelpillai	Luke Samuel Yates

SUPPORT US



SUPPORT US

For three decades, Forward Arts Foundation (FAF) has been at the vanguard of new poetry and now reaches an estimated 123 million social media feeds each year.

FAF started in 1991 to promote public knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of contemporary poetry. We are a UK national charity committed to creating diverse mass audiences for poetry, showcasing the best new work, and developing emerging and underrepresented talent. Through our two flagship programmes, Forward Prizes for Poetry and National Poetry Day. We rely on the support of individuals. Please consider making a donation to support our work.

THE POETRY SOCIETY National Poetry Competition



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£5,000

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WILL HARRIS AND
CLARE POLLARD**

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Foundation**

