

FRIENDLY STREET POETRY COLLECTION 2026

== Judges Report ==

First off: I'd like to thank Nigel for the opportunity to judge these collections. But, then again, I'd also like to *not* thank him. It's been an extremely difficult task. I'm well aware that I am working with real people here – the writers and the written. These pages are smeared with blood and I can feel the warmth and intensity in so many pieces.

But before I start: housekeeping: Can I implore *anyone* who sends in material to *anyone* to please number pages, use headers, footers - whatever you need to do so that poems fall into the eye of the beholder the way that they're meant to. So you won't have poems starting with one line at the bottom of a page and then the rest of the poem over the page and the tail on the next. People reading a lot of material will use any hiccup, any excuse, any speed bump to say, "Oh look, I don't want to read any further," This is highly unfair in assessing novels but a poem is a body. So please present the body the way you want it to be seen – as still alive!

Page numbering. No fancy fonts. Page breaks where you want them. I know I'm in lecturer mode here, but believe me, getting stuff into publication is tough enough without it looking clumsy by the time it arrives at the other end. Set A4 pages, set margins, use PDF output - whatever you can do to make it... a poem! Not just a page of lines. Get good enough at this and you won't need a publisher.

Selection Process: One core feature that marks those selected is consistency across the poems submitted. Each submissions had gems in them: stunning pieces, poems I would like to read aloud at some stage or make sure that people were made aware of. There were moments when I really heard the writer's voice in my head, and therefore yearned to hear it in actuality.

So I would say write more and choose less. Creosote is almost 30 years worth of work and is a very thin volume because it's been very severely edited. Now I know that there's no sense to this. You can work on a poem for five years and still find a way to fiddle with it later. Another will come to you fully formed in an hour and you will spend five years just decoding it. So I would say to people who are putting a collection together, write 100 poems and submit 20. And then keep writing.

So- what jumped out:

Breakfast in Cairo, Thoughts on Travelling, Zanzibar from **Home and Away: Poetry Through The Ages**. I felt that this writer would perhaps develop a stronger voice by more frequently letting go of the need for rhyme and/or the imperative to 'nail the poem down' in the last verse: not an uncommon flaw - the feeling that each poem has to have a 'twist in the tale', a final punch in case the reader hasn't got the message. To everyone: trust the reader more. It's a poem, not a banner.

From **Prickly Cushions in Every Corner**. I understand the cultural/political emphasis and urgency but wish it to be felt even more deeply purely through storytelling. When that happens - and it does - *your* conclusions become *our* conclusions covertly. I loved *Icon* – said so much in so little. I'd suggest holding back on the exclamation marks – build them into heavier words instead. Also loved: *Where My Parents Once Lived* – great writing: you lived it and felt it, so we did as well.

On reading **Discovery**: Strongest for me here were *Sanctuary of Sawdust* and *Bringing In The Wood*. And the quiet power of *Risen* - an excellent poem, and one that, I believe, shows how (and where)

this writer works best – like a *plein air* painter – immersed in the world, entranced by it and able to carry a fragment of it to us. Surely that is art.

Rivers And Roads: Like other mentioned before - laced with gems like *Boarding a Flight To Melbourne* and *Breeze Through Casuarinas*. So many works in this whole collection were redolent with almost universal memories – it was a journey. I really liked it.

Highly Commended. The latter two mentioned - **Discovery** and **Rivers and Roads** - were hard to split as Highly Commended. Unfortunately I can't go to VAR to make the decision for me so I have to choose ***Rivers and Roads*** by a short half-head.

But, as I said, we are looking for a complete collection of even quality, ready for publication. So perhaps what separates the three collections from those above is, perhaps, a 'fullness'. And, in the light of this I would recommend **Ember Rain...**, **Wishing On Satellites** and **Swallows** for the next ***Friendly Street Poets New Poets anthology***.

Ember Rain is proudly Indigenous writing on the surface but, crucially, also reaches gracefully inward to universal feelings and generously outward towards world events which resonate with its themes. And all this based in story and written with a unifying compassion. The writer asks to be recognised but not by othering those who fall outside the boundaries of their experience – a fine balancing act.

Wishing on Satellites is a body of work with a couple of knives buried in it: a dagger for the harsh cuts needed to bleed us into feeling and a scalpel to forensically dissect relationships and what we do to each other in their name. There is a consistent, strong, barely controlled voice here. You *will* recognise it. But open it carefully – you may get cut. You may bleed.

Swallows is a monster of a collection. I would be willing to bet that there are works within it which even the author doesn't recognise on some days - that's the level of writing. Reading and re-reading it I started to wonder about the title: Does it suggest the bird (as many poems in *Swallows* rest gently on the wings of birds) or does it suggest the act of taking in sustenance and crap at the same time? The poems certainly deal with all the things we are willing to swallow to sustain a full Life. Bravo.

Rob deKok
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