conditions of living



UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA

THE 2026 UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA HEALTH POETRY PRIZE

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Introduction

Over recent years, and across the globe, health practitioners and researchers are increasingly aware of the relationship between health and art. Whether doing creative work oneself, or consuming the creative work produced by others, there appears to be something surprisingly productive of increased wellbeing.

Even as poetry and the other arts cannot interrupt the progress of the diseases we humans face, it can help us live better with illness; it can ease anxiety and distress, and provide a fresh perspective on the world and the self.

We who work in the field of creative practice are heartened in equal parts by the support and collaboration offered by our colleagues in the health sector, and by the enthusiasm and compassion of fellow creatives, who turn their own work toward initiatives that might just make life a little better.

The 200-plus poets who submitted poems to this year's contest are a part of that community of artists who understand that creative works can be of genuine aid to others. Their submissions covered pretty well every aspect of health, from being born right through to the final moments; from physical illness and breakdown to emotional or psychological distress; from one's own state of health to the health and comfort of those we love and offer care. It's a reminder that no matter how urbanised and technologised—and individualised—our lives may be, we do in fact live in material bodies, as part of the living planet, and a language beyond the mundane through which we can connect with others. We are grateful to the poets for their contributions, and delighted to present the shortlisted poems here for public pleasure.

We are also very grateful to the Health Research Institute at the University of Canberra, who have generously provided the funding for this Prize, and who are also deeply interested in how art and other community activities can support individual and community health. Without their contribution, we would not be able to offer this prize or publish this chapbook; and it is a reminder of the critical importance of collaboration and community.

Melody Ellis & Jen Webb
Editors

Heartstrings: *Chordae tendineae*

WINNER

A. Frances Johnson

Donor No. 11 has coral-painted toenails. That is what she sees.
A woman, aged 88, feet tipped with birdwing colour,
yellowed grave wax under tanned skin, ammonia-scented.
That colour could be this tender, the young girl thinks,
heart bursting, silent phone encased in jeans pocket,
the urge to call home and check everyone is alive.
Bodies are placed in the sunny wet lab
as if it is a hospital ward, as if soldiers
from The Great War, sheets tight to chin,
have just requested a last smoke,
daylight drawing down, nightingales happy
to oblige and flaunt rules. Oh sister, oh sister!
No. 14 has surely died mid-sentence, mouth a frozen zero,
one-hundred-year-old ash on white sheet,
a brief, bullet-hole mimicry. Then she reads the man's chart,
no celluloid story, but lung cancer's breathless calculus—
slow illness, like love, his last dignified possession.

No. 5, close by, was stumped by a warring aneurysm.
She thinks, briefly, of a balloon ride she and her brothers
took as children, how soft brains hold so much,
but not enough to fly sans basket, metal capsule and fuel.
What the donor bodies also teach is that endings
are as imaginative as they are factual.

When it's time to dissect No. 8's faulty heart,
19 years shake inside her starchy lab coat
like laden plum branches. This man was not old,
but his plummy heart grew old inside him.
She removes costal cartilages with bone shears.
Five-thumbed, her prac partner lifts the sternum
up and away. She closes her eyes, not sure she can
remove curtained adipocere without being sick,

making a hash of what she does not yet know.
Their teacher hovers, demonstrates.
The girl's red-rimmed eyes weep with relief
to see no residential address printed
on the pericardium; no myocardium of memory
tricks her into unburying the dead.

She and her partner take turns
to bend and lean into No. 8's thoracic cavity,
faces galvanised as gurney steel.
They follow instructions, take notes.
At session's end, there's comfort
in this oddly parental chest; they feel as if
they have been up all night with permission.

In the caf, it hits her over sugary drinks,
whiff of formaldehyde in her hair—
a desire to dance wildly under 11am fluorescence,
to let the body go.

Simultaneities

SECOND PRIZE

Tricia Dearborn

Your lover tells you you're beautiful
and the stench of the watermelon that liquefied in the pantry
pervades the kitchen.

The days of inexplicable grief and rage proceed
and the magazine agrees to refund the subscription
you forgot to cancel after the trial period

Your asthma's playing up
and these late summer evenings are deliciously balmy.

You're a half cup short of the flour you need
to make banana bread
and your new shoes, ordered online, arrive by post and fit.

Your work's behind, you're exhausted,
don't feel up to the graft
and the latest ep of your favourite show just dropped.

Someone dear to someone dear to you
is dying, and someone dear to someone dear to you
is accreting cell by cell on their way to the disparate world.

Children's Hospital

Margaret Barbalet

At night the hospital becomes
a tomb: few come, few go
except some business know
unfinished with death.

Of course I bargain, or is it pray
like the rest. Plain angels, flat foot
with a torch, wrest toddlers
gently west into drugged sleep.

Through all this space I meekly
ask to find you there, my world
that curved, pale baby face, still moving
with the currents of the quick.

Let sun glare, rattle busy light, my
own dull life—let it stay. Tear
this ward apart, bring on the day, heal
this wound and roll that stone away.

*

Each night amplified to
the Sister's office, two
children, lumps beneath
sheets, moan their ten-year-old
version of what—of life?

Penicillin, suction, oxygen
hunt these two into life; no
sight for the ward, their
breath a current, loud or soft.
There is nothing to see.

These are the moans of Lazarus,
who too, did not ask for life.

Notes from the Edge

Marina Eugster

Triumph doesn't look like the dead
on the marble arch
of the memorial,
it looks like the everyday brave in smallest acts.

A sista texts *today I'm in bed*. Later, she opens the door and goes to an appointment.

Night can order or unravel us.

One night at 10pm, I drive and find my friend beside his silenced phone
sleeping off a few bad tabs.

Pain riots another sista's head. She says *meet me in the sunrise; I'm going there.*

Simon tracks his moods with smiley faces, and Ruth walks after a stroke.
Under the stars, a bedridden bro writes his family final letters.

We can never know someone's distance from the edge.

Years back, for months, I talked to Lifeline:
just look what you're juggling, they said.

Once, trying to parent alone and to stop overwhelm taking over my workday, I talk to Lifeline while I drive. Miss a sign showing an illegal turn. A copper orders me to the curb. She says *ticket.* My tears paint the

steering wheel. That's how those days were. Three hundred and twenty smackers. *I can't pay it.* Every day I paid more to deal with the domestic violence I survived. I see the copper clock the call to Lifeline and what I say. She calls an ambo for the hospital to assess my mental health. Not that I cared, but for her information, Lifeline and I were all over it and she'd no idea of ten workarounds I had in place.

In hair-raising times, mornings are the worst.
Yesterday's hurt is waking
and we beg sleep *please stay with me another two hours.*
I'm trying so hard to live.

Tonight, it's impossible to stand. My leg screams in spasms when it touches the floor. My 1am ambos: Terry, with the perfect hair of an American president, and tall Steve, his bald head and John Lennon glasses. Terry says *night shifts are eighty percent mental health*. Alone people. Forty and up, but younger too. Anxiety shrieks when there's no-one to talk to.

People I've dated say Death sat close in breakups. Alcohol blurs.

Saviour talks. Meditation. Health foods and support groups.

Mum said *in menopause, I felt like I died and everyone died with me.*

We must find a beginning when our lifeforce stops
and biochemistries are up the wahzoo.

After five horizontal years of eyes-closed days, one
bed-yoga pose to the next, I try to get my breath past the trucks
which block my throat. They're hijackers of the things I want to say.
Once more I'm close to the edge. Alarmed, I research psychology.
They tell me *thoughts about the edge don't always mean
conversations with Death*. It might be a reprieve we need. And we're
wagering with the gods for our lives. But it's knife-edge which kind
of conversation we're having.

I laugh and say to a sistagirl, *who hasn't visited Ward Eleven for a bit?*
I rarely meet anyone who hasn't.

In edge-times, lean in:
place your arms around edges
like a pale dusk,
and call up forgotten places where manic spikes don't exist.

Familial

Scott Jackson

The first lesson was calcium.
Miss Perrett at the blackboard,
laying down the chalk's floral alphabet—
vowels in quail-egg blue,
consonants frozen-pea green—
while we sat on the prickled jaffa carpet
and learned the decade's white gospel:
the milk moustache, the obedient bone,
the body you could earn by drinking.

Drink, and be made correctly.

Years later, the gown will not close.
A red laser finds my chest.
Hold your breath. Hold.

The bore takes me in the way a throat does,
swallowing without appetite,
and fear lays its thin coin of metal on the tongue.

Then the number—Agatston's arithmetic—
calcium counted where no child would look:
not enamel, not the long clean femur,
but seamed through the soft red country of the heart.

Before the number could become mine,
I was afraid for her.

A private travertine, laid down for decades
in the unlit rooms of me,
drop by patient drop, the way a spring
builds a cathedral out of water
and never knows it has made stone.

All that time the body had been listening.
It heard calcium and built—
faithful, laying the mineral down
in the wrong room of the chest.

I dress. The number leaves with me,
riding under the sternum like a second pulse.

At home, my daughter drinks her milk
at the kitchen bench,
and a white crescent forms above her lip,
and I do not wipe it off.

holding / up

Alana Kelsall

I followed the crumbs out of the forest of tubes
unhooked myself from the blip /
blip of the machine chasing the levels of
fluid emptying / from one sac /
to fill / another
tubes coiled dropped in a bucket
a pad for leakage how can this loud
spurt / drip
be out there
like this bulge / not / in here
my arms shiver as if newly awake
ripped from memory
shreds of childhood on the farm Mum leaning /
back against the rail of the Aga I didn't know
her laugh was holding / more
than the kitchen / in place

now her age I drive out to this other kitchen /
coffee shop metal chairs on tiled floor
easy cleaning families spill / outwards
the warmth / tug of coffee I scrape my chair / in voices
climb / up cheese drips I see feasts
over the road aisles seethe / heaped trolleys / turn
speed out when did I
last
feel / hunger

As if

Sollace Mitchell

Sleepers waking from a six-year nap
we spoke quietly through the afternoon
of everything we had missed.
The sun swabbed the room with light,
washing over the stacks of science fiction,
the vials of medicine, the fragile,
lucent body that lay against the bed.
In the window cut flowers bent
to the glass. Many stories below
we could see patients strolling
in the park, how the sun in the trees
stippled their robes with bronze.
We saw beyond the ocean, beckoning
blue and distant, and remembered far-off lands,
Lalibela's summer rains scouring the mountains
that now refreshed us with longing.
Across the way sheets on a line
shivered and flapped upward.
You laughed with pinched delight
at a joke, until the pneumonia
gurgled in your lungs and the cough
pulled you upright. A nurse came in
with protective gloves to unplug
the needle from the vein in your hand.
Blood started up the plastic tube,
flushing orange in the sun.

The day wasted away,
the lungs sent up their white cries,
and before you slept your eyes like the sea
went from blue to mauve to gray,
then came back to dream,

and would not keep still.
One time you sat up from the sheets
and said, I believe in ghosts,
then lay back, pulling the covers
tight round your face. You have
always believed in ghosts,
the living part that abandons the body,
thinking it viral and unloved,
forgetting that it calls across the sea
in sleep, sick with self-punishment.

I had wanted to stay with you on the shore
till morning, as if when you woke
you would understand you are loved.
I had wanted to give you this,
as if the poem were enough
to lay your fears down, to rest
until they are taken up again,
as if for what ails us there were a cure.

The desperation of language

Denise O'Hagan

*Thank you for referring —— for evaluation. At school when —— he feels tired —— he should be —— allowed to rest —— if he complains of feeling —— his heart beating**

I could tell you of the long walk from the car
under light as brittle as glass, how after the rain
moss pushes itself up glossily from cracks in concrete
against the precise geometry of light and shade
cast by the metal-panelled foyer, clover-leafed
and canopied, the architecture of resilience,
or I could speak of the curious lumping of clouds
that morning, blustery shreds of faces, ravaged and bearded
like prophets blown in from another world
and out again, leaving a scooped-out shell of a sky,
a backdrop to something that hasn't been written,
a space as yet unhedged by thought—
or I could look past the lobby's frosted glass,
and learn tenacity from a blade of grass.

*Composed from fragments of cardiologists' letters from The Children's Hospital Westmead, Sydney and Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney (2011–2015).

Note: Ebstein's Anomaly is a rare congenital heart disease affecting the tricuspid valve, affecting one in every 200,000 live births.

Fine-tuning

Felicity Plunkett

Incidentally, he said, your heart's
not right. You've no inferior
vena cava. Absent
inferior vena cava. As though it left
the room to take a call

like this doctor now, conducting
news of an ensemble
of organs, back with a moving scan
like a Ouija board, scrying
my heart's anomalies, anatomy's early

failure. But failure wasn't permanent.
He showed how two other veins
changed course, did the work
of the missing one. How defects
can defect—how what is broken

might fix itself, adjust. How before
they tested for these things
no one knew, and for years
my body was an isolette,
nursing damage and risk.

How the heart with its left tilt
tucks under ribs like notes
of an unstruck xylophone.
My neonate self lay quiet
in a bassinet, ticking

like a smuggled bomb with trip
-wire, as though some first violinist
would soon lift her bow, while
my body's orchestra waited, holding
its make-or-break music.

Prescriptions

Vanessa Proctor

This indoor life
prescribed by doctors
has left me listless.

Chemo and radiotherapy
make skin sensitive to sunlight
and scars are vulnerable
to sun damage.

I've missed one spring,
one summer, and the liquid ambers
are already beginning to redden.
So much time spent inside looking out.

Yet there have been moments
spent sitting in the garden,
breathing in the green,
standing barefoot on wet grass,

and once, coming home from hospital,
just at the point where the road slides
down the hill towards home,

I opened the car window, put out my hand
and felt the breeze, cool and beautiful,
rushing past my fingertips.

Mapmaking

Caroline Williamson

If it's inspirational you want, you've come
to the wrong place. There is nothing uplifting
about an out-of-the-blue diagnosis: instant
transition to the country of the sick while still
possibly feeling just fine. What this experience
is offering you to begin with is shock
and the unmasking of your own ignorance. I thought
I knew about this stuff: like, duh. There will
be medical people with whom you can crack
a grim joke, and others for whom your tears are
a tiresome interruption to their working day,
and others who'll perform sympathy, and offer
the wrong books—magnificent! the power
of the human mind!—while refusing to discuss
the possible costs of treatment. Meanwhile you
might be looking down the barrel of surgical
mutilation, or experiencing current best practice
in radiotherapy—burn the bastards out of your
living body—or chemical purgatory, or
the rearrangement of your hormones. None
of the choices offered by the doctors are what
you would call nice, we agreed, my friend
and I, marching in sync, as though this was some
kind of rite of passage in middle life. Phone calls,
Friday evenings, a couple of hours at a time,
for how long afterwards? A year? We should
have recorded them, we would have had a book
deconstructing the experience. Her path

was to do with finding the best professionals
and putting her trust in them, mine involved
questioning everything. Between us
we mapped our ways through that unknown
and dangerous territory. Twenty-five
years ago, and here we both are living our best
lives, veterans. We take each day as it comes,
managing arthritis and unreliable memories.
Our adult children are out there in the world.

Sulphur-crested cockatoos, suburban mango tree

Jena Woodhouse

Still summer, though the mango crop
is very nearly over, the golden pulp
squished on the bitumen; the laden
prodigality of ever fewer backyard
trees, the stench of fermentation
waning as the tropic days truncate.

Two sulphur-crested cockatoos survey
the scene, sated with the season's bounty,
disinclined to feast. One, astride a street
lamp, basks in early evening's glow;
the other splays his claws and walks
the cable between poles: a natural
funambulist rehearsing for a show.

Another bird in silhouette, not
a cockatoo, is busy in the foliage,
snipping, with its pointed beak, the last
few wizened mangoes from the tree that is
an icon of a time when life seemed simple,
sweet, and summer brought an offering
of pungent, heart-shaped golden lobes,
dense and heavy as they hit the corrugated
iron roof; sticky with the oozing sap;
voluptuously flavoured: a signature
of carefree youth, a time to dream,
to savour languid, deliquescent days,
lazing in the coolness of the mango tree's
penumbra, breathing plenitude's diffuse aroma.

Biographies

MARGARET BARBALET has published four novels and two children's books with Penguin. She is working towards her first poetry collection.

TRICIA DEARBORN is an Australian poet, writer and editor. Her work has been widely anthologised in literary journals and anthologies including *Best of Australian Poems* and *The Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry*. She has been a judge for the University of Canberra VC's International Poetry Prize, and guest poetry editor for literary journals including *Cordite Poetry Review* and *Rabbit: A journal for non-fiction poetry*. Her new collection, *Goatscape*, is coming out with Cordite Books in 2027.

MELODY ELLIS is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. Her writing and research explores questions of power, the body, language, art and knowledge. Having lived experience of disability, Melody's writing and thinking are attentive to the interconnectedness of social, embodied and ecological life. Her work has appeared in numerous literary and scholarly publications, including *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Meanjin*, *AXON*, *Mekong Review* and *TEXT*. She is the current creative nonfiction editor of *Southerly*.

MARINA EUGSTER / SPICYM is a neurodivergent Pakeha-Swiss-Australian poet/spoken word poet. A lawyer/humanist/dog social worker shortlisted and first published in the ACU collection *Belonging* in 2025. She performs with Midnight Feast theatre, an all-abilities company, and was a finalist in NSW's APS slam in 2024.

SCOTT JACKSON is a Bondi-based poet and father of two. Drawn to coastlines, motorcycles and lifting weights, he writes about the strange moral weather of ordinary things. Since completing a PhD at UNSW, he has been travelling to older places, drawn to where the past has not yet let go.

A. FRANCES JOHNSON is an award-winning writer and artist. Her latest poetry collection is *controlled burn* (Puncher & Wattmann). She has published five collections of poetry, a novel, *Eugene's Falls* (Arcadia 2007), and a monograph, *Australian Fiction as Archival Salvage* (Brill 2015). In 2020, she won the International ABR Peter Porter Poetry Prize. Other awards include the Griffith University–Josephine Ulrick Prize (2016) and the Michel Wesley Wright Prize (2012). In 2018 her collection *Rendition for Harp and Kalashnikov* was shortlisted for the Melbourne Prize for Literature Best New Writing Award.

ALANA KELSALL is a poet and prose writer living on unceded Wurundjeri country. She won the Liquid Amber Poetry Prize 2024, was runner up in the June Shenfield Poetry Award 2023, and was shortlisted for the 2023 ACU Poetry Prize: Love. Her poetry has appeared most recently online in *Cordite Poetry Review*. She is the author of *The Distance Between Us*, Melbourne Poets Union 2015.

SOLLACE MITCHELL After a short career in philosophy, and a book (*The Need for Interpretation*), I changed hats and went into movies as a screenwriter and director. Some

poems have appeared in *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Nantucket Review*, and *The American Oxonian*. My spouse and I live in Paris where are daughters are in school. So pleased to be included in such good company.

DENISE O'HAGAN is a Sydney-based poet, born in Rome. She has a background in commercial book publishing in London and Sydney, and is co-editor on *The Marrow*. Her poetry is widely published, and she is the recipient of the Dalkey Poetry Prize, the Monica Taylor Poetry Prize and the NSW Poetry Prize. Her third poetry collection, *What the Mirror Tells*, is published by 5 Islands Press (2026).
https://denise-ohagan.com; https://blackquillpress.com

FELICITY PLUNKETT is a poet and critic living on Wangal land. Her books are *A Kinder Sea* (UQP, 2020), *Vanishing Point* (UQP, 2009) and *Seastrands* (Vagabond, 2011). She edited *Thirty Australian Poets* (UQP, 2011). Felicity has a PhD from the University of Sydney. She is poetry editor with *Australian Book Review* and teaches poetry masterclasses with Varuna, the National Writers' House.

VANESSA PROCTOR lives and writes on the land of the Darramuragal people in NSW, and volunteers as a surf lifesaver on Garigal land. She has an MA in Creative Writing, and her work has been widely published both in Australia and overseas. She is a foundation member of the Australian Haiku Society and served as its president from 2016 to 2020. Her latest book is the poetry collection *On Wonder*, published by Walleah Press (2024).

JEN WEBB is distinguished professor of creative practice at the University of Canberra, and the author of several volumes of poetry, most recently *The Daily News* (Recent Work Press, 2024). She is co-editor of the literary journal *Meniscus*, and the scholarly journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*, and her current research focuses on the intersections of art practice and health.

CAROLINE WILLIAMSON's work history includes the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in London, Lonely Planet, Museum Victoria and Melbourne University Press. Her PhD (Monash 2016) explored climate change in poetry. Her book *Time Machines* was published by Vagabond Press in 2023 and *Carboniferous* came out from Rabbit Poetry in 2026.

JENA WOODHOUSE has eight published poetry collections, and has been awarded creative residencies in Scotland (Hawthornden Fellowship); France (Tenot Foundation Bursary); Greece (Contemporary Creative Residency, Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens), and the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Ireland. Her poetry has been shortlisted three times for the Montreal International Poetry Prize. Her most recent poetry collection is *The Singing Ship: A Study in Resistances*, Calanthe Press, 2026. Forthcoming with Ginninderra Press in early 2027 is *The Wild Country of Time: Peregrinations*.