

2026 Friendly Street Single Poet Manuscript Competition Judge's Report

In his poem 'After Cavafy', the American poet Edward Field narrates a dialogue between an old man and the muse, lamenting that in his whole life he has only written a few slim books of poetry. The muse responds:

*You have taken a step
on the difficult ladder of poetry,
and even getting to the first rung
is an accomplishment the gods all praise.*

I am humbled to have been invited to judge the 2026 Friendly Street Single Poet Manuscript competition, an important publication opportunity for South Australian poets that is recognised nationally. The award provides an important "first rung" for poets seeking to publish their first book-length collection in what is a highly competitive publishing environment. I congratulate Friendly Street Poets for continuing to provide this publication avenue along with the New Poets series, where I got my first start in 2007.

In reviewing the manuscripts, a fundamental consideration was identifying a body of work with a strong and coherent poetic voice that was aware of its own milieu and influences while developing a unique poetic vision. In terms of poetic technique, I considered the extent to which the manuscripts demonstrated precision and a command of language in the choice of words, including imagery, rhythm and sound. I also looked for evidence of wide reading and the extent to which the poetry engaged in a broader conversation with poetry published in Australia and overseas.

I was drawn to poems that had a strong emotional impact and demonstrated originality and depth of thought. An important question also was the extent to which the poetry was of a quality and contemporary relevance that would see it published in leading Australian and international journals, or likely to be picked up by other publishing houses.

Great writing articulates what we ourselves know deeply to be true but have not been able to consciously recognise or put into words, it has the courage to move beyond socially accepted observations to portray deeper and often unpalatable truths. These were qualities that I looked for in the writing, and the extent to which the poems 'showed' instead of 'told'.

While I was coming to the work blind, the city of Adelaide and South Australia more broadly was a familiar character, there were many scenes I could relate to intimately with the knowledge of the local. This also presented another challenge; would the poems have appeal beyond our state borders and internationally?

The overall quality of the submissions was high, the manuscripts were well edited and presented, and each poet met aspects of the loose criteria that I have outlined

above to some degree. There was also evidence that many of the manuscripts had a distinct voice that had been honed through regular readings and performances at Friendly Street. A smaller number of the manuscripts could sustain a consistently high and publishable standard throughout the entire collection.

I will now make some specific observations about each of the short-listed manuscripts, in the order of commended, highly commended, runner-up and the winning manuscript.

Commended

Putain Quais represents an extensive body of work with a rebellious spirit, as evoked by the title, at times whimsical and profound, in which the poet demonstrates a distinctive voice that kept me coming back to reread. The poems include careful observations of both nature and humanity from a marginalised social and economic perspective. I particularly enjoyed the line in the poem 'ebb tide' – "fruit-bats blackly silent in nightly pilgrimage to ripeness" and the opening verse from the poem 'Tattoo':

the common house-sparrow
might be inked
somewhere between my heart and mind
its hybrid myth of day to day.

The following lines from the poem 'she gives me' also stood out:

cool sax lands softly like a bruise
on skin still tender with fever
holding me taught on a wire listening.

Celebrations of the minutia of everyday life are offset by meditations on the big questions of climate change, the housing crisis, AI and the future of humanity. I commend this manuscript.

Highly Commended

Encyclopedia Ephemera – This is a tightly edited and carefully constructed manuscript that demonstrates range and versatility of form, a strong command of language and a formidable range of subject matter. A poetry of the body, the manuscript is organised like an encyclopedia in sections such as: 'Appliances, Breasts, Food, Women, eXcrement and Zippers'. A party favourite is the hilarious 'An Ode to my Breasts':

Those swinging soft melons
at the front of my chest
those finish line winners
those bedtime armpit pests.

A poem followed by the tender and intimate 'Full Circle':

My sister and I

gently lift her
battered breast
and tend
her cancerous wound.

Viciously
full circle
where once we suckled
we revisit
with horror
and awe.

The bosom bond.

This is powerful stuff, particularly for anyone who has cared for a loved one near end of life. I highly commend this manuscript.

Runner Up

Telling secrets – This is a raw and passionate collection in the confessional vein in which emotion may be recollected in tranquillity but in borrowed, short-lived and rented spaces, such as in the poem 'In Bloom':

trying to recollect the emotion
of that fibro house in Merrylands
the stereo alarm
loud in the dark womb of morning
teen spirit kicking in and mellowing
sixteen wakes next to eighteen
the two of us listening, with trains to catch
but not yet
but that sounds romantic

and it wasn't
nothing romantic
about the sting of International Roast
on an empty stomach
in a cold kitchen
and two Western Sydney trains
travelling in two different directions
from one kind of loneliness to another.

An intelligent collection that is both sincere and self-aware in its intimate exploration of human relationships, while also outward looking with a range of ekphrastic poems responding to local artists, a voice to look out for in future. I commend this manuscript as the runner up.

Winner

The Syntax of Silence – Upon my first reading this manuscript stood out as a work by a poet with a mature, strong and compelling voice that sustained a consistently high-quality and publishable body of work that surprised and delighted with its command of language and storytelling. *The Syntax of Silence* explores a broad range of characters and experiences, celebrating marginalised and working-class voices across time and place, among them survivors of domestic violence, prisoners, farming families facing foreclosure, octogenarian protesters, historical figures and as captured in the title poem, Deaf poets. While firmly embedded in the local, the collection also has an international outlook in poems set in Europe and through engagement with art and literature. To quote from the title poem:

your hands told me
you weren't listening
and now mine
are empty
and silent

once my hands were fearless –
fluid fingers dancing
in the twilight of sound
then they faltered
forgot
and fumbled over *please stay*
and *forgive me*

now I am learning
the syntax of silence –
its rhythm like a second language
and the grammar of misunderstanding
where some things
make more sense
left unsaid

In the poem 'dad's ash pot' a West End can becomes a different kind of sign that signifies a particular South Australian class milieu:

. . . he didn't want an ash pot
could never see the point
in the cost
the elaborate engravings
and the waste of space on a shelf

so we decided on an empty West End can—
he would have loved that idea
even though Mum didn't
when his ashes were ready
we drank a six-pack

cleaned and dried one can
and poured some ashes in
through a paper funnel

I am pleased to commend *The Syntax of Silence* as the winner for the 2026 Friendly Street Single Poet Manuscript competition and look forward to seeing the book in print.

To conclude, I would like to thank all the poets who put so much effort into preparing and submitting their manuscripts, an achievement in itself and important first step “on the difficult ladder of poetry”. I wish them every success in future with their writing.

Thank you for inviting me to be the judge for the 2026 competition.

Dr Steve Brock

7 August 2026