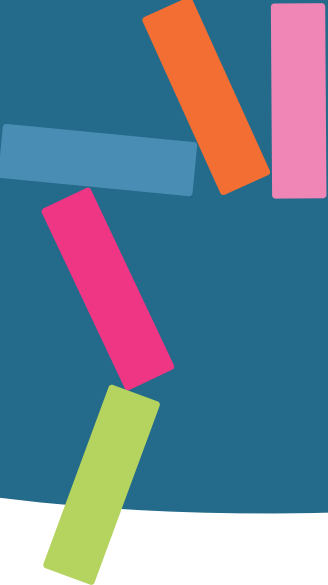


2026 JUDGES' REPORT





POETRY REPORT 2026

Anthony Anaxagorou



The entries in the 2026 Bridport Prize for poetry were massively diverse, with poetics straddling traditional lyric along with more experimental verse. Poems which roved the tentative dynamics of family and bereavement, of war and genocide, of political decadence, alienation and climate collapse. These were poems which appeared to be invested in complexity, in contradiction and flaws, while remaining in strict pursuit of innovation and artmaking.

The ten highly commended poems all possessed a dexterity that stayed with me long after I'd finished reading. In *'Plastic Spoons'*, the speaker's tender relationship with a grandmother is traced across time by use of a plastic spoon that comes to connect childhood memories with old age. The poem *'How Inuit Manage Polar Bear Attacks'* reads as a stark comment on humanity's hostility towards the natural world, marking a divided and fraught existence. First

'Woman's Manifesto' is a piece that laments the life of Soraya – an undetermined figure whose name in Arabic means 'cluster of stars'. The speaker feels as if they could have done more for Soraya, thus evoking feelings of regret, inadequacy and worship; Soraya, I want you whole and immanent. If my Arabic were better I would know your name down to its pith. The poem *'Donation Day'* observes a scene where piles of fabric lay across a basketball court ready for donation. The speaker continues to imagine the lives of those who'll receive the donations, the hardships they've endured, with fine detail. If you look at displacement long enough, it begins to resemble something else. Another poem which struck me for its attentiveness is *'Postmarked'*. A haunting journey across memory and longing with lines like Even with nothing to tell / she sent a room / to stand in. A table. A lamp. Her voice making ordinary things hold still.

The poem *'Driving With Lucia Berlin'* is full of original phrasing in a setting which imagines a car ride with the short story writer, Lucia Berlin. Bizarre, strange and full of character. In *'Al-Mawasi 2007'* a photographer is seen to be traveling through the Bedouin town in South Gaza where they encounter an old Bedouin man who goes on to predict the horrors that will destroy Gaza in years to come. Staying on the theme of genocide, the poem *'A Few Massacres Ago'* is an arresting palindrome presented in two columns (resembling a newspaper article), which devastatingly recounts the lives of those impacted by death, displacement and conflict. The poem *'Missed Call'* reads as a tender poem observing an ageing parent through a perceived distance. Themes of the mundane evoke loneliness, frailty and concern. And finally, *'Losing The Thread'* is a quiet piece, sparse and reserved, which uses the metaphor of embroidery to launch the poem into a more complex space, into the place where needles disappear.

Anthony Anaxagorou

The winning poem, along with the second and third place, inhabited such a assured sense of language and idea that they seemed to almost move beyond the limitations of conventional meaning-making. The poem entitled *'The Observer Effect'*, which came third, reads as physically active, formally aligning the reader's eyes with those of the artist, who is drawing the speaker's body. As the poem develops the fraught dynamic between the pair is further complicated through the statement 'the artist / uses my body / for his fiction' followed by a run of short crude open clauses which depict the artist's gaze as something more foreboding, culminating in gestures towards physical violence and entrapment. The artist, who in the early stages of the poem is one who wields power through controlling the painting, is eventually made to appear compromised or at least equal to the speaker through the final lines 'he knows we're both hanging / I'm just deciding when'. A dark and haunting pun, recalibrating the speaker's agency who appears caught between suicidal ideation and wanting to break the apparent pattern of abuse.

'Nice Girl Aesthetics', which was awarded second place, is a compelling existential concatenation of phrasing, imagery and idea, all working in tandem to create a lively atmosphere of self-deprecation while resisting pity and melodrama. Some of the lines which struck me in the most wonderful way were 'I held the foul task of reinvention in my mouth' or 'I sucked the blue from the hour with my teeth'. The poem is full of sharp, innovative non sequitur images which capture some of the more idiosyncratic moments of modernity, ending a sombre comment on our overheating planet which again takes the reader by surprise.

Finally, the poem which I re-read over half a dozen times before deciding to give it first place, is an incredibly sophisticated conceit which, as the opening line states, sees 'a black beetle enacting himself upon the earth.' The poet concretised the poem from the beginning, formally composing a shape that's made to appear like the exoskeleton of the beetle on a wall. The poem uses the subject of the beetle as allegory for moving around complex themes of status, migration, war, place and memory. Carefully balanced with intricate details where the beetle is suggestive (in an anthropomorphic sense) of a person trying to return home or their land, the poem manages to blend realities together – moving the poem's camerawork away from the beetle and back onto the speaker who by the end of the poem realises they are no different from the beetle. Aside from demonstrating how a poem can be fractal in its ability to hold multiple truths, this was speaking into ideas around resilience and self-determination at a time where necropolitics and the agency of people and states are being quickly and openly dismantled and undermined. A poem which managed to capture the bare essence of our moment.



SHORT STORY REPORT 2026

Manuel Munoz



Judging for the Bridport Prize has been a deep pleasure. Even as I felt inundated by the amount of reading, I was able to stand back from the process and appreciate our commitment to expression and linguistic play. These stories have revealed so much of our current condition, both globally and personally, and their reach in subject was vast. I encountered stories of migration, addiction, love, childhood, and resentment, told in an array of points of view. As I honed the final list, I tracked why some stories were invading my sleep, lingering in my mind as I did my daily errands. No story is ever perfect, even if our favorites certainly feel that way. Even the great stories cannot use every tool in our literary box. Encountering new stories is such a wonderful opportunity to ask—all over again—what a story offers.

'Black Earth in Pompei (Protoevangelium III)' shows us how a queer presence is embedded in history, however much we think it is hidden. In *'The Death of Paster Welshman'*, the gradual erosion of a house

reveals much about the community who is watching it happen. *'Fish Heads'* is a fantastic story about the nature of work and the relations between co-workers and customers. *'The Keens'* tests our sense of sound, a mysterious tale about a vinyl record found in a shop. A child filters nearly all of his traumatic experience into a deep dive on the habits of the animals of *'Mole Tunnels'*. The memory of a childhood bully cannot be shaken in *'Mud'*. The evocative open landscape of The off-comers provides the unexpected backdrop for a story kept private. *'The Rental Ledger'* meditates on the homes we inhabit and the memories we create in individual spaces. *'Security Check'*, another story of work, showcases the monotony of daily labor and how our "real" lives give us respite. Finally, the boys lured in by a strange object in *'The Stamp Shop'* learn that some things are beyond their understanding.

I had a hard time choosing the top three from this wonderful group. Ultimately, I selected these three stories for their exceptional layering of language, theme, and arrangement.

For third place, I chose an unnerving story of entrapment, *'The thing enclosed inside'*. It opens innocently enough, a family moment of attempting to unlock a handmade wooden box with a secret opening. The trick fools our narrator, a young mother, but the pleasure of a small game slowly turns to something more discomfiting. We begin to learn more about the father's run-in with the law, the family's attempt to situate themselves into a new locale, and the mother's true predicament. Has she been tricked or fooled, or is she under her own illusions? Just as we might marvel at any sleight of hand, knowing for sure that it is simply a trick on the eyes, we still feel enraptured by the mirage before us, if not frightened.

Second prize was for a story set in Dubai, *'The Flowers in the Steel Jug'*. Ajmal is taken on as a driver for

Manuel Munoz

the wealthy Mr. Waqar who senses that Ajmal can be trusted with questions of discretion. Is his silence being bought? Soon, Mr. Waqar informs Ajmal that his wife is coming to visit from London and tacitly orders him to watch his tongue. Ajmal's wife Shazia is making her way to Dubai for a visit as well, and soon enough the story has expertly set up a parallel set of marriages, an opportunity for readers to consider how people "read" each other in partnership and the truths that they intuit.

The first prize winner, *'Flower Children'*, proved surprising and satisfying for several reasons. It's a post-apocalyptic story without the spectacle or despair of destruction. We begin to recognize that that this an Australian coastline and, even if we have never been to Melbourne or the Yarra River or St. Kilda Beach, we know that it is now a drowned world and that a forced migration (if not a population wipeout) has transformed everything. 'Flower Children' thrills the senses both visually and audibly, but it also asks tough questions about what we value and what we pass on. Survival is the first order of business. But what then? How do we teach each other what is important and what must be valued? 'Flower Children' lets us sit with this unsettling question but also leaves us with the possibility that, even in the aftermath of destruction, something truer might begin again.

My hope, of course, is that a reader of this anthology will be enamored of all of these stories. There is much to celebrate and admire in each of them, every single one a testament to our continued need to tell stories to each other as witness, solace, and inspiration.

FLASH FICTION REPORT 2026

Tania Hershman



I have been devouring stories for fifty years and what I want as reader/listener/viewer is twofold: something different from what I've read/listened to/seen before, and someone to care about. Those, for me, are essential ingredients and when I judge a competition, I set the bar high - I'm looking for nothing less. What's amazing is that I always find it.

What I'm looking for isn't easily defined; as is clear in the FUEL anthology of prize-winning flash fictions I edited (www.fuelflash.net) there's no recipe for a winning story. There is nothing a story "should" be, no reason that, because you "only" have 250 words, you can't have many characters and scenes, description, backstory, movement in time. Everything is possible.

On first read, I assign each story to the Yes, No or Maybe pile, and make notes for myself. 70 percent of entries generally go straight into "No", for several reasons: First, it feels like something I've read before. Second, the language is tired, I spot a cliché or two. Third, it has a new premise or idea, but either doesn't go anywhere and feels gimmicky, or there's no character in this interesting situation for me to

care about. And fourth, in particular with flash fiction competitions, the story has a fantastic beginning which grips me - but suddenly stops at the word limit, leaving it feeling incomplete. (If you suspect this is your story, please keep writing, your beginning is great!)

The eight stories I selected do completely the opposite: I didn't feel I'd read any of them before, they have a freshness of language and voice, the story goes somewhere, there is at least one person to care about, and I consider them complete and self-contained. They were a delight to read: original, entertaining, and often moving stories of loss and grief, identity and fitting in, community, uniqueness, connection, and the oddness of life itself. Most importantly, they all possess the indefinable energy of a story that needed to be told and told in exactly this way, shape, form, style, voice.

Congratulations to the authors of the five Highly Commended stories, all doing what a fantastic piece of writing does, which is to grapple with enormous themes through the particular; through character. All took risks with structure, voice, content, and achieved pretty much perfect endings for this judge. **'Submersible'** is a magical and original approach to loss and grief, with wonderful imagery; **'Daedalus'** is a new take on a well-worn myth, with a strong voice; **'Fear of Coulrophobia'** is delightful, that final line causing a beautiful reappraisal of the entire story; **'What The Easter Bunny Left Behind'** also tackles enormous themes from a tiny and particular lens, with exquisite detail; **'Grief Has Stolen the Perfume Apprentice's Sense of Smell'** makes its title work incredibly hard and does not let up throughout a story which tackles grief in such an original way.

My top three stood out for two primary reasons: each one felt like the writer had taken great care of every single word, every single space and punctuation mark, not fighting the tight word limit but employing it to

Tania Hershman

make the story richer, deeper. And each time I read these three, they offered me more. That's a hard feat to pull off, in 250 words or in 250,000 words.

In utterly unique ways, my 1st, 2nd and 3rd prize winners tackle humanness and what this life is or might be. My third placed story tricked me with a seemingly cliched title and then wooed me, made me smile, and ultimately also moved me with its original structure, which the writer stayed beautifully faithful to, using it as far from a gimmick. My second place story took an experience most of us won't have, and, as well as making the title work hard, was incredibly playful with its premise, and surprisingly affecting. My first prize winner would appear to be about something that most of us have experienced – shopping – but is so much richer than that, and deeply poignant, and I wanted to reward it too for its unconventional language and grammar. That was a risk, and I love a story that takes risks.

I am honoured to have had the pleasure of reading all your entries, thank you for your bravery in sending them for judgement. Congratulations to the eight winners, you brought me great joy and your stories will stay with me for a very long time!

THE PEGGY CHAPMAN-ANDREWS FIRST NOVEL AWARD 2026

Jennie Godfrey



It is a privilege to have had the opportunity to read these shortlisted novels. I am heartened by both the evident talent and the variety of styles and subject matter, and I look forward to seeing more from all these writers in the future.

This year's winner, *'The Witness'*, had me gripped from the first page and shows a confidence in storytelling that stands out. Opening at the trial of a young man accused of rape, and narrated from the perspective of his mother, Gauri, the reader is immediately engaged, especially with the 'mike-drop' moment where the reader realises, she is there to testify against her son. The writer then moves back in time to tell the story of the mother and the family she married into, exploring the historic dynamic and tensions which have led to this moment, interspersing this with scenes from the trial so that the dramatic tension is kept tight. I particularly admire the ambitious scope and scale of the novel, in terms of the breadth of themes it

touches on, from religion to politics, to culture, class and privilege, in a way that never feels heavy-handed. The novel deftly moves in and out of timelines, with each glimpse of the past feeding into the present-day trial in a way that had me desperate to keep turning the pages. I was genuinely sad when the extract was finished and immediately wanted to read the rest.

'On Shakespeare Road' had a similarly propulsive feel. Centring on a relationship underpinned by coercive control, it is told from the perspective of Audrey, whose chance meeting with a stranger offers her some sorely needed friendship and respite from the situation at home and propels her to begin the process of change.

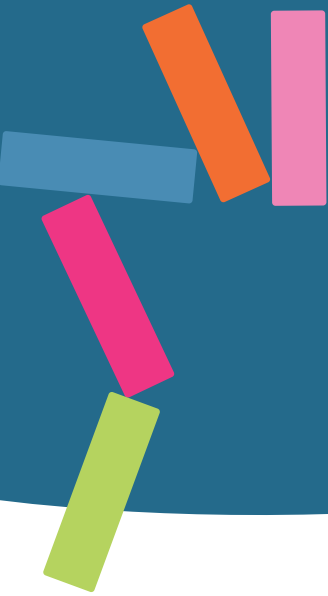
We are introduced to the dynamics of the relationship on the very first page, with Jon's question to Audrey following a near fall on the Tube escalators being 'Who's your new friend?' and the immediacy of that introduction to Jon and his behaviour (as opposed to a slow reveal) felt like a different way of beginning the story that really worked. The topic is both timely and important, and the writing unsentimental, an approach which starkly portrays the reality of a relationship like this, and Audrey's seemingly impossible situation. I was drawn in to both the setup and the characters and fully invested from the beginning.

'Before the Revolution' documents the real-life trial of Howard Hughes, a young Black anti-dope crusader in 1970s Detroit. Aggressively anti-Black policing clashes with vigilante justice in this tense exploration of what it means to fight for justice in a system that's corrupt to the core, and what it means when people forced into victimhood resist, arm up, and fight back. Balancing two points of view, the author zooms in on the personal stories behind a national headline story from America's past, that we should all know more about.

Jennie Godfrey

Contemporary yet lyrical, *'I Am In Love with All of my Friends'* follows two young men across a sequence of nights out as they find each other and themselves against a backdrop of London's gay bars, churches, temples, raves, sex saunas and climbing walls. The storytelling is atmospheric with an almost-dreamlike quality, punctuated with wry one-liners and keen observations. Moving between Manny and Mo's respective points of view, the reader is drawn into their friendship circle – one full of joy and fear, desire and need, grief and love.

'Murmur', an eerie and unsettling narrative, centres on Um, the protagonist, his sister Em, and Um's compelling and psychic relationship with an unknown, guiding, bird-like character, called Murmur. The writing is sharp on the line and viscerally poetic, and the narrative voice creates a profound sense of uncertainty, echoing the loss and instability caused by Um's unprocessed trauma. As Murmur begins to guide Um, their presence begins to control and overwhelm, and the core relationship between the two develops into something far more sinister.



2026

POETRY WINNERS

Judge: Anthony Anaxagorou

FIRST

Black Beetle, Blue Wall

Maya Elphick

SECOND

Nice girl aesthetics

Laura Jane Lee

THIRD

The observer effect

Kate Fenwick

HIGHLY COMMENDED

A Few Massacres Ago

Al-Mawasi, 2007

Donation Day

Driving with Lucia Berlin

First woman's manifesto

How Inuit Manage Polar Bear Attacks

Losing the Thread

Missed Call

Plastic Spoons

Postmarked

Saemah Mushtaq

Elena Croitoru-Reed

Collin M Kim

Ahana Banerji

Clara-Laeila Laudette

Paul Moclair

Esther Lay

Nigeen Dara

Jeremy Pak Nelson

Adam Keith Johnston



2026

SHORT STORY WINNERS

Judge: Manuel Munoz

FIRST

Flower Children

Amanda Hildebrandt

SECOND

The Flowers in the Steel Jug

Raeesa Zeb

THIRD

The thing enclosed inside

Issariya Morgan



HIGHLY COMMENDED

Black Earth in Pompei (Protoevangelium III)

Matteo Mora Castañeda

Fish Heads

Elizabeth M. Terzakis

Mole Tunnels

Emma McDonald

Mud

Efrat Danoni

Security Check

Catherine McElroy

The Death of Paster Welshman

Marcelle Olivier

The Keens

A G Bestwick

The off-comers

Tony Durrant

The Rental Ledger

Jennifer Wawrzinek

The Stamp Shop

Arthur Mandal



2026

FLASH FICTION WINNERS

Judge: Tania Hershman

FIRST

Esther fifty-eight her birthday

Kerry Hood

SECOND

The Book Prize Jury

Andrew Boulton

THIRD

Fake News

Chris Hall



HIGHLY COMMENDED

Daedalus

Michael Kilgannon

Fear of Coulrophobia

Debra A. Daniel

Grief Has Stolen the Perfume Apprentice's Sense of Smell

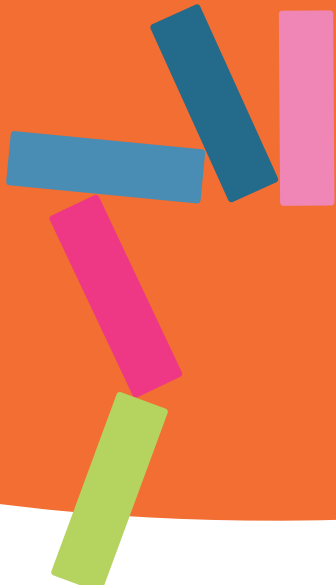
Rachael Dunlop

Submersible

Adam Z. Robinson

What The Easter Bunny Left Behind

Harriet Sandilands



2026

THE PEGGY CHAPMAN-ANDREWS FIRST NOVEL AWARD

Judge: Jennie Godfrey

FIRST

The Witness

Mohini Singh



RUNNER-UP

On Shakespeare Road

Hannah-Fleur Fitz-Rankin



HIGHLY COMMENDED

Before the Revolution

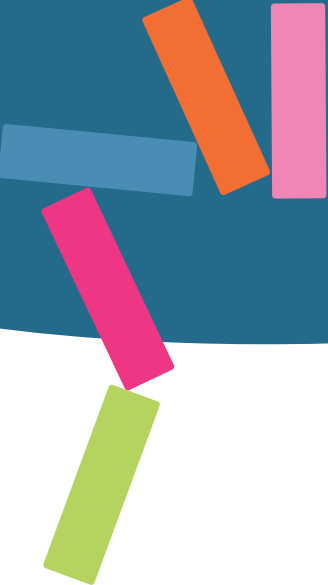
Lisa Lenzo

I am in love with all of my friends

Simran Singh

Murmur

Simeon Ralph



THE DORSET PRIZE

Presented to the highest placed writer from Dorset in the competition each year.
Sponsored by The Book Shop, South Street, Bridport, Dorset DT6 3NQ

WINNER

The Things I Will Never Have

Lydia Clark

YOUNG WRITER AWARD

Presented to the highest placed writer aged 16 to 25 in the competition each year.

WINNER

Black Beetle, Blue Wall

Maya Elphick

NEVER TOO LATE AWARD

Presented to the highest placed writer aged 60+ in the competition each year.
Sponsored by A M Heath, Literary Agency, 6 Warwick Court, Holborn. London WC1R 5DJ

WINNER

Esther fifty-eight her birthday

Kerry Hood