Judges' Report

2026 looks like a bumper year for Australian poetry. The ACU Prize for Poetry attracted 678 entries (very close to the record of 700 in 2021's Covid-enhanced competition). The overall quality was very high, and the judges found it challenging to whittle the entries down to the 118 poems (by 88 poets) that make up this anthology.

In *Burnt Norton* (1936), T. S. Eliot ascribes to a bird the (now infamous) observation that 'human kind / Cannot bear very much reality'. That may be true in general. But poets are endowed with an exceptional gift: the ability (which is also a grave responsibility) to bear witness to reality in all its glory and atrociousness.

'Witness' involves a close correspondence between seeing, knowing, and telling. Etymologically, the word is linked to *wissen* ('to know') in German, *uideo* ('I see') in Latin, and *oida* (originally *woida*) in Greek ('I know' because 'I have seen'). 'Wise' and 'wisdom' are also cognates, all of these words deriving ultimately from the Proto-Indo-European root **weid-* 'to see' (and hence 'to know').

Many of the poems in this anthology apply what Shoshanna Rockman calls the 'mind's telescopic eye' to the world around them. This often results in epiphanies – momentary manifestations of the extraordinary within the quotidian – but it may also demand the sustained and structured 'daily

observations' described in 'The Phenologist', Sue Lockwood's celebration of the labours ('for the greater good') of the eighteenth-century parson-naturalist Gilbert White.

As to the 'telling' component of witness, some of the finest poems in this anthology derive their power from the fact that the processing and articulation of trauma have been delayed. Nigel Featherstone asks:

> What becomes of experience? In the scheme of things
> will it take him long to shapeshift – egg to hatchling – into eye
> -witness, then, when adult, shift again into forgiveness?

Featherstone's ability to mitigate the gravity (indeed, the grossness) of parental betrayal by a small widening of the lens is a generous counter to what Nicole Lutwyche calls, in 'False Witness', the 'narrow squint of grievance'.

While some poets call attention to the unreliability of witness, the unverifiability of so-called 'lived experience', others express anxiety about the poet's role in shaping poetic narratives based on the experience of others. As Denise O'Hagan observes, 'behind every line / of testimony there is privilege. There is selection, expediency.' Or, as Isi Unikowski puts it:

I know the story has become a little sketchy,
a thread of ash upon snow. But look how well
I use italics and parentheses
to heighten the affect with stories that are half right,
or a quarter right,
or true only to an author's vocation.

Tug Dumbly alerts us to the urgent need to preserve an endangered resource: 'the teeming, tangled riot of language – bawdy, comical, beautiful, wrenching; at times inflammatory, sparking raging fires of debate'. The poems in this anthology bear beautiful and wrenching witness to the fact that the spirit of linguistic riot is alive and well in Australia.

Five poems have been Highly Commended: 'Statement' by Russell Buzby; 'American Sentences' by Jo Gardiner; 'Cape Hart' by Verity Laughton; 'Observance' by Anthony Lawrence; and 'Under a Wobbegong Moon' by Elizabeth Walton.

Linda McQuarrie-Bowerman gains Third Prize with 'Looking Upward'. Second Prize goes to Mary Wickham for 'Angel'.

The Winner of the 2026 ACU Prize for Poetry is Jennifer Kornberger with 'In the Back of the Ambulance'.

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