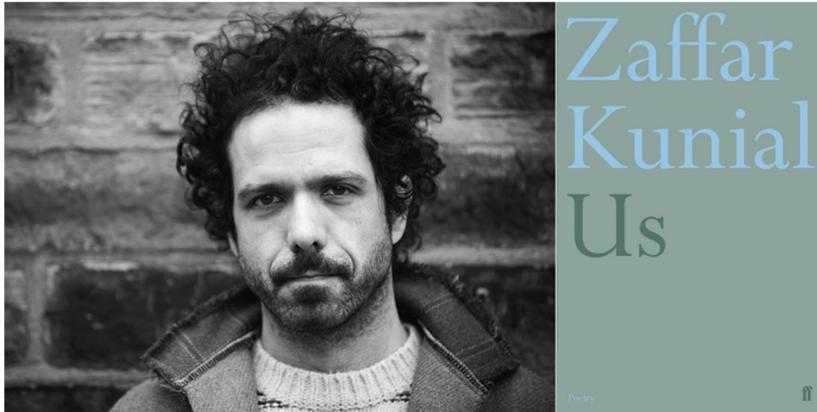


# *Us*

## by Zaffar Kunial

### (Faber & Faber)



Zaffar Kunial was born in Birmingham to an English mother and a Kashmiri father. He now lives in Hebden Bridge. In 2014 he was the Wordsworth Trust Poet-in-Residence and published a pamphlet in the Faber New Poets series. Since his first public reading, of 'Hill Speak' at the 2011 National Poetry Competition awards, he has spoken at various literature festivals and in programmes for BBC radio, and won the Geoffrey Dearmer Prize for his poem 'The Word'. He was Poet-in-Residence at the 2018 Ledbury Poetry Festival. *Us* (Faber, 2018) is his first collection.

### Reviews

"Prayer," for example, is a painfully specific account of the poet's last hours with his mother as she lay dying of cancer ("so spread / by midnight her rings were off") but it is also a meditation on the universal cycle of life and death. Similarly "The Word" recalls an incident from the poet's childhood when, as he sulked in his room, his father instructed him to come out and "enjoy the life". The poet's discomfort at his father's grammatically inaccurate use of "the" is consequence of his desire to fit in, to show "I'm native here." At the end of the poem, however, there's also the realisation that Kunial senior's use of the definite article was actually (albeit inadvertently) "half right, half wrong" – right in the sense that his life – and all our lives – are "the life" singular; the only ones we're going to get. (*The Scotsman*)

The relaxed vernacular of Zaffar Kunial's newly published first collection, *Us*, may at first conceal the precision with which his poems search the vexations of identity. The reaches of

the search are exposed most plainly in the knowingly titled *Self-Portrait as Bottom*. Like the title poem, the self-portrait references Tony Harrison's 40-year-old sonnet diptych 'Them and [uz]', in which the sneering literature teacher told the working-class pupil Harrison, "You're one of those / Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose!"

Kunial's speaker, unlike Harrison's, doesn't spit up furious "glottals": more subtle and contemporary, he dispatches his gobs of spit "to a lab across the Irish sea" for the DNA ancestry test. The simply complex equation that he first announces, "50% Europe. / 50% Asia," demands sub-divisions genetic and linguistic, leading to a surprising, tenuous ethnic link between the poet's Kashmiri father and Midlands-born mother. (*The Guardian*)

## Prayer

First heard words, delivered to this right ear  
*Allah hu Akbar* – God is great – by my father  
in the Queen Elizabeth maternity ward.  
God's breath in man returning to his birth,  
says Herbert, is prayer. If I continued

his lines from there, from birth – a break Herbert  
chimes with heav'n and earth – I'd keep in thought  
my mum on a Hereford hospital bed  
and say what prayer couldn't end. I'd say  
I made an animal noise, hurled language's hurt

at midday, when word had come. Cancer. Now, so spread  
by midnight her rings were off.

I stayed on. At her bed.

Earlier, time and rhythm flatlining, I whispered  
Thank you I love you thank you

mouth at her ear.

She stared on, ahead. I won't know if she heard.

## Us

If you ask me, us takes in undulations –  
each wave in the sea, all insides compressed –  
as if, from one coast, you could reach out to

the next; and maybe it's a Midlands thing  
but when I was young, us equally meant me,  
says the one, 'Oi, you, tell us where yer from';

and the way supporters share the one fate –

I, being one, am Liverpool no less –  
cresting the Mexican wave of we or us,

a shore-like state, two places at once, God  
knows what's in it; and, at opposite ends  
my heart's sunk at separations of us.

When it comes to us, colour me unsure.  
Something in me, or it, has failed the course.  
I'd love to think I could stretch to it – us –

but the waves therein are too wide for words.  
I hope you get, here, where I'm coming from.  
I hope you're with me on this – between love

and loss – where I'd give myself away, stranded  
as if the universe is a matter of one stress.  
Us. I hope, from here on, I can say it

and though far-fetched, it won't be too far wrong.

### **The Lyric Eye**

Methinks I see these things with parted eye  
– William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

I've stood at your portrait at different times.  
Scanned my own face, on and off, in the glass.  
A cloud, eclipsed. Vaguely before, or behind you.  
Half cast, at a loss.

Even the gloss  
back then, at school, left me looking this blank.  
In the dark. Not on the same page as you.

But when I stand, here, almost in a blink  
I can place my eyes – glazed over your stare;  
let you lend me your ear, your famous cheek;  
let the flare of your nostril stretch thin air;  
even try on your earring, from five feet, four  
centuries apart. I swear by this lapse the light  
on your mouth seems cast

half on mine  
when I borrow the line between your lips

## Discussion Ideas

- [Here's the George Herbert referred to in 'Prayer'](#). How do the two poems speak to each other?
- Does poetry have a place at the beginning and end of life for you? Why? Are there any particular poems which have done for you what the speaker of 'Prayer' is wanting to do for his mother?
- [Here is the Tony Harrison poem The Guardian reviewer refers to](#). How do the two poems argue with one another?
- Is 'The Lyric Eye' a poem about confidence or anxiety?
- Herbert, Shakespeare, Harrison: how does a reader find room for him or herself in this conversation between writers? Are assumptions being made about a shared or unshared literary heritage? Do you feel included or excluded by those assumptions?

## Other books by Zaffar Kunial

*Faber New Poets 11* a pamphlet (Faber & Faber, 2014)

## If you liked Zaffar Kunial, try ...

- Tony Harrison
- Hannah Lowe
- Raymond Antrobus

## Zaffar Kunial online

[Zaffar at the Poetry Foundation](#)