

Ockhams Sampler

Extracts from
the finalist books in the
**Mary and Peter Biggs
Award for Poetry**
at the 2025 Ockham
New Zealand Book Awards

OCKHAM

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Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry

OCKHAM



The Mary and Peter Biggs Award for Poetry at the Ockham New Zealand Book Awards considers both selections and collections of poetry, from one or more authors. The winning book receives \$12,000 in prize money.

Judging the poetry award in 2025 are poet, critic, and writer David Eggleton (convenor); poet, novelist and short story writer Elizabeth Smither MNZM; and writer and editor Jordan Tricklebank (Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Mahuta).

The judging panel says endeavouring to select the best vintage from this year's crop was a very tough task. "We sought to argue, debate and rationalise – and eventually harmonise – our choices; pitting militant language poets against equally militant identity poets, spiritual poets, polemical poets, experimental poets and careful traditionalists in pursuit of acknowledging books of literary excellence at the highest level," they say.

This Ockhams Sampler gives you a taste of the craft at play in each of this year's shortlisted poetry volumes. You can read the judges' comments about each finalist at the start of that title's extract.

Look out for samplers of the finalists in the other three categories in the Ockham New Zealand Book Awards. As they are rolled out in the coming weeks, you will find them here:

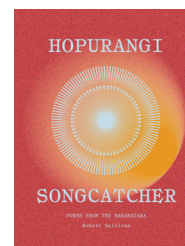
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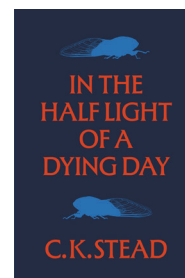


HOPURANGI – SONGCATCHER: POEMS FROM THE MARAMATAKA

Robert Sullivan (Ngāpuhi, Kāi Tahu)

Published by Auckland University Press

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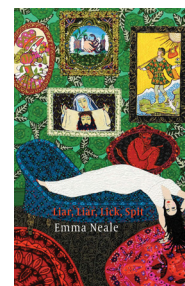


IN THE HALF LIGHT OF A DYING DAY

C.K. Stead

Published by Auckland University Press

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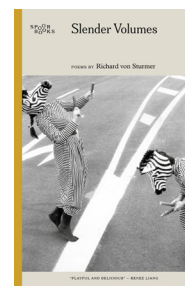


LIAR, LIAR, LICK, SPIT

Emma Neale

Published by Otago University Press

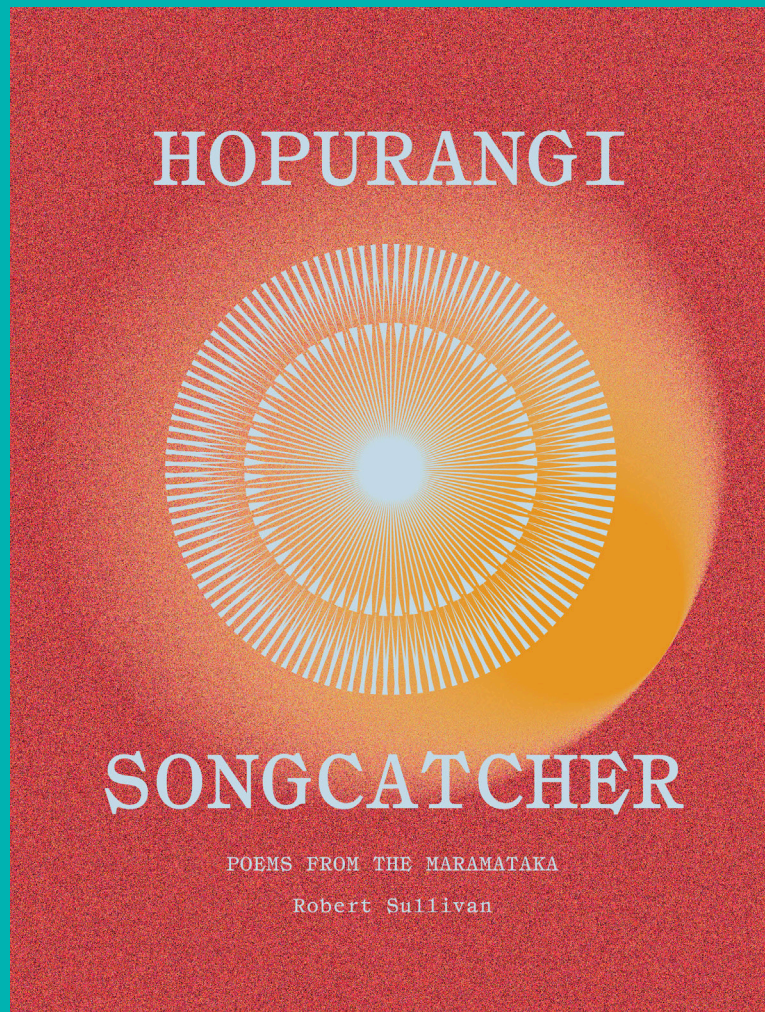
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SLENDER VOLUMES

Richard von Sturmer

Published by Spoor Books



Published by **Auckland University Press**

Hopurangi – Songcatcher: Poems from the Maramataka

JUDGES' COMMENTS

Robert Sullivan's collection presents a distinctive and musical poetic voice, inflected with te reo Māori. The poet is almost a tribal shaman, making observations that invoke planetary energies. In this way he offers a visionary way of seeing that connects to the natural world. In search of self transformation he invokes metamorphosis and the Māori spirit world. Māori creation myths, Treaty claims, Ovid, Dante, recent iwi histories and cradle Catholicism are all part of the rich mix.

Poems overleaf

The Paper Chase

I like to think that the original Treaty has been nibbled
by giant kauri snails in retribution for losing

their forests and everything they deem to be precious 😊
You can see their preambles along the margins of clauses

on the Treaty of Waitangi sheet, and the gobbled signatures.
They were trying to steal the deal, but didn't know

about the 1877 lithograph (darn it). They tried to chase
the other sheets too—the one at Manukau, the sheet at Kāwhia,

the one at Raukawa Moana (Cook Strait), the one at Te Moana
a Toi-te-huatahi (Bay of Plenty), the Tai Rāwhiti one,

and the Herald (Bunbury) sheet. Apart from the first and the last one
they couldn't keep up with all the treaties and barely

chewed on anything leaving the signatures shining as trails
in full moonlight and invisible by the light of day.

Mutuwhenua: Te Awa e Rere Nei

(((((((Medium Energy)))))))

For Dad

This evening we practised our waiata-ā-ringa with their composer,
Waiariki, at Pueteraki Marae. It was healing at Karitāne

to hear the beautiful words and learn the moves that speak
of our places of home, Hikaroroa, Pahatea, Ka Iwi a Weka. It's okay

to make mistakes and smile about them with others
who are your relations, and just to carry on carrying the airs

and graces of our whānau nui. Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, Waitaha,
Rapuwai, Kāti Huirapa. I've eaten shellfish and muttonbirds

in the weekend (at Hone Tuwhare's) and my fill of happiness
at Puketeraki. This kai is kōrero, from our whenua too.

Tamatea Kai-ariki: 'Three birds flew from me'

((Low Energy, continue to be cautious.
Offer support to others.))

Three birds flew from me:

a sparrow from my chest
a tūī out my throat
a pīwaiwaka from my thigh

they flew to see my father
to let him know I am well


then the monarch butterflies
took their turns to see my
grandmother
once they saw the birds
were safely flown

and then the bees
came back to the field
to help the new mānuka,
akeake, harakeke, tōtara,
tī kōuka and kōwhai
bring back the birds

Tamatea Kai-ariki: He Iti Pounamu

((Low Energy))

Since you were a pēpi
I'd sing to you in Māori
and you'd hold
the pounamu round
my neck that I got
from Nanny Ina.
That's the first
thing you reach for
still when I lift you up
and we sing along.



IN THE
HALF LIGHT
OF A
DYING DAY



C.K. STEAD

Published by **Auckland University Press**

In the Half Light of a Dying Day

JUDGES' COMMENTS

Love and grief and a breakthrough from Catullus' familiar stance to raw emotion mark C.K. Stead's meditation on the death of his beloved, Kezia (wife, Kay). The poems are the more moving because the Stead virtues still play their part in the telling selection of details (what to wear in a casket; the company of a cat). In this exploration of time and loss, sentimentality is banished. Everything has been changed, utterly and profoundly.

Poems overleaf

INVOCATION

Suburb or Sabine farm, not all our hard work
alters, though it orders, as best it can
your rhythms that answer in feather, fin and flower
motions of sun and moon. Look where tides
advancing under the causeway flush the Bay.
Sun silvers the ferns, domestic grass
pricks up to greet the mower, and my timber house
creaks on its jacks. That once I crossed
the rust-red river, heard steel speak and saw
scavengers wait on the dying; that I command
at peace diagrams of dissolving stars
or proceed white-coated against the militant Crab –
such purpose commends itself. But blood must keep
even as Caesar's your lyric measure precisely
or lose itself among the abstract spaces
where no bird builds, nor predator patrols
the sandy shallows,
nor sap rises to inform a tree.

COMPASSION

How far into the meal
at Caesar's table
were you Catullus
when he told you that story
about what he called
compassion?
He'd been captured by pirates
and warned them that crucifixion
would be their punishment,
and, rescued,
felt he must keep his word,
but when they were up
nailed to their crosses
he'd had their throats cut
to speed the process.
You wondered were you meant to understand it
as a warning
or was it only
the sociable dictator's
after-dinner chat?

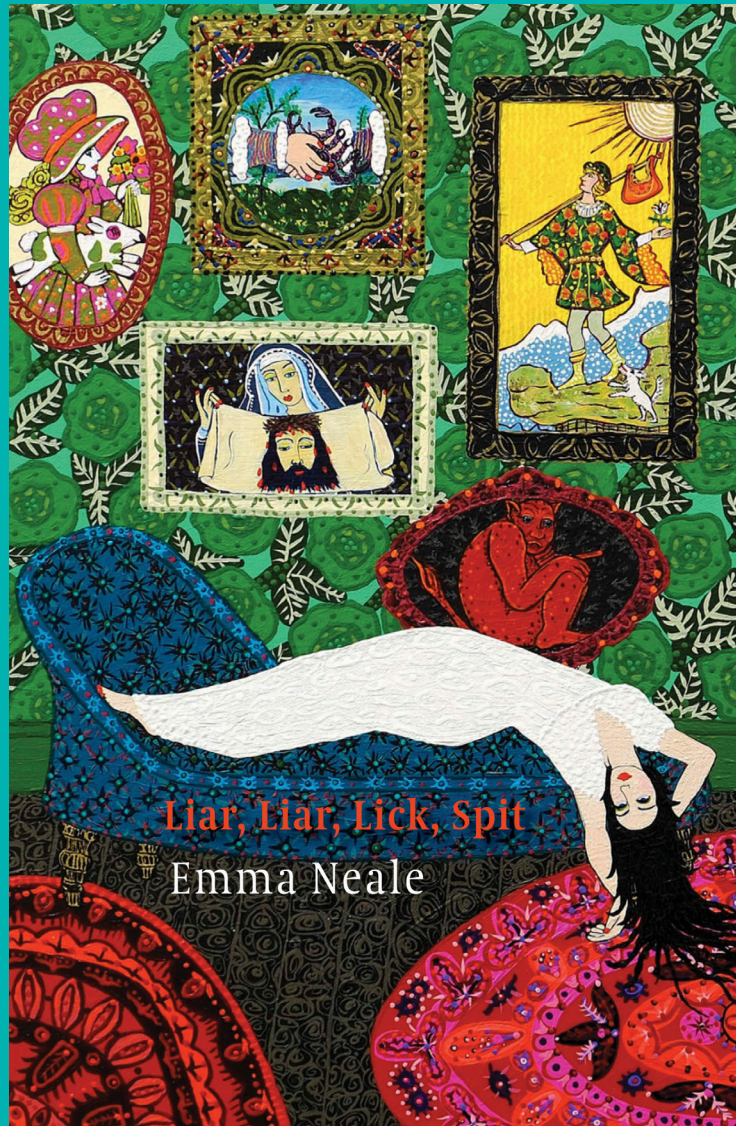
MODERN MIRACLES

Your London daughter
 Kezia
believes she hears something
 in your conversation
by phone across half a world
 and in your breathing
 and googles it
soon enough to earn you
a diagnosis and a course
 of radiotherapy.
She's here so soon
 (Business Class)
 that our forebears
watching (let's say) from Beyond
 gasp and admire –
 such good fortune,
so much time for travels and goodbyes
than was ever theirs!
But for the rescue,
 the cure?
 Probably not.
 That's a further,
 a future
 too far dimension.

THE PANIC

You've been missed of late
Kezia
in the street
and down at the Bay.
When people ask
Catullus tells them you've not been well
and they wish you all the best.
In a panic he asks himself
what's in the offing?
Could Kezia die?
What would he do with himself
with your 'things',
your favourite shirts and sweaters,
your scents and your secrets?
He can't think
but thinks he knows
he'd keep them as they are,
untouched, unchanged.
They are you, Kezia
his love,
he'll live with them
for ever.
He'll die with them.

Liar, Liar, Lick, Spit



Published by **Otago University Press**

JUDGES' COMMENTS

This is a collection concerned with fibs and fables, and telling true stories perceived by others as tall stories. Emma Neale's word alchemy takes everyday fustian and transforms it into something fine and precious and enduring as she strives for epiphanies, for transcendence, for truth-telling – for telling moments sifted from the quotidian flux. Fastidious attention to precise luminous detail, a vigilant ear for sound patterns, and an ironically self-aware literary consciousness are in play.

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Poems overleaf

Terribly Involved

I lay there at night next to our son's hospital bed
his small, warm hand in mine
while in the next bay along another child cried.
Empty chairs sat vigil at his side.
Safe after surgery, our son slept, if fitfully;
that nine-month-old baby, not at all.

His wail was so desolate and cold
I saw an image from a long-forgotten film:
a blind Arctic fox cub trotted along ice
that broke and calved so a small floe
carried it into open ocean.

I slipped out to stand by the metal cot
near the baby in his nest of tubes and needles.
Hush, hush, little one, I whispered, *hey, hey, little baby*.
His cry swelled, fell like snow.
I called for the night nurse, asked,
Can I pick the baby up when you're busy, is it safe to hold him?

Best not, she said. *The parents might not approve*.
Half afraid to hear, I asked, *Where are they?*
At home, she answered. *They're just not terribly involved*.

I tried to find shock, judgement
in the grim brackets of her mouth;
to cling on to her choice: *terribly*,
but saw the practised calm of her face
just meant she'd seen far worse.

I thought of our own first maternity nurse
the platitudes trotted out, blithe as free brochures:
Babies bring all the love they need.
News headlines said the opposite.
What about the neglected, I'd asked, the abandoned?
Her reply: *Their souls are on a journey, to atone for past lives*.

Fictions she told her clients, not feeling they were lies?
Homilies to keep herself coming to her job
where she saw miseries she couldn't repair
even if she could say, *Hush, hush, little one*;
even if she could, once a fortnight, then once a month
for a designated time, lift each baby up,
give them, briefly, all the love they came to bear.

The Moth-eyed Steeplechase Horse

At a farm stay in Routeburn
we offer small coins of carrot
to a thoroughbred who licks them up:
our hands held flat as picnic plates
over her paddock fence.

We wait, as if in her amber eyes
we'll find each horse-thought formed
as clear as honeyed cells of wax.

Globed, deep presence,
she takes us in
and we are dreams that flow
easily as bleached driftwood
down a slow river current.

Time piles in cloud towers
as magpie song spirals;
we look away, catch small hot dots
of white, pink, gold
as the sun glints deep in the grass
like dropped wedding rings.

I look back, see the horse
has one dark pupil shaped like a moth,
its scallop-edged wings spreadeagled.
Look at your eye! I want to say,
as if she wears a rare jewel,
yet as our stare expands she seems to see
into each and every human weakness.
I am as thrown as I was, long years ago:

a sadhu, his ochre robes in ropes of rags,
hair twisted in tree-bark strips,
wooden staff in his slim grip,
stoic, singular and alone,
locked his eyes with mine
as I stood there with my palm
clasped inside my husband's
and I felt a catapult of fear:
his receptiveness to pain and drift
against my clinging to love
like a moth's egg to a leaf tip
exposed all that was wrong
and false in us: yes, even the way

I want to hold this morning
under an agapanthus sky
with a gentle, moth-eyed horse
as if the thread of language
could ever weave a hide
against the hook and ache of loss
when we carry it
deep as the mare carries
the sprint, the vault,
in her hocks, her fetlocks.

SPoor
BOOKS

Slender Volumes

POEMS BY Richard von Sturmer



"PLAYFUL AND DELICIOUS" — RENEE LIANG

Published by **Spoor Books**

Slender Volumes

JUDGES' COMMENTS

This substantial publication with its witty and paradoxical title is a meditative poetry journal, artfully constructed to present what amounts to a series of mirabilia: anecdotes that might arouse astonishment or wonder in a spiritual sense. Richard von Sturmer's poems seek illumination from the ordinary everyday world. Drawing partly on Buddhist teachings, life itself is here seen as miraculous. There's a dancing intelligence at work, highly alert, self aware, and fearless.

Poems overleaf

4. MAZU'S "HEART SŪTRA"

"Form is only emptiness, emptiness only form." I crack two eggs on the side of a bowl and whisk them together with a rotary egg beater. The basic form of the egg beater has remained unchanged for over a hundred years. I admire its handle, crank and drive wheel. Rotate the crank and the beaters spin. Rotate them faster and their blades become invisible. It's like I'm altering the composition of the universe. Space itself turns into froth.

5. LAYMAN PANG'S AWAKENING

Years later, when leaving a temple, he watched the swirling snow obliterate the surrounding mountains and valleys... I remember when it snowed at Christmas in Rochester, upstate New York. It was night and a thick layer of snow covered the myrtle hedges that had been threaded with small Christmas lights. Faint blues and yellows and reds shone through, intangible and flickering as if an entire city were sinking deeper into the whiteness.

47. GUISHAN'S "DO NOT BETRAY OTHERS"

Few things are more painful than a broken friendship—a shard of regret lodged deep in the heart. Could things have gone differently? Probably not. Circumstances change and people change. And yet, on looking back at that time when we supported each other, leaning shoulder-to-shoulder into the wind, I can't help but smile. We were two mamalukes, two dunderheads. And that smile is both a beginning and an end.

48. XUANSHA'S BLANK LETTER

The rhinoceros roams the savannah. He's short-sighted, but if you make a sound he'll charge... In our city, public post boxes have been removed from the streets and post offices are being closed down. I have a 1964 stamp from Cameroon of the western black rhinoceros. It was declared extinct in 2011. I'd like to write a letter on behalf of the western black rhinoceros, which looks like a fine creature. Although I have the stamp, the letter will never be sent.

56 GUISHAN'S GIFT

It's not so much the gift but the act of giving. A bird gives itself to the air and a fish to the ocean. A branch gives itself to scraping the side of a house in a high wind. A child gives itself to running around the back lawn with a hose... and the grass gets wet. A pen gives itself to a piece of paper and the paper receives the pen. Words are written. Eyes give themselves to reading, and the writer stops to wonder, "Where do these words come from?"

57. WHERE WISDOM CANNOT REACH

At the back of the pantry there's a shelf of spice jars: cinnamon, paprika, cayenne pepper, star anise, cardamom, ginger, nutmeg, mace... Although several jars have remained unopened for years, each contains its own fragrance. I pour a cup of rice into the rice cooker, add water and a pinch of salt, and decide to throw in some cloves. But I can't find any. Standing in the pantry, I see that a spider has suspended itself right above a jar of bay leaves.

177. FAYAN'S "SINGLE BODY REVEALED"

In upstate New York I came across a skunk in broad daylight. He was walking around the edge of a pond and I followed him. At one point he stopped, turned his head and gave me a look that could be described as "imperious." The look said, in no uncertain terms, "You will go no further because you know what I am capable of." So, I stayed where I was, and he walked off with slow steps as if to show that I offered no threat and did not merit a squirt.

178. LINJI SEES HUANGBO READING A SŪTRA

Linji believed that a true Zen master should ignore the written word. But didn't he know that The Lankavatara Sūtra states: "Things are not as they seem, nor are they otherwise"? The clouds read the wind, and their shadows read the fields. The large clock in the hall of the railway station reads the moving escalators. Waves scroll across the surface of the sea. And in their caves and crevices crabs turn over pages of seaweed, deciphering each grain of sand.



Robert Sullivan (Ngāpuhi, Kāi Tahu)

Hopurangi – Songcatcher: Poems from the Maramataka



C.K. Stead

In the Half Light of a Dying Day



Emma Neale

Liar, Liar, Lick, Spit



Richard von Sturmer

Slender Volumes

He kupu whakamihi to all the authors whose inspired work has been recognised and honoured in this year's Ockham New Zealand Book Awards. We urge readers to seek out their titles in bookstores and libraries around the motu. And we invite you to join us for the awards ceremony on Wednesday 14 May – in person or via the livestream – to hear the finalists read from their books and to celebrate the ultimate winners. To find out more follow NewZealandBookAwards or #theockhams on Facebook and Instagram. For tickets visit www.writersfestival.co.nz.



The Ockhams Samplers were compiled with the assistance of the Academy of New Zealand Literature.

Look out for the other category samplers at:



ANZL Academy of New Zealand Literature
Te Whare Mātatuhi o Aotearoa