

# **CASELBERG**

**INTERNATIONAL  
POETRY  
PRIZE  
2021**

## WINNER

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**Sophia Wilson** [Ōtepoti]

### Sea-skins

*'and the angry waters dashed themselves against their narrow bound'*  
(Phoebe Cary, *The Leak in the Dyke*)

In the ruins of this floating house, there's comfort in  
simple cycles:  
the click, click, click of spinning wheel,  
small wooden beads; the next round of medicinal pills

I have a dermatological condition that involves  
shedding malignant layers

A physician displayed my skins on a bulletin board,  
stuck pins in the scabs, voodoo style  
He banished me to a moonless sea, told me I was a  
sinking boat,  
made so many holes in me, I was anyone's for the taking

Pirate-nurses tied my tongue to a stone,  
and flung it overboard

Who can blame them?  
All I want is to get to the X, get drunk, or get into a  
hammock  
with strange seamen, because that helps me forget  
what's unfurling in the future

Some mornings cold waters engulf the sun,  
waves pound the portholes, and all the life-rafts go limp

Mostly I'm trapped with my babies  
in a darkened hull,  
floodwaters rising *exactly as predicted*

Injustice is a hard rash to soothe: each circumnavigated  
wound  
is like the Dutch boy's small finger plugging that dyke

My spine is a displaced mast, my navigation ataxic:  
Consumptive cells conjure up  
yet another metastatic colony,

but on the keyboard-rosary, *click, click, click,*  
a new poem surfaces: sleek-skinned, seaworthy,

set to survive invasive latitudes and longitudes —  
a savvy sigh, a seabird's song,  
a swift and salient filling of the sails

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## RUNNER UP

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**Jenna Heller** [Ōtautahi]

### **Kintsukuroi**

1. That there are five stages of grief does not mean you will experience them in order or even at all.
  2. The common swift stays airborne for up to ten months every year, pausing only for severe weather. And though it has been nine years since your mother died and twenty-nine since you last saw your father alive, you have hunkered down in the quiet as grief flies the nights, the weeks, the years. Weaves your days like a golden repair.
  3. The gumption. To braid together threads of memory with future plans and present worries into a carefully constructed nest.
  4. And what of the swifts that dazzle in aerobatic flight? That pierce the twilight with elfin screams and finally rest in lofts and spires?
  5. There is no time to lollygag. The bargaining continues. And acceptance? Well, that requires some other kind of act.
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## HIGHLY COMMENDED

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**Jilly O'Brien** [Ōtepoti]

### **Inversion Layers, Hāwea**

It's been three weeks in dulling gloom  
three weeks stuck in stone; steel shot  
sewn into pockets; damp ashes  
dumped on jackets. Ankle weights.

Three weeks of rubbed-out charcoal  
sketches smudged on aching thumbs;  
removal of sea fret traces,  
trudges to the mail box. That's all.

May is a swindler. May sells  
promises of yellow flowers  
upturned towards the light, tells us  
'Uncurl your leaves, limbs, other things'.

I hang a picture on the wall.  
It's a lake scene; clear water  
shimmers blue-green in blazing heat;  
skimming stones meet the waves; and I,

I wonder why you stayed. I find you  
brushing sorrow off our shoulders;  
worrying at stitches until  
a small hole appears, spilling cold.

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## HIGHLY COMMENDED

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**Jane Simpson** [Ōtautahi]

### **The domestic assistant**

She is Duchamp's nude, descending a staircase,  
but in uniform, with a vacuum cleaner hose round her neck,

trips halfway down, hits her shins, bangs into door jambs;  
she is a staccato fiddle in the legato violins,

sweeps and dusts in tantalising silence,  
leaves her mauri in every room,

vacuums into corners, stumbles on the black spine  
of *Hākuī*, takes and reads about her kin,

speaks with eyes wide as an owl's, declaims  
with a kuia's tongue: *I am a Ngāi Tahu woman.*

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## HIGHLY COMMENDED

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**Alan Roddick** [Ōtepoti]

### **At Bluecliffs**

*For My Wife*

I'm at the fishing hut, the farthest end of  
that curving blade of a beach whetted by tides,  
and there's your Dad, comfortable on the doorstep,

knocking the dottle from his pipe, thumbing in  
a fresh fill of his favourite tobacco,  
Murray's Erinmore Flake, to scent the woodsmoke.

He's not alone: here come his sons-in-law  
back from checking out the Waikōau,  
Ted always keen to know was it fishable,

and Johnny chuckling still at his lucky find,  
a Fiordland lake where big trout lined the shore  
like wallflowers at a dance, and not one landed.

And there's your Uncle Bill and cousin Sam,  
solid men now sketchy in the glitter.  
I hear their voices sounding in my head,

tenor and baritone, as they review  
the lamb schedule with cheerful pessimism.  
I've finished picking seaweed from the net,

the tea has drawn, your father taps the billy,  
sets out five mugs – and at once I know  
how they had all come to be here together,

and I must wake up, hoping that I might wake,  
desperate that you would wake up too,  
to hear that I'd come back, and where I'd been.

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## HIGHLY COMMENDED

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**Sandie Forsyth [Ōtepoti]**

### Ode to L

L stands for Lesbian,  
which was always the word for me,  
back when saying it out loud took a bit of girding,  
and withstanding the ensuing ripples of unease  
took a certain willfulness on my part.  
Of course there were other options,  
and I wore Dyke for a while  
which suited my frame of mind  
but not my hairdo,  
and all the others seemed to be a part of something else,  
like a lesser category, while Lesbian  
was completely its own self,  
and once I stepped in,  
it was clear there was all the room in the world for me,  
and any way, I was already a foot taller  
and had a longer stride  
and lesbian was me and mine  
and we were all trains charging down the line  
out in front, yelling as we went  
to make way, we're coming through!

And then. And then  
we were the ones asking for rest stops,  
and every time I looked up  
a new letter had been added,  
and some new glorious truth about who we all are  
was making itself visible, and of course,  
there is no end to our variety.

But this poem is a love poem to the L  
which was placed at the beginning,  
which is astounding, even now,  
and may have been a moment of enlightenment,  
or reparation,  
but I suspect standover tactics.

And every time I hear the whole thing  
there it still is, the first letter spoken.  
I keep expecting it will have slipped away  
or been dropped off,  
given the long back story,  
but there it stays,  
As if it were the start of something.

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## HIGHLY COMMENDED

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**Derek Schulz** [Raumati Beach]

### Kōanga Ngākau

*You are now ready, she decided, for one of my deep purple dreams. And geared me up for it her way—the samadhi jacket, the harakeke beanie, the INDIAN, the te tata o te Rangi number plate, her tail wind. Ka hao te rangitahi, she grinned, looking so very pleased with herself, shaking me down. You will be in Te Pō within 10 minutes. Ten of her minutes maybe, because I was already there, lying in tall grass where there was a rustling of wind, a humming of bees, the caress of a kaitiaki checking out my inner ear. Her valleys flowed with thoughtfulness and kōanga ngākau (joy), where it was always almost summer. The sound of Te Rā came bustling in from beyond, accompanied by a little yodelling effect, the echo of an echo. Then, there he was in person! He was really nice, and showed me a few of his moves. This she likes, he said, with this, and this. He hoisted his arms in a swirl, lifted his knees, sinking his arse to the ground while kicking out like a primo on Red Army pay. Then pulled me into his charade. We pinocchio'd our way across the stage together, arms secured aloft by strings, our heads nodding /to the left/ to the left/ to the left/ as we crossed the floor, encircled in light that would always be her, neither wanting it to end. Which it then did. When all else fails take her bowling, was the last word of his command, before turning back into night. So which Te Ra were you? I mused. There are so many now. Might you be her third man? There flowed magic abroad in the air, tumbling me into her pretty little square—Wiesse Rose. Everything went still and quiet, as if snow had just stopped falling through the night of the first ever day. Frost began to spread across her blood-white flowers, deepening their sibylline ardour and starting up a nightingale in the nearest kowhai tree. He sang of easeful death, and his great love for poetry and letters from home. The tune rang through me like a bell but was way too much to compute and I sat down upon the banks of his rivers of burble and wept.*

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## JUDGE'S REPORT

### Majella Cullinane [Ōtepoti]

Irrespective of a judge's particular tastes, there are elements which make a poem rise to the top: the careful craft of language, rhythm, clarity, and originality, especially in terms of imagery and voice. The subject matter of entries was broad: political and social commentary on recent events in Aotearoa, nature, love, ghosts, death and identity. Many poems had striking lines, but were let down because the tone or rhythm was sporadic, or the observation clichéd. Others suffered from poor line endings or opaque language that rendered them difficult to connect with. Many would have benefited from closer editing and precision – often 'less is more.' The use of, or lack of punctuation is a controversial topic in contemporary poetry. While poems can work without it, a blanket lack of punctuation that ultimately impedes or jars the reader is best avoided.

**Winner: *Sea-skins*** drew me back again and again with its inventive language, and the assuredness of its voice. The leaps of imagination between stanzas, between the ordinary and extraordinary are surprising and original:

*A physician displayed my skins on a bulletin board,/stuck pins in the scabs, voodoo style/He banished me to a moonless sea, told me I was a sinking boat,...*

**Runner Up: *Kintsukuroi***

A list poem on the nature of grief, for its combination of startling nature imagery and emotional insight:

*And what of the swifts that dazzle in aerobatic flight? That pierce the twilight with elfin screams and finally rest in lofts and spires?*

**Highly commended**

**At *Bluecliffs*** – A carefully drawn narrative poem that charts a day fishing:

*a Fiordland lake where big trout lined the shore/like wallflowers at a dance...*

***Inversion Layers, Hāwea*** – A meticulously crafted poem with some lovely examples of personification:

*May is a swindler. May sells promises of yellow flowers/upturned towards the light,...*

***Kōanga Ngākau*** – An ambitious poem with a bustling energy, and striking imagery:

*the caress of a kaitiaki checking out my inner ear/ and (...) Frost began to spread across her blood-white flowers,...*

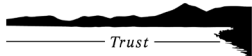
***Ode to L*** – With its confident, engaging voice, this is a poignant lyric on a woman's sexual identity:

*(...) I was already a foot taller/ and had a longer stride/and lesbian was me and mine/...*

***The domestic assistant*** – Struck me for its assertive, unapologetic pronouncement of identity:

*she is a staccato fiddle in the legato violins,//sweeps and dusts in tantalising silences, leaves her mauri in every room,...*

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