MEDIA RELEASE
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Fremantle poet makes history winning ACU Prize for Poetry

Jennifer Kornberger has become the first poet living in Western Australian to win one of Australia's richest prizes for a single poem.

The poet and artist from Fremantle has won first prize, worth $10,000, in the Australian Catholic University's Prize for Poetry national competition, the first from Western Australia since the competition began in 2013.

Kornberger's award-winning poem, 'In the Back of the Ambulance' – which beat 677 entries on the theme 'Witness' – reflects on her unexpected visit to the hospital while travelling through Austria.

"I woke one morning to find that I was completely incapacitated," Kornberger said.

"The world was spinning out of control, and I was overcome with attendant retching. I had the sensation of continuously falling into an abyss.

"I just felt like I was dying."

Kornberger was unknowingly suffering from a severe case of benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV).

In the poem, she describes her interactions with a young paramedic, who had used his right to refuse mandatory military service and instead chose civilian service. Kornberger, despite having severe vertigo and not speaking German, used the 20-minute ambulance ride to become "a paramedic of poetry".

"On the drive to the hospital, we became a gift for each other," Kornberger said.

"In the small space and time that we occupied there was a palpable presence; it was as if we had found a new language of simultaneous giving and receiving. I am forever grateful for this extraordinary experience."

ACU Prize for Poetry judges Emeritus Professor Margot Hillel OAM and Professor Robert H. F. Carver said 'In the Back of the Ambulance' was full of humanity, and praised Kornberger's "beautiful lyricism".

"That gift between Kornberger and the young paramedic has been turned into a gift to us in this beautiful poem," Emeritus Professor Hillel said.

"Although it recalls an experience in Austria, there's a universality in her poem – the way two people can come together in a particularly meaningful way in the midst of an emergency, even though they probably won't ever see each other again."

"Kornberger exemplifies poetry as a healing art."

This is the first time Kornberger has been shortlisted for the ACU Prize for Poetry. She was shortlisted in the poetry category of this year's WA Premier's Book Awards and has been shortlisted five times for the Newcastle Poetry Prize.

Kornberger wrote her first published poem at the age of nine and is now an established poet and artist based in Fremantle.

She has always considered poetry "a healing art", and in the era of artificial intelligence, "a matter of survival of the human race".

"Poetry taught me that the heart could think very clearly," Kornberger said.

“I came to the conclusion that if it is language that defines us as humans, then truly creative language, language that is inspired, can continually restore our essential humanity to us.

“To imagine truly, to name what is emerging, to speak a future that we want to live in, all this is the province of poetry. Without the ability to create new images, new meanings, we are lost as a species.”

Kornberger frequently fuses prose with performance art, inviting poets to feature in her live art installations, including one for the 2016 Fremantle Biennale.

“It’s important for me that poetry moves into the world in new ways,” she said.

“Publishing is one avenue, but performance meets new audiences; it meets people who would never sit down and read a poem from a book.

“It’s like a therapy through the spoken word.”

Kornberger said competitions like the ACU Prize for Poetry were “culture initiators”.

“Poetry competitions like the ACU Prize for Poetry are indispensable for the continuance of any striving towards excellence, for the encouragement of poets at any stage in their development,” she said.

“Because they exist, new work is constantly produced, and this is vital for the entire cultural life of Australia.”

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Catholic Mission) Fr Gerry Gleeson said entries for this year’s poetry prize came close to breaking the competition’s record high number in 2021.

“Australian poetry appears to be thriving, based on the interest in this year’s ACU Prize for Poetry competition,” Fr Gleeson said.

“As a Catholic university, ACU has joined in the Church’s historic tradition as patron of the arts, hosting the Prize for Poetry for more than a decade.

“The collection of new poems from this year’s competition is a testament to the serious cultural contributions Australian poets make, and I congratulate all the winners and poets who entered this year.”

Mary Wickham from Melbourne has won second prize worth $5000 for her poem ‘Angel’ while Linda McQuarrie-Bowerman from New South Wales has taken out third prize of $3000 for her entry ‘Looking Upward’.

Five poets have been Highly Commended with a $750 prize including Russell Buzby, Jo Gardiner, Verity Laughton, Anthony Lawrence, and Elizabeth Walton.

The work of 88 shortlisted poets in the competition appears in *Witness: Poems from the 2026 ACU Prize for Poetry*, selected and edited by Robert H. F. Carver and Margot Hillel OAM.

Copies of the 2026 Anthology are available on the ACU Prize for Poetry website.

Jennifer Kornberger is available for interview on Friday 6 November.

Media Contact: Emilie Ng, 0475 963 606, emilie.ng@acu.edu.au

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