



# 2019 Bruce Dawe Poetry Winners

## Winner

### At Sackville Crossing

by John Watson

When I was here a year ago,  
In notices about the gates  
And who should legally open them,  
A gerund was so hedged about  
With plurals that, quite plausibly,  
It had been given a plural verb.

The sign had read The Opening  
Of Gates By Persons Other Than  
The Ferrymaster Are Prohibited.  
The plural verb seemed resonant,  
As swallows perched above the sign  
And the sunlight seemed indifferent.

Today I crossed that stream again  
And looked with pleasure for the sign  
To feel the frisson of that 'are'  
So carefully well-meaning. But  
I was confounded and perplexed  
To find the signs corrected. Doubt

That subject and its distant verb  
Had ever been disjunctly joined  
Washed over me. The cable creaked.  
The swallows still swerved round their nest,  
And like a silver cattle grid  
Light flowed beneath our shallow prow.

The singular 'is', so innocent,



So blandly, modestly correct,  
Belied that former recklessness ...  
I stared at it until, relieved,  
I traced the faint outlines in dust  
Of where that plural once had been.

The youthful ferrymaster stood  
Within his cabin looking out.  
A bakery's delivery van  
Had driven to these very gates;  
Its driver with a loaf of bread  
Stood in the ferrymaster's shed.

And then I foolishly enquired,  
Above the chugging motor's roar,  
When had these painted signs been changed.  
The youth looked down derisively.  
'So you're the one who rang, complained  
And wasted everybody's time.'



## Second Place

### Bedtime

by Tahra Baulch

here grumbles in my tumble pup

my moochy mooky roily ruff

the tiny toesy skip trip one

with rosy cheeks and padwhack bum

come smooch patooch and honey grin

we'll skirl skamoo and duffer spin

a kooka kooka burra's laugh

a wombat's womp a frilledneck's scarf

while bandicoots do snuffly sniffs

and cockatoos be blackened scriffs

of ancient engineering

more scrawk and eeking flap and rise



we'll curl around the pummel pines

whose cones will drop a plonk of thud

from sky high tops to

plush moss mud

let's rollahippotrundlemore

we'll rumbleomph the playroom floor

till rubbing eyes and fuzzled heads

and bumpy knees mean nearing zeds

so

time for bubbledeepenough

time to ookypooky buff

to water till the wrinkle prunes

make sealy slippy drippy droons

then come to rundle twisty wrap



let me enround the yawny yap  
we'll shnoog manoog and fumble flop  
and snuggleupski bumble drop  
  
now cosy clothes and dozy muffs  
for cuddledrunks and sillyduffs  
some hushabyes and story snuff  
there's never quite enough enough  
too soon we're deep in doona pluff  
and nestling in to sleep



# Highly Commended

## The Line Marker's Testimony

by Damen O Brien

I like to pick up hitchhikers, though there are less  
each year who'll dare to stick their thumb out  
since Ivan worked up and down these roads and since  
his avatar terrorised Wolf Creek for television,  
but young tourists still have a go, pack-muling  
their bright-eyed way across the country.

I didn't make it all the way through high-school  
but I still remember my teacher drew a line on the  
board and said if I could sight along its edge  
I'd never see it turn, its spearing point  
the only thing that ever approaches eternity.

I've had kids who were stretching their gap-year over  
a season picking fruit, thumb down my ute, speak  
to me about the pools around the stars, the sleepy, heavy-  
lidded stars, and the deepest dark where nothing  
can escape, not even straight-lines diving into sleep,  
so I know there's more to geometry than that.

I curate the longest graveyard in the world,



set the catseyes, place the speed signs, clear the  
weedy edges, but most of all, I paint the centre line,  
help it seam the mountain's coil and edge,  
camber, drift and slipway, zip and unspool,  
the thread that leads out of the ranges again.  
Sure, I've seen those photos shared around the Net:  
paint rolled right over carrion, random gaps,  
zigs where the road zagged, as if the workmen  
were asleep at the wheel, or oblivious and blind,  
but that is not my way. I maintain the busy corridors  
of the living through the black-spots of the dead,  
and when I come upon the many crosses that make up  
the turns, and dips and cutaways of my road,  
I do my best for every cairn, clear away the weeds, set  
the wreaths of plastic flowers back upright.  
I've seen it all: the trucks looming out of darkness  
the cloudy Milky Way dipping into eucalypts, slow  
cyclists pumping pneumatically up the hills,  
stubborn koalas sitting with their backs against the edge,  
kangaroos staring down a driver's headlights, and  
I know the truth of white lines in the dark, how easy  
it is to sink into gravities of doubt, how a vehicle might



drift from its purpose, how a driver might wander off  
the road, slip yawning into gullies and be lost. So  
I like to pick up hitchhikers now and then, pale  
in the uncertain wash of the high-beams. Perhaps  
I'm taking some of the dead further on, exorcising  
this quiet mausoleum, straightening out the curvature  
of space, helping ghosts make their disoriented way home.  
I paint the road that takes the straight path out of time.





# Highly Commended

## Letter to Signor Merisi

by Smith Randal (Ruby)

Another boy from Lombardy, from afar

will look Lombardian, that's to define

your nature as all piss and vinegar

your clothing rat-black rags-on-the-line

In '93, while drunk on Roman wine

and striding in high temper down the street

you caught my eye, so Clotho made us meet,

and wove our Fates together undeterred

Son of Caravaggio's soil, who must accrete

blood on the sword, is this your final word

A lizard tore my finger, but the scar

came from your painting Piero's face, not mine

Your naked Cupid was as secular

as my (anonymous) verses that malign

your rivals and their work as asinine



Those early years, you were too poor to eat  
but now the Cardinals ensure you're replete  
Your mood has darkened, something that you heard  
made you regard now as your greatest feat  
blood on the sword, is this your final word.

Hand on hip to hand on hilt, no bar  
to patronage if your star should shine  
From skinny ingénue to avatar  
in seven years (that's seven years too, of mine)  
Sick Bacchus has got well and toes the line,  
the lutes are gone, the gypsies can't compete  
with the drama of the Christian church elite  
I'm bitter, yes, as I think you erred  
in saying our love is just some indiscreet  
blood on the sword, is this your final word

Now orthodoxy reigns, in particular  
the martyrs slain, Fillide by design



holds up with her thick wrists the scimitar,  
so was I too, through intrigues labyrinthine  
to feature as the princess, to recline  
in holiness at old St Matthew's feet  
as he is martyred, but while incomplete  
you scraped the canvas clean, since you preferred  
to centre the assassin, the same way as you treat  
blood on the sword, is this your final word.  
Scraped clean the canvas, oh love bittersweet  
that hides a Michaelangelo beneath the sheet.  
What's in a name. You, who had conferred  
on you transcendent power, archangel on the street  
become avenger, who takes as a receipt  
blood on the sword, is this your final word.



# Highly Commended

## WORDS MY PARENTS USED

by Wayne Eaton

When my father split the crank-case of our Bantam BSA

And I looked into its sharp and gleaming heart,

Each gear was a chunky star that dripped

With a thin oil wet as tears

Packed tight and compact – and each one slid apart

In its own sure logic – Look!

When you depressed the kick-start; this bit moved

And the piston gave one lazy thumping pump

When my father skun his knuckle rounding off a bolt

He said nothing, but merely hissed and grinned

And the look he gave my brother said ‘Well,

These things happen son’, and he changed the spanner:

Twisted it again, but I looked – I looked

At the blood that oozed and blackened

Round the jagged flap of skin, torn and jutted



Like a wrinkled canvas scrap  
And offered him a rag: he threw it at the bin  
Spat, and adjusted the timing gap  
My father's words were hard things  
That could mean only one thing at a time:  
'Pity' was a word only cowards used  
And nothing could have hurt him  
As much as pity

When my mother said the word 'Pity'  
It didn't sound like fluffy clouds or little winged cherubs –  
It was a word she breathed like the wind in a flute, that  
Shaped its own sound on the un-welcome air.  
Perhaps it was like a straining wire  
That stretched taut and tense  
To tighten flesh and muscle together  
And even that shudder in her blood  
That clenched and unclenched its iron jaw  
Within her tender bones, was stilled by it –



More than her Vallium ever could –  
Long enough for her white-boned hands  
To flutter together to pray.  
And it gave her voice steel enough, so that  
She could grimly ask my father to give her all her pills  
All at once – He knelt by the bed  
And he hung his great Labrador head and squeezed out  
Wheezing tears and shook his head ‘no’  
And I couldn’t use the word ‘Pity’ then  
Because I didn’t know if it took more courage  
To ask than to refuse  
Or who was the coward  
Then