

CASELBERG

**INTERNATIONAL
POETRY
PRIZE
2022**

WINNER

YVETTE THOMAS [Auckland]

NOT WHAT YOU WANTED

I could have been your Boadicea
 or blossoming lavender in July,
 your secret treehouse, your starfish in a rock pool,
 your dirty girl who did all the things you wanted,
 whenever you wanted,
 your underwater cave, your shy muse, I could have been
 a sweet voice singing in the distance,
 or a red helium balloon with “I Love You” written on it,
 I could have been leaves doing amber backflips in the wind for you
 or an abstract painting hanging on your wall,
 I could have been your Azure Window,
 your lighthouse, your pyramid, your temple,
 maybe even your very own Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

But I wasn't.

I was a meerkat hiding in a burrow, an insomniac,
 a lover of benzodiazepines and Scrabble,
 I was a dense thicket, a message in a bottle,
 a used device with missing instructions,
 a thrashing epileptic, a tea party for one,
 a crab scuttling across the shore,
 a sparrow flying with a twisted leg,
 I was a frantic pacer walking up and down,
 an unlikely prophet who predicted terrible things
 which came true,
 but most of all I was midden,
 animal bone, ash and mollusc shells,
 broken tools and fish hooks.

RUNNER UP

MARGARET MOORES [Auckland]

Self-portrait, nude

Drifts of sand under wooden benches, faint smell of pee, a puddle on the concrete floor where the roof leaks. The harsh scrub of a threadbare towel dried to a crisp by the sun. A shaft of light revealing goose-pimpled breasts and pale belly contrasting with tanned and sun-spotted arms and legs. A single varicose vein winding down the back of her right leg from the soft place behind her knee.

She walks home towards her brushes and paints and the challenge of luminosity, colour, skin that is always covered. The varicose vein is hers to depict or not. Smudge of blue-green pastel or watercolour pencil. She is aware of her knee, the way it creaks sometimes and the way her shoulders ache. A sudden memory of making damson jam follows, blue skins staining the yellow flesh crimson. The back of her hands wrinkling now like jam setting on a saucer.

She could depict herself as smooth and blemish free in a kind of pink glow because of the curtains she has pulled against the light. A different hair colour might make her look younger, and lipstick, if she could find the tube at the back of the bathroom drawer.

She adjusts the lamp to get the best out of her skin tone and leans toward the mirror while her belly settles on top of her thighs—as disconcerting as discovering that all the entries in her address book are out of date. The curtains billow against the open window, the pink glow pulsing, while she considers what she could reveal—scars, liver spots, newer purple plum blotches, and the folds of flesh at her waist like a badly plumped cushion. When she raises her brush to the canvas, something lightens within her.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

RATA GORDON [Raglan]

A home for just us

the landlord was sweat and gut
 his mouth was a rusty hole
 he showed us the clipped green
 carpet and the tall grey lawn
 we hid from the white cat
 we hid from the boys we hid
 from the man who shouted
 at his dog next door

we brought in our boxes
 of blankets and bowls
 mum cut apples the faucet worked
 the hollow of her neck
 was a bath for our dolls
 we made dust pies which turned to mud
 rain came in the afternoon
 she put a bowl under the
 drip

the carpet around it
 turned to wet moss
 she swapped it
 for a pot and then
 a bucket

the drip kept me
 awake like a ticking
 clock or a tickling cough
 my dreams were hunched
 in the dark there was
 a noise my mother saying
fuck the light was on
 and she was standing up
 on a chair her arms held
 high water gushing
 through her fingers
 holding up the bulging
 ceiling holding out
 the lumbering dark
 her face was wet

go she was telling us
get the man
next door

HIGHLY COMMENDED

CLAIRE ORCHARD [Wellington]

Chicken

Grandad took to calling me Chicken when
I was little, maybe six or seven.

He'd come in to tuck me in, always the same:
night, Chicken, time to put big light off. It was after

our father died. I think he started calling me
Chicken so I'd know I was still loved. Later on

I read in my Stepsister's diary that she could see,
it was so obvious, that my brother was his favourite.

I remember hoping it wasn't true.
But I suppose if it was, so what?

Last evening, after all the hurley-burley of his funeral,
I heard his voice inside my head again: *night, Chicken.*

He maybe had a pet name for my brother too but
I've not heard it, I've not asked, and I'm not going to.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

PAULA CLARE KING [Ashhurst]

Too much telling

I looked at the carpet as I took each step. It was a wide staircase with shiny fancy wood railings. The carpet was dark green with a gold diamond-shaped pattern. It reminded me of the carpet in the Catholic Church I attended when growing up. That was blue, but otherwise it was almost identical. I'm wondering now if the carpet in the Church was red. On the wall it said, *ring bell and take a seat*. I took a seat but didn't ring the bell as it wasn't there last time. I took a seat and did some coughing so as to let them know I was there. Not that they could identify me by my cough but just so they knew someone was there and they needed to come out and see if it was the person that they were meant to be seeing. It wasn't long before a woman came out and said *well hello there, come through*. I can't tell you my name because of confidentiality and I can't tell you the woman's name also because of confidentiality. What I can tell you is that two other people came through looking for where to go and saw me sitting there coughing. They don't know my name but they may well know my face in the future which could well be an issue depending on how the future turns out. I wondered if I should have worn some sort of disguise but that seemed to defeat the purpose of the entire exercise.

I took another seat this time inside the little room where two soft charcoal chairs faced each other. A small coffee table stood on four legs in between and a wastepaper basket to the right with three crumpled tissues in it. Three crumpled tissues in it. I thought, hello, someone has already been here sitting in this chair facing this woman and dropping tissues in this very wastepaper basket. Then the woman talked and I talked and I listened to the woman talk and she listened to me talk. I understood this to be true because what she said connected to what I said and so on and so far three tissues joined the already before I entered the room tissues. It was a real mingling of tissues by the time the allocated time was up and the talking and listening came to an end. I'm not sure now if it was a mingling. The mingling of tissues. If only I had paid intricate attention to the initial tissues I may have been able to distinguish them from the tissues that came later – my tissues. Maybe there was no mingling at all. Perhaps it was more an invasion of later tissues on earlier tissues. And the earlier tissues found themselves overshadowed, suffocated, sodden. If this is the case I wish to apologise. It was not my intention to tell so much. It was not my intention to dominate.

JUDGE'S REPORT

Glenn Colquhoun [Horowhenua]

Ok – so what have I let myself in for? This is kind of crazy. I mean I've judged a few writing competitions in my time and I usually find a relatively thin layer of cream rising to the top of the poetry milk can – one or two individual poems that stab me in the eyes and make the whole thing easier. It's supposed to be pretty straightforward.

But this has been the most difficult poetry competition I've ever had to judge. I was a pin cushion by the time I went through all of the poems. And the long-list stretched out behind me for miles. I had to cast my eye back over it again and again to whittle it down. Then lived with a kind of dread for a couple of weeks knowing I had to whittle it down even further. That's really what I want to say first and foremost. What a beautiful bunch of singers all those who entered the competition truly are. I'm humbled as a grizzled old human being by what they said and how they said it. You could make a very good poetry collection indeed from a generous selection of the entries.

But competitions are competitions. And they're cruel and joyful and nuts. So don't get bent out of shape about them one little bit.

And inevitably judging poems made me ask again what it is I respond to in a poem. And so I'll hit you up with that for what it's worth. And because it might help make sense of my choices.

After scribbling for so many years without any sensible idea of what I am doing, and resisting all the pronouncers and pronouncing, I think a poem for me is most simply a song. Perhaps a song for the spoken voice nowadays. That is how they began after all. As a reaching out with language to do a few simple things that we need language to do; ask if anyone is out there, rock a child to sleep, say goodbye to a love, make the tribe dance, tell of our histories and geographies. I can't really think of anything else.

And because they were sung then they contain a cry. Some sort of note or tone or ache or reach. Perhaps a thumping old heartbeat by which all things are listed. Perhaps an echo of children laughing. Or a storm brewing.

Those are the rough palettes.

Over time though they changed shape a little. And then it was that they developed startle and conceit. Or the riddle if you want to put it another way. And I reckon these qualities especially ramped up after poems started to get written down. It meant we could read them over again and again. And lay down elaborate curling weaving thoughts. Poems got brainier and brainer. And the pleasure and shock of looking at something taken for granted in a new and powerful way became a pleasure in itself. Poems had always played with language when they were sung. But after writing rocked up they could go nuts. And did.

Sometimes it makes me sad though when I see people not engaging so much with poetry now. Or feeling intimidated by it. So I'm a sucker for those old joys of oral poetry that have always been so democratic. And relied on the audience as an integral part of the interaction between a poet and their work.

That's enough of that. It might just give context to my choices. Poetry competitions unearth great poems. But they also ask us all over again what it is we are responding to. So there you go.

With those thoughts in mind my winner of the Caselberg Poetry Prize for 2022 is 'Not what you wanted' by Yvette Thomas. Why? Because it sang. And it hurt. And it made me recognise the hurt in all of us. And because it riddled with language. It juxtaposed words in combinations that made me think and feel the freshness of rejection all over again – no matter how old a friend it has been. And because it rose up and and fought back and was beautiful. It spoke with a single uninterrupted voice. I believed the person who wrote it. My deep congratulations to them. I doff my cap.

My runner up is 'Self portrait, nude' by Margaret Moores. Because it made me love again all that is beautiful in what breaks. And because it redraws especially all that old bullshit about the ways women's bodies in particular are supposed to be. I just cheered all the way through it. Perhaps it's the old doctor in me too that has tended bodies for years. And found so many beauties in the way they bend and nip and tuck. As if life itself is a big old chisel carving them into something so much more gorgeous than the mad values of *The Bachelor*.

I loved that it sang too in its own quiet way. Holding a tension from start to finish. The perfect cadence of human thought and reflection. Bloody good stuff.

As for the others, God it was hard to turn them away. I rarely found anything that wasn't a great poem, or a great poem in waiting. You know, those poems you see inside poems. I found so many of them. But it's a competition eh? So it's not like I can just beg you to take a single line out so the thing can soar.

I loved the poems to age. There were a few of those. The poems scattering ashes. That someone thought to imagine a leopard loose in a city. I loved the poems celebrating old love. The poem about swimming at night. The poems talking back to other poets. The idea of writing to a bag of saline with added potassium is genius. I wish I'd thought of that. I'm super jealous. The same goes for the poems celebrating Minty wrappers, old pianos, maps. You guys know who you are. Here's to you all. A deep bow to those who talked about illness, tumours, and to whoever sang the tidal blues. The concrete poem on the tidal zone was a cracker too.

In the end I decided to highly commend the following poems. But the list could certainly have been longer.

A home for just us by Rata Gordon

Chicken by Claire Orchard

Too much telling by Paula Clare King

So thanks to all who entered the Caselberg poetry prize – for the haunting, and for the effort of trying to tie a piece of human thought down to a piece of paper. Thanks for the urge to say. So many sayings in a way add up to something greater than any individual poem. They are a small piece of reportage into what human beings sing about in twenty-first century New Zealand. A piece of remarkable science perhaps. I loved this view of the poems too. Placing them end to end created something that was greater than the sum of their parts.

Nō reira, Ngāti Scribblers, tēnei iwi mīharo, tēnei iwi ngaoko, he mihi nui ki a koutou katoa. Good luck out there to all of you. I loved sitting around your fires. I'm sending out a deep old human hug to all of you, my brothers and sisters. What other sensible thing to do is there in this big old scary and beautiful world?

Ngā mihi, **Glenn Colquhoun**

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