

CASELBERG

INTERNATIONAL
POETRY
PRIZE
2023



JOINT WINNER

TIM SAUNDERS

Aloneness

Sometimes I would stay
with my grandfather
and listen
to thunder's distant rumble
resound like a lonely kākāpō
down valleys
and eroded gullies,
moist and windborne
through the green velvet crush
of undergrowth.

Under a half-pie moon
he described the meaning of lekking
and talked of
nocturnal behaviours,
the uselessness of wings,
the scattered moss
that crept across headstones
and the south side of rātā.

On the shelf
above the fire
were my grandmother's ashes.

Some nights
my grandfather scooped a bowl in the dust
and boomed for her.

JOINT WINNER

JILLY O'BRIEN

The Tiriti Translator

The swings were all chained
and the sea salt was finer
so I knew it was Sunday

I knew it was Sunday
for kirk-going carts
wore Sunday shirt with collar and tie

I watched their fury flash by
but the sea was our kirk
and a bou-backit sea requires work

even on a Sunday.

You weren't to know we brought Sunday to you
when we came, hand-habble, to shoot kereru
travel upriver, harvest the moon

and the stars, buy land at the market
buttery-lippit, for a penny an acre
singing by afternoon

the tune of the righteous, the pious
the greedy, the liars, firm
in the truth of the written word.

Still, harken Tūi the parson bird
making the sound chains make
when they shake to the ground

Chain sounds part of his repertoire
the heart of resistance
Ko te Rātapu tēnei rā

The river puts her fingers in her ears
rolls the stones over and over
and over and over

even on a Sunday

RUNNER UP

MEGAN KITCHING

The Time of the Wetlands

Scry into a sinkhole: a felted plain
with its tents of tussock
in the wake of night

porous with sky

gleams, hums. Here clouds
breathe into wind-
bruised water and rare moments

come clear, as the chord
of a duck drawn across a pond.

In secret pockets

moves the juggler's shadow of a hare
or riroriro on a flax stalk
slinging his concentric songs

like skimmed stones over the marsh,
the groans of geese,
cymbals of light.

Silence blows south-west.

The thousand lashes of toetoe,
harakeke blink
repeatedly blink.

Time layers down.
Matted shallows swallow
the whirlpool of the sun.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

NICOLA EASTHOPE

Still life in an op shop

Dylan is sixteen and feels he's been working here part time for too long. He's sorting reject CDs by genre and thinking this is such an old person thing, not retro enough yet. Customers mull at the table of vintage crockery: Temuka bowls and Crown Lynn, Arcoroc mugs, clear glass with the embossed crocuses. Everybody wants to save nature now—

flowers on tea towels, mountains in frames. There's a box block matt print like some DeviantArt they've chucked thinking some sucker will love this! Dylan stares at it so long he wonders if he can love this—flamingos flocking with a pink toothbrush on a lean in a salt flat—the kind you see in Bolivia on the internet, at altitude, in sunsets but without pop surrealist toothbrushes. The boss

is talking about the weather with one customer after the other. What a mild winter we're having! Eighteen degrees and sunshine in June! We are so blessed. Our summer sale rack is bare! It's not good, really, thinks Dylan. The Greater flamingo depends on rainfall to help it mate. See the flock's formed in a chevron across the dry distance, in hope. But the Even Greater toothbrush head is doing fine. Let me carry it out

for you, he says to a girl with glitter tipped fingernails shaped like long coffins. Daylight stipples her face, there's a crackling in the air—a crash, splash, shells, skeletons. Thank you, she smiles. We really do live in #paradise.

JUDGES REPORT 2023

RHIAN GALLAGHER

Judging the Caselberg Trust International Poetry Competition has been a polyphonic experience: there was such a multiplicity of voices and variety of approaches to how a poem might be made. The diversity, and the level of accomplishment, made it a real pleasure to read and engage with the entries. Competitions are often a prompt for getting a poem completed and I'm grateful to everyone who did just that, and then submitted their work.

The role of judge might well conjure damnation and court rooms. Yet poetry competitions in various forms, in different cultures, have gone on for centuries. There have been eras in which poets literally sang for their supper. These days, no matter how well a poet sings it will rarely pay for their supper. Yet we go on singing.

Judging the competition was also hard. After several readings I had a long shortlist. I then attempted to come up on these poems by surprise, reading each at random moments throughout a day, as if there were no competition but simply my experience as a reader.

Thank you again to all those who entered.

Joint Winner

'Aloneness' by Tim Saunders

'Aloneness' is a quiet, spellbinding poem. It's a small poem with a big interior and, in that, exemplifies something only poetry can do. It's a poem of great economy. A child listens to the distant thunder resound 'like a lonely kākāpō', the grandfather describes lekking (a breeding display performed by some male birds and mammals). The interlocking of images is done with grace: the grandfather (lekking himself?) boom(s) for his lost wife, echoing the lonely kākāpō. The child's own sense of aloneness is melded throughout. There is no over description, every word counts and the details are exacting: 'eroded gullies/ moist and windborne'. It felt to me that the poem arrived naturally at the insight in the stunning last stanza. Far from summarising, it led to an air of reflection: sitting with the poem, in that way you do, when you know you've been given a gift.

continued over

Joint Winner

‘The Tiriti Translator’ by Jilly O’Brien

Conjures a historical period with deftness and cinematic clarity: “I knew it was Sunday/for the kirk-going carts/
wore Sunday shirt with collar and tie”. This is a poem that has found its form: a lilting rhythm, apt use of rhyme and Scottish dialect so wonderfully employed: “hand-habble” (business done quickly with a haughty air), “buttery-lippit” (smooth-tongued). The meaning of these phrases can be intuited from the soundscape of the poem (though I did eventually look them up). The ironic slant on missionary zeal is all the more poignant because it is almost quietly given: “You weren’t to know we brought Sunday to you”. Pakeha parcelled up the land and equally chopped time into hours and days of the week. The undercut in the last stanza is beautiful: “the river put its fingers in its ears”.

Runner Up

‘The Time of the Wetlands’ by Megan Kitching

A lucid invocation of a wetland, built of specifics rather than generalities. The detail is wonderfully observed and shows a real feeling for place: “a felted plain/with its tents of tussock”. The intertwining of sound and image enacts the interconnection of life forms in the habit itself: “... clouds/breath into wind-/bruised water”; “riroriro ... slinging his concentric songs/like skimmed stones over the marsh”. The poem is attentive to life forms in the wetland and it asks us, as readers, to attend. Imbued with a meditative rhythm, so fitting for this micro-world where “Time layers down”.

Highly Commended

‘Still life in an op shop’ by Nicola Easthope

How rare it is to find humour in a poem that is also seriously concerned with the climate crisis. The deadpan humour here is delicious. There is no overstatement; the poem sticks within the constraints it’s established and unfolds like a scene in a play. Beguiling, acerbic and funny. It touches on intergenerational dissonance and I doubt whether I will ever get the image of “glitter tipped fingernails shaped like long coffins” out of my head.

CASELBERG



info@caselbergtrust.org
www.caselbergtrust.org

Generously supported by

