



2021 Bruce Dawe Poetry Winners

Winner

Screen

By Paul Hetherington

1.

Meetings, construals, broken words. One member says she'll be signing
off soon; a painting wobbles, a bike merges into a wall. Words climb to a
near-falsetto. Outside, someone's radio says we're reaching the
right level of flattening, as the number of dead increase. I think of
cremating my father; how he died too soon to be one of these statistics,
his body underneath my stalling gaze. Like children, we do not know what
we understand.

2.

You phone to say, "Despite isolation, I'm doing my best". Soon I'm in a
meeting that shatters into mask-like faces. I've muted audio; a few
voices compete for electronic space, discussing "what-we-all-can-
certainly-achieve". It's a way of surviving when verities are worth
little and the plagues are suddenly new. Public figures offer consolation like
secular forms of prayer. Yet our gods have left, as rivers flood or vanish.
You phone, asking loudly what you can possibly do.

3.

How do we disappear so quickly into this weird notion of ourselves? The
screen asks for a password. In another age we might have entered a
secret wardrobe or yard where innocence is eventually found out.
In a different year, we may have gathered ourselves into a broad idea
of travel. Today, we take our virtual presence across suburbs, to share
glimpses of ordinary rooms. No poems start; no *Dawn Treader* quivers.



4.

The flesh is facsimile. We cannot read the age-old bodily signs that we evolved to understand. Your embrace sits in imagination; we close down screens. Walls creak, and when your phone call comes from quarantine I think of eloquent hands. You talk of “seven more impossible days” and I remember the Sagrada Família—walking under its unfinished roof. Sky collapsed as spires stood apart.



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Highly Commended

A Kind of Humming Silence

By Alicia Sometimes

Every day is a weekend now—our backyard the only
connection with outside. We cannot venture beyond
 this perimeter of blanched ivy vining its way
 down cold brick or stray past the boxed boundary
of whisky grass weeping at the front porch. Topography
here is assembled into main areas, co-ordinates of terrain
 in need of navigation—creating continents in the dirt
Not only to make time drift by as if large sails in calm
but to feel part of something else, to breathe in the garden
with its imaginary flat plains, mountains, forests, ridges and valleys

You stand by the side fence with its curled rock pitted
in the corner, now pretending to be Algar de Benagil, the sea cave
in Algarve, Portugal. Watching you peer through the small
gaps—the reds bleeding into the salt of the edges—I picture
 you in the water holidaying far away from the lawnmower
 whirring in the distance. At your feet are stones but I daydream
barnacles ready to withdraw into their protective shells
 white cones in the shallows of your toes

These sudden spaceless moments remind me—sometimes
we are many places at once. Anywhere but here in solitude—
 other times, the eucalypt casts shade at exactly the right angle
 black ants scurry in wattle trees carrying rich pollen, as the sun
butterscotch-fringed and sharp, runs its fingers on the back of my neck
From here the backyard is vast—exactly where I want to be
You, with your unruly hair, me in a sunken chair with the newspaper
 If I tilt my head, the landscape becomes smudged: oranges
 and yellows, as if Grace Cossington Smith's *Door into the Garden*
appears before me—how the greens fold into the browns
squares of light drop at my feet carpeting my way to you

This is our whole world. Our resolve as thin as crêpe paper
our skis, dusty and our bathing clothes, dry. Hope, broken-limbed
 We've camped out here, bought binoculars online just to observe
 the micro-universe of insects. We've made spires out of old table
legs. We've listened in on the quiet long enough to know the quiet is never there
even in the murmur of tranquillity somewhere a Jack Russell will bark
 This backyard needs an Atlas, to record every bump, every lattice of fern
 every tuft of grass, every lemon fallen to the ground. All latitudes are mapped—
the paces I have taken, the shrubs you have watered, the posts we have mended
Every longitude marked—the topsoil we have nurtured, the doves we have fed, each star

We will again hold hands as the day closes, eat by the fire-pit
this time looking up at the Milky Way, its cloudy shine spilling
 into the enormity of space, the galaxies—a nod to the multitude
and fullness of nature down here. You and I sit in the hush of warmth
quietly waiting for escape.



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Highly Commended

Babel

By Scott Salter

Speech held no sanctity for you.
You would mangle my words;
cut them, shuffle them,
glue to them unintended meaning.
You'd Frankenstein away 'til what you said I'd said
looked like a ransom letter lifted straight out of 70's TV.
Then you'd staple that to my tongue
and spin the egg-timer on your malcontent.

Every skip bin within four suburbs
would brim with the conversations we didn't have:
The set-the-record-straight ones;
The you-seeing-the-light ones;
The make-believe-jury-interrupting-me-with
rapturous-applause ones.
But when it came to the actual ones,
it was always the same pockmarked monster,
slogging it round the block,
schlepping it haul bag full of calibrated grievance.

We were a chance when the words got put away;
when the scrabble letters went back in the box
and resumed a benign superposition.
We were a chance when we would turn our hand
to wet lego instead.
Somewhere there in the midst
of binary twining, lit fingers, hurried breath,
we would seize upon a language
I knew that I could trust.



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Shortlist

<i>A Kind of Humming Silence</i>	Alicia Sometimes
<i>Babel</i>	Scott Salter
<i>I Wandered Lonely in a Crowd</i>	Maurits Zwankhuizen
<i>Orphan</i>	Robert Verdon
<i>Philosophy of Play-Doh</i>	Anne M Carson
<i>Screen</i>	Paul Hetherington
<i>The Emperor's Clothes</i>	Connor Weightman
<i>The Myopia</i>	Ella Kurz
<i>The Rosary as Noun and Verb</i>	Kerry Greer
<i>Voyages of Timber Houses</i>	GERSHON MALLER
<i>When We Were First Year Apprentices</i>	Carl Walsh

Special Mention

<i>The Myopia</i>	Ella Kurz
<i>I Wandered Lonely in a Crowd</i>	Maurits Zwankhuizen
<i>The Rosary as Noun and Verb</i>	Kerry Greer
<i>The Moon Asks a Question</i>	Isabel Hong