

## Five Islands Prize Judges Report 2025

### Introduction

---

Reading first collections of poetry is a privilege. Reading them in close conversation with each other and then with a small panel of passionate peers makes for an enlivening and hopeful experience. In a time when the mainstays of the arts seem to be under threat on multiple fronts, it was especially heartening to have the opportunity to meditate on the devotion, perseverance, and skill that brought these books into the world both on the part of their authors and their publishers. We note that these publishers on the whole are independent and small presses, forging vital opportunities for writers and readers. The overall high standard of these debuts, their robust variety and careful attention to craft, assures us that the future of Australian poetry writing and publishing is bright.

### **Winner**

---

<b>Portraits of Drowning</b>	<b>Madeleine Dale</b>	<b>UQP</b>
------------------------------	-----------------------	------------

---

The beguiling crosscurrents of *Portraits of Drowning* are announced in its title. Who would stop to make a portrait of somebody drowning? Everywhere, Dale makes the unexpected choice. Thoroughly versed in tradition, she chooses surprise, history with a twist, the familiar made strange through an assured idiosyncratic eye. This is a thrilling, moving and thought-provoking collection of poems, meticulously researched but always empathic and intimate. Dale has a remarkable dexterity with form and theme. The collection almost dazzles with its kaleidoscopic shifts and the breadth of its attention, but is always grounded in the particular: 'slicing ginger in the green kitchen' (from "Three Mornings"). Of particular note is Dale's voice. It is deceptively conversational, her tone direct and often matter of fact. The deception is that in fact every word, every line is carved with precision and an exquisite attention to juxtaposition and rhythm: 'Before I love you, the bay gelding breaks his leg' (from "Crush Fracture"). Even on rereading, the poems excite with new possibilities as they shapeshift to slip from beneath the staid weight of assumption. Literary allusions and deep research sit alongside an adventurous, rangy, slightly wild approach to form, structure and poetic composition. Such manoeuvres can only be pulled off by a poet in full control of their craft. We congratulate Madeleine Dale and UQP on this assured and singular book, we know it will find a wide readership.

### **Highly commended**

---

<b>Bathypelagia</b>	<b>Debbie Lim</b>	<b>Cordite</b>
---------------------	-------------------	----------------

---

Taking its name from the high-pressure darkness of the ocean's depths, *Bathypelagia* is a collection of poetic ecology and bodily imagination that is deeply satisfying. Debbie Lim's poems are always lyrical and lucid, with piercing and memorable imagery. Extraordinary aquatic lifeforms are evoked as familiars and in their own otherness, mythologies and archetypes are examined for their potential for damage and for affirmation, and the mystery and power of the parent-child relationship is given fresh illumination. Lim is particularly adept at lyrical discomfort

and poised compression. The poem's images are immediate and intensely suggestive. In "Seahorse", the titular creature "floats a knuckled thought in the vast / un-state of sleep"; and in "Gift of the Sloth", the animal "must appear to be a handbag of dripping moss". In "My son the cephalopod", the child is said to have "the approximate weight of an ocean", yet this could also describe this collection overall. These are poems that captivate, affirm and disturb in equal measure. Diverse in its reach, yet fully coherent as an exploration of relationality and possibility, *Bathypelagia* is an accomplishment.

**Commended (joint)**

**The Infant Vine**

**Isabella G. Mead**

**UWAP**

In *The Infant Vine* Isabella G. Mead invites the reader into a world both intimate and vast, familiar and utterly strange. She creates exquisitely crafted poems out of the visceral experience of birth and the surreal exhaustion of parenting, in conversation with art, with animals, with the sublime power of the more-than-human. The irresolvable tension between life's beauty and its griefs are held. Such as the poem "The Grasshopper" where a child's wondrous gaze is written alongside the threat and horror of climate disaster. Mead is a writer with a luminous eye for detail. Pay attention, her poetry insists, slow down and heed what you might be missing. There is also wry humour in this collection, often found in the incongruous collisions of the mundanity of parenthood with the demands of life. An 'ideal dinner party' envisioned as one where 'I won't be interrupted', where 'I refuse all guests'. There is a hymn-like quality to this collection, such that we hear each carefully composed line and become tuned to the rich sonics of them in concert with each other. Mead's voice is clarion. *the infant vine* is a book that readers will return to multiple times. Each reading deepens the richness of language and ideas and keeps offering that invitation of slow, careful, sacred attention.

**Commended (joint)**

**Past & Parallel Lives**

**Kaya Ortiz**

**UWAP**

*Past and Parallel Lives* articulates a new dimension of Australian poetry. Clear-eyed and prescient, it maps nascent horizons for queer becoming and for anyone intent on excavating their truth. Ortiz is determined to coax the marrow from language, naming and renaming the nameless, never satisfied with a false singularity. The poems are formally dextrous — deft manifestations of their own internal impulses. They impress as technically robust inventions that wholeheartedly claim the page, holographic diagrams that demonstrate how to plot an honest course through the cosmos. They birth a mythology out of loss and hunger, sensitive to tradition but always questioning the given. Ortiz approaches revelation through the kaleidoscopic mundane — grounded in natural longing while turning to meet grace where it lives. A travelogue rich with multidimensional knowing, this collection provides a guide for self-fashioning which, while always attentive to the trauma of birth, celebrates above all else the impulse to live. *Past and Parallel Lives* returns from the future and from the past with a message of joyous resilience and queer homecoming. We can't wait to read more.