

BIRKBECK STUDENT UNION POETRY COMPETITION 2025

ABSTRACT

This is an online collation of entries to the 2025 Birkbeck college student union Poetry competition. Judged by Kate Rowland (BBC) and Stephen Willey Dept. Of creative writing at BBK. This was the first time a poetry competition has been hosted and we were incredibly impressed by the calibre of work we received as well as the array of topical and often sensitive topics students chose to cover. Judges noted the impressive creative talent of students that showed just of multi skilled Birkbeck students are. Thank you to all who took part and a special mention to Rose Downton for her role in organising and facilitating this competition.

Birkbeck Student Union





An Anthology of poems written by Birkbeck College students.

Judged by Kate Rowland BBC and Stephen Willey BBK Creative writing dept.

With special thanks to Rose Downton student union staff

NB: This was the first time that the Birkbeck student union have run a poetry competition and the judges noted the vast topical and at times, sensitive subjects that students chose as inspiration for their work. From grief, to love and the environment, difficult topics were handled with care and an impressive level linguistic skill. There were varied and at times unique styles that student chose to write their poems in, including one which was translated from Latin, showing impressive mastery of two languages.

The judges were highly impressed with the overall high standard of work, and the number of submissions we received was a credit to the creative talent and diversity of skills Birkbeck students have. It was a challenge to choose the winners and for that reason the judges chose to highly commend four additional poems.

Below we begin with this year's winning submissions followed by the highly commended poems and all remaining poems that were entered into this year's competition.

On behalf of the student union, we would like to thank all the students who took the time to participate and we hope to run another competition next academic year.

Thank you,

Your student union.

First Place: Megan Hill

Sea Glass

I see you, chaos-girl,

In the dark so thick

It feels like someone filled your eyes with ink,

I see you as you burn,

Matchbox palmed and

Crushed beneath blistering skin

And I do not shame you

Or blame you or question your why

I, too, tried

To cry the ink from my eyes,

Tried salt, tried blood, tried bleach

Nothing could reach

The depths to which it stained

I have regained partial sight

But I cannot tell you the shadows have not remained

Deeper

And so I burned,

Fire in the night

A Roman candle

A flare

I let my incandescence scream

Until all that was plastic in me

Melted into carcinogenic dew

Scattered across rooftops

Till drainpipes threw me to the river

The sea pulled me through

Riptide after whirlpool after eddy

Deposited my frosted glass

Upon the strandline

Placed me before hands

That held me up to the sunrise

So I could break her light into wavelengths,

Become the colours

And send them back to you.

Second Place: Rodger Stephenson

Floor 21

He came to a sanctuary in this green and pleasant land

Escaping the devastation of tyranny and war, fleeing the great bombs

which he'd seen rained down upon

Then the fire burned up around him on floor 21

The reports they came it was clear from now on

There were now no ways of reaching anyone alive on floor 21

They searched in every hospital and every refuge near and far

From the well healed restaurants to the centres with doors left ajar

To care for those who'd lost everything they'd ever won

There was no one found alive on floor 21

Mario Gomes heroically returned to the smokey maze

To rescue his daughter and be burned by the fiery blaze

The newsmen they sank to a new low

Pretending to be the real friends of heroic Mario

Whilst never ever reporting what should've been done

To keep Mario and fellow tenants safe on floor 21

The locals of all nations gathered around

To do what they could kind actions on the ground

With gifts and words so kind

Like a great light so brightly shone

But there will be no more words spoken on floor 21

The savings were counted and costed, the stories now been widely told of

the Royal Borough so mean

£2 a square metre of cheap polyethylene

So how many £2 coins will we need

To rebuild the lives and loved ones of this heinous corporate deed

Who are the hidden criminals who saved the borough this sum

And now we all know they listened to no one from floor 21

So where will we go now the residents say and feel

Where are we wanted but they inside know what's really real

That the Royal Borough and others will only faintly conceal

That they're better off elsewhere better off away and gone

There was really no plan for anyone from floor 21

So the reports will be written and published one day and

Someone somewhere must be made to pay

for the manslaughtering of those who had little choice to be there

Who had no country abode to be able to run

And they no longer even have their home on floor 21

Third Place: Katrina Petro

I cannot hear the birds

I cannot hear the birds

The sirens are so loud

I cannot hear the birds

And I am no longer convinced

That those are fireworks

It seems we have entered

Another phase of darkness

Where the sun fails to rise

I remember many of these in my life

The riots, the virus, the bombs

I remember it all

We stuck the pages together

And turned them

Like they were not written

But something changed yesterday

Yes, the air is different

Cannot board the train, the plane

Or rest our heads to pray

Without fearing this will be our final day

All of the words we say

How they hover above our head

For there is nowhere for them to land

When the wind is fuelled with dread

And our children neglect their privilege

Because they think that poverty is cool

Wishing they were in a gang

Speaking a lingo they do not understand

Even though they attend a private school

Nobody takes a breath

Without forcing the world to watch

Even when our neighbour bleeds to death

They pray their views will reach to the top

There is a lack of humanity in this nature

That we destroyed and lost and fail to remember

Nothing feels real anymore

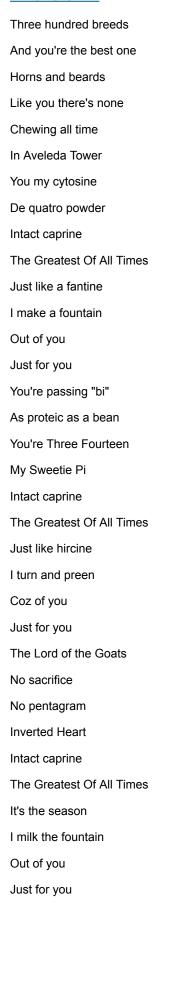
I do not want to believe this is true

How could I bring new life on an Earth

That is coloured more black than blue?

Highly commended poems 2025:

The GOAT



Swallowed silk Swallowed Silk By EmotiveJasmine (Missy Isaackson) It appeared like the vinyl floors of our halls were the rubbles of a war's closure in your eyes. I don't need to be softened were what your shoulders told us. I don't need to be clasped was what your torso commanded. You were a lost quiet owl neatly nesting in a haggard history... with no owlets or treasure finds for you to watch over and see. You were a sombre tree with the trunk of a giant -Close, but not as close to being defiant as an ancient artifact museum's visitor code of conduct poster boldly saying DON'T TOUCH in capital letters. Someone who represented the colours of green beanstalks, pumpkin picking, black and white films, vintage clothing places and undone laces. Your colours were my only traces. I was a baker hoping my haggard history and yours would knead us eventually. Someday Someway Meanwhile, you were a silhouette

who had already found your silk. There was a projection of light.

You swallowed your silk's shininess,

indulging yourself in its mellowness.

Swallowed silk the story now was...

I couldn't run from it; I let it be.

It was the perfect swallow

So perfect it filled you with

glee -

All I can do is

wonder

how it would have felt

if I was silk

and you the silhouette

had swallowed

me.

What's in a name

I wonder what my name is.

On paper my name is Johnson,

Meaning Son of John.

Very résumé-perfect English.

Acceptable, every day, Englissshhh.

It has a long shared heritage,

Deep connotations of a common culture,

Living beneath the surface of all that we do.

I could just as easily have been a Smith,

Meaning blacksmith or metalworker,

Identical to Martel if I were French.

But I am none of these things.

I hail from the island of Jamaica,

Named Xaymaca by the indigenous people.

Meaning "Land of food and water,"

Given by the Arawaks and Tainos.

Indigennnousss people.

Three million people,

All gruesomely gone and forgotten

So that we could sweeten Victorian tea.

Well, what then does that mean for me?

It means my roots stretch back again,

Across the Atlantic Ocean.

Perhaps I am a Kweku.

I'm not REALLY a Johnson.

My earthy dark skin says that much is true.

Kweku is a man's name

For one born on a Wednesday

In West Africa to Akan and Ewe mothers.

Remember the roots our countries ripped,

The languages stolen from between our lips.

Erasing names, places, and meaning,

And making the beauty of dark skin demeaning.

That is the awesome power of language!

And you ask, what's in a name?

The very roots of identity, glory, and shame.

Study Buddy

Just be my study Buddy,

Not for the group but for me.

When you study Sustainability,

Battling the mental fragility and emotional vulnerability.

Of what you don't know but what you want to know,
and
what you need to know.
Impacting the world isn't easy,
Study Buddy, you understand me.
I'm distracting you but you are comforting me.
"STOP, it is reading week"
"I will be your study buddy if stop talking for a bit, drink the smoothie I made you and stop eating snacks on my bed"
Okay
Study buddy, Can I join you for Christmas?
I bet your aunt and mum miss us
I remember
"Shhhh"
Sorry Study Buddy
Remaining submissions 2025
Knock Knock by James Scripps
Who's there?
The men with the staples

The table and the chair.

"We've come for your guttering"

He said with glee

As he scratched his brow and furrowed his knee

"You've come for the what?"

I hastened a reply

"We've come for the guttering and we've brought our supplies"

I studied the men through the peephole with doubt, dubiousness lingered, a worrying amount

"I haven't requested any work"

I said in contempt

"Now go on your way, I wish you good lent"

Silence abundant, I'd caused quite the stir

The sound of the wind and the church bells were heard

"You deserve to hang"

A dark voice replied

My lips danced a quiver, my heart did it cry

For I recognised the voice

Twas not that of a stranger

The voice was my own

Silent echoes, phantom danger.

Spoken word Poetry by Danny Danquah – Pathways to Healthy Newham

Project productivity

Verse 1

A fictional story of clarity, a notion of sane in insanity

An idea bled from poverty, an imagined sense of vanity,

A clear preposterous positioning, a near proposed collision in

A part that says you shouldn't and another that says just put it in

The coin the slot the gambling, the point to raise the pot to win

or lose the whole damn lot, so what,

The commenting dropped a calamity, a sanity backed by security

A safe bet backed for surety, to generate project productivity

Verse 2

And because of Karma, the defence that's why I don't believe in fear,

if the road ahead is blocked, make sure my head is clear

Trade barrier logic around the clock, but the pictured line is near

For the bias, in haste generalising, the fallacy comes and disappears

What's there to keep in check, in case the ego wrecks it

Karma clocks the matter, at hand, look to inspect it

The case in passages lines to, settle, so select it

Cost of action given back to serve and protect it

Karma's there to keep in check, in case the ego wrecks it.

To love is to live

by Erin Leece

And to live without love is not to have lived at all

To love is still to live

When you cannot live with the love because you cannot have it all

To miss the mistake is not a risk worth taking

When to miss is a risk worth it all

For joy short lived is still joy all the same

Happiness is more than a pawn in this game

Now is not forever

And forever is not no

Time will you only tell the mountains we climbed and how many times we fell

Lakes turn to ponds yet we stand in them still

Drinking water from the source

Catapulted by another force

We are people of the wilderness we yell

Hermit crabs swapping shells

All is gained, shared and sacred

Fear not engaged, thunderstorms rage

Plastic drowning from a home that is soft shelled, melted

Water pooling, floating on air, metal spoon a tool

I'll build a you shaped hole next time and that will keep out the cool

Free From by Sarah Jones

The colours cut through

the brume.

You come knocking,

and it feels like just for me.

Because how would you know

to find me here. Still, I have to admit I could of been anyone. Who else listens now? Who else walks so slow? Almost going backwards or trying to. You come to tell me you are going away For a while. I don't really mind. I welcome the absence, the space. It sounds nicely; Pathos Harmonises with Death. I will sleep more and stare into the grey light. I will note your absence at my door, and try to make friends with bitter twisted hags who point and claw and say we are waiting for you. When you come back you will laugh like a child. Innocent of the havoc you've wreaked. And we will start again. And I will try to be dazzled by your newness, I will even, for moments, forget. Sitting in Sunshine. I stop going backwards. Or forwards. I have stopped. Then your guilt will suck colour out again. Through the mist.

And I will feel the weight of them

heavy on my chest.

Orange, yellow, brown and red.

From underneath I will lift up,

get out, and live.

Though I don't know why.

I expect I still am waiting for you.

Mine to Mind by Zaynaab Hud

I forget who I am sometimes.

I get caught up in the moment.

I get carried away.

I give in to everyone around me

because I want them to feel as good

as I do inside.

I forget that what's within me

is precious—

mine to hide.

mine to mind.

I give it away freely.

I have more than enough to share,

until I don't.

And when I'm empty,

there's no one to help me find

what's been lost.

I'm on my knees,

the world around me turns dark,

people pass me by

and no one notices-

no one sees me.

It's as if the vessel in my chest

loses its light,

and nothing is left

to power it back on.

Until there is. A power beyond the universe rescues me every timea power that does not diminish, a power with endless light. Slowly, surely, everything I'd poured out returns home. Not through the hands that once held it, but through the hands of those who recognise my plight. And then I remember who I amwhat I've survived, what I've learned, what I stand for. I remember my heart, and I remember my mind. Slowly, surely, I rise again. And I remind myself to guard what's inside of me, before I find myself on my knees once more. Because there are vampires who feed on the light of others and they do not show mercy. Not everyone carries a vessel of light. Some carry vessels of darkness. Some carry vessels pitilessly empty. I won't forget again that what's inside me is precious mine to hide, mine to mind.

When Ink is not Enough

Claire Upton You embody love for me Your quiet faith Your unshakeable grounding Your identity Built on the solid rock A universe of love incarnate. Your gentle eyes Your listening ears The eager heart and earnest brow That I love to the ends of the earth. And I am called now To wonder how I would translate your essence into ink How to portray you You, my one. How to immortalise you in art How to capture your depth The thinking, reflecting, exploring Knowing, waiting, living That your pour over me That floods our lives. So I ponder images An anchor -You hold tight in the storm An intricately patterned moth -You are drawn to light And flee wisely from darkness An oak tree -You surround me with Your embracing arms You have seen much. It all falls short of you.

You hold me

Ache with me

Cry with me

Laugh with me

You shape me

Help me grow

All at once.

Conveying you in flesh

Is too great a task

So I capture you

In moments

Etched eternally in my mind

Each a piece of our jigsaw

And each a window to our being

Dear Soho, From Southbank

Liz SweetingI

I miss you, but life on this side is so sweet!

I miss you, but on this side, I feel so complete.

I miss you and all of your twists and turns, glitter and beats.

But here I enjoy a quick straight line to melodious strings, celebrity vocals and yummy treats!

You're a miss with your swag and tuxedo, but here I enjoy Limo by

Vidiamo.

You are FACINATING, but here the view is breathtaking.

I miss you, but you're just over there and right now; I'm glad to be here

Don't Look Birkbeck in Anger.

by Lita Doolan

She wore the flag like a summer coat,

Threadbare gold, wind in her throat.

Said she'd marry the storm if it asked,

Then vanished into the Russell Square grass.

I chased the flag down

I tried to hold the wind

but only caught the flag's thread

from an edge the story unravelled

About how far this girl had travelled.

One displaced face, found a space.

Flags stitched from fraying threads —

Are the things we left unsaid.

a corner caught on a bramble, another sunk in dew

rags of dream, that's all it was, who knew??

Troubles rise and vanish thin —

the wind is full of might-have-beens.

They dance the tune the kettle hums—

Their protest plays where no one drums.

I lit a flag in Regent's Park at dusk —

A flare, a dare, a deal in rust.

Her name burned blue, then black —

I watched it melt as she didn't look back.

5th floor sky has a pale soup light,

Flags look like birds, forgetting their flight.

Caught in mid-dream as the sky draws near,

The George kicks out a distant cheer.

The wind tore it like a whisper

Then the grass stood still — to listen

Flags stitched from fraying threads —

Are the things we left unsaid.

"After the train journey" by Elosie

My heart is heavy, the sadness stored up behind a dam.

Why does it matter?

"You're obviously a man"

How should I answer, what should I say?

To deal with ignorance, her filter away.

The anguish is real, and yet, I must not let it show.

I must stay strong, I must stay kind

And lock it up within my mind.

The tears are hidden so no-one sees

The real effect she's had on me.

What can I do? What let me down?

Do people see me as a clown?

I must stay strong, make up my face,

Continue to live, with dignity and grace.

And yet, it hurts.

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One throwaway comment without a thought,

That plunged so deep and could not be caught.

How dare she think that was ok?

To state it as a fact; no tact.

There was no warning nor a query,

Not even asking as a theory.

Just straight out with it like a sword,

That found my weakest point and scored,

"You're obviously a man"

I will not let this dam be burst,

Even if it means I'm cursed,

I will be strong, I'll live my life

And not give in to other's strife!

And yet, it hurts.

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I have no way to get in touch

To answer questions or educate,

To help her understand the world she's in.

She needs to know, it's not too late,

There is no binary anywhere.

It is a myth made just to scare

Those like myself who do not fit.

But people need to be aware,

Show compassion and be fair.

Let people live their lives and pass

Free from anguish and constant ask

To justify who we are, or worse.

To stop it being seen as a curse.

And still, it hurts.

Reminders of You

I look up at the clouds

As they gather and form,

is that your gaze up there

Warning me of a coming storm,

Why did you leave me?

A man now split in two,

I walk in the park each morning-

What else can I do?

The house is like a prison

Your ghost in every room,

Your toothbrush by the sink

Your hairbrush, your perfume.

Your lipstick stains the coffee cup

Forever it will stay,

Each reminder cuts me deeply

Yet I'd have it no other way,

I pass the playground slowly

The children call my name,

I give a little wave

While holding in all the pain,

A couple walk hand in hand-

I remember when that was us,

laughing in the rain

running to catch the bus.

The wind still carries your scent

The flowers, your lips, your kiss,

A drifting petal grazes my cheek

Soft as your fingertips,

After the month you left

I drank myself away,

Oh, what a wreck I was

An alcoholic in decay.

I see now you were right

I was stubborn, blind, and conceited.

You were reaching for tomorrow,

While I kept you defeated.

I would give my whole self now,

If you'd give us, one more try,

but you said never - not in a million years

you'd rather lay down and die,

I never knew you hurt so deep

I thought it was a cruel thing to say,

Maybe I'll sit beside the pond

Clasp my hands and pray,

I'll ask God for a miracle-

To bring you back to me,

It's my only hope

Or my lifelong misery,

Now the pond's gone still

The ducks drift in their line,

The day slips into evening

I start to feel the decline,

I light a smoke and watch the ash,

It falls, then fades from view,

I whisper to the empty air,

'Another day without you.'

Watering Mother's Grave

I. Abbey

I hunt for forgiveness in the monastery the meals are silent here much like ours used to be

In the monastery

I must earn my keep I rise at dawn meditate and once we ate we scrape leftovers from fork to plate

In the monastery I rinse out each spoon fork knife cup plate we go plate to bowl bowl to water passed down the table in a specific order for generations

In the monastery stale water absorbs our sins and feeds hungry ghosts and nothing is ever scraped towards those seated across the table never be pouring outwards into the unknown

In the monastery time flicks lights I forgot to switch

Breathe.

Breathe.

Breathe.

In the monastery the Monk's wide brown sleeve misses a tickle of translucent tears diluting sadness absorbing the beads by asking me questions such as:

Do you like to read?

And later: is your mother—also dead?

To which I said, it depends what being dead means-

Is it un-aliveness or an unloving state?

I'll carry your briefcase of fears wear cloak speckled with bloodied memories sow up the sockets of your eyes to keep them warm and dry

I'll keep my bookshelves empty

to hold space

for your mother's memories-

The poetry books flocked to me from Throssel Abbey on the train the monk, the daughter carries them shoulder to leather, leather to paperboard, paperboard to cloth, cloth to paper, paper to tree, tree to grain grain to sky and back

I unpack them ever so carefully fingers faltering at the inscriptions:

What would it be like? to have known for a day or a few hours

The love of

The monk's Mother.

II. Falcon Daughter

For years I believed my mother's death would save me

Her grave would be my vacation

Flat chest looking at me from the mirror

Teenage-hood, era of delicacy

Blushing always blushing

Without the ecstasy

Before she clipped my wings Before I knew everything

And if I knew I could never take off what she gave me: I would have waited forever Before probing it on.

Her leather glove plucked to shreds as I landed over and over in the same place somewhere she's been herself before

She tapped to receive my claws— Daughter please stay as if we weren't already fatally chained

Mother, when will you go back to your grave?

Home is not a real place it is always evolving—

She trimmed my feathers pretending sorrow hauled at me would be gone along with her such was our mutual misunderstanding I won't fertilise her grave with poems spade is a spade is a spade somehow always right especially when—unkind. III. Mother Says

Aren't you a Buddhist living in the Now?

A daughter should forgive

I am your only mother I forgave mine

As if erasure of crimes and self, could lead to: reincarnation.

IV. Letter to My Mother

Once written the words from the online template

From Kafka's letter to his father formulate an angular shape clever or perhaps more

Preposterous, because once truth is captured on paper it screams so loud asking, yet resisting an apology

Which was why I sent her an email

Requesting it formally

ı

as the first born daughter I have

hung

barefoot, wings-clipped, I

still prefer beginnings of things

(when possibilities coexist)

Now that you are dead Mother

Take a seat inside

Your-self

Get comfortable and I will tell you

How you were

Un-made

Moon has been celibate for centuries

Mother barren you should've been Mother you are the opaque Moon hiding your ominous side deep within Your craters culminate into castrated sparks You scathe, you hit, you die

unannounced I call out for help to our neighbours who are otherwise occupied

losing spoons and borrowing each other's knives-

Mother at dawn I see

Your ashen face in the sky The crematorium's giant chimney is

returning you

to charcoal returning you

to cosmic delight.

Mudlarking

It's futile to think of the mundane, Though I live in it.

Neck buried deep underneath the slob, My lips were constantly kissed by foul water.

I think I see it: smoothness hiding beneath the sand.

Is it the thing I seek?

A rare jade, a colourful stone, or a pinch of joy? I dig my fingers into the gravel shore— The sharp edges draw cuts open.

Finally, I found something, a solid that could be something.

I can give it a reason, I can ascribe it a price, I can give it meaning;

But I failed to see what it is, as the blood from my fingers has blurred its edges. Then it sank into my palm; wet, trembling, red.

What do I seek in the mundane?

What can I seek?

Feet buried in the slob,

My sorrows were constantly soothed by the foul water— Lone me, pacing up and down the shores, mudlarking.

My dear father...

The pain I feel now is like nothing I've felt before,

Holding your hand as you walked through heavens door.

You weren't only my dad we were partners in crime. We were a mischievous pair from time to time.

If there's one thing you've taught me it's to love and be brave because that's all we have on our final days.

You were selfless and proud and so loved by everyone. We are surrounded by your spirit, for that will live on.

I will look for you in nature, in my heart and in the morning light.

Be free now Dad, I love you goodnight.

The Raindrop Race

Outside the window, the raindrops race, A time before gadgets a familiar embrace.

A childhood moment so universal and clear.

The soft pitter-patter of rain as we draw near and near.

They skitter and scatter across the race track of glass, I look back on this memory knowing the time has passed.

How I cherish these simple moments, so wide eyed and free.

Now a screen time epidemic, the new generation will see.

And I know it sounds boring, watching the raindrops race.

But to me and my sister nothing could replace,

The competitive nature of the watery maze,

Front row seats, safely buckled in,

Wondering, this time who would be the one to win?

Our laughter and giggles erupting like thunder,

Our car ride never ending, yet so full of wonder.

I wouldn't change a thing about those long journeys back then. The playful chase, of the raindrop race, Will start over, and over again.