

2024 Bruce Dawe National Poetry Prize Winner

Louise Nicholas

Between the Sheets

After I tell my mother that my boyfriend and I have moved in together and she has expressed a mix of disapproval and relief that I am not, at least, *frigid*, that unlike her friends, she had always found *that side of marriage* very *decent* indeed, we begin folding the sheets, taking the first by its corners and thwacking it into submission, bringing the sides together and pulling them straight, our hands moving in unison, the steps well-practised by now, this not our first time on the dance floor, and she's telling me how each of her five children came about, the first three always part of the plan, deed done, cells busy dividing, between sheets one and two, the fourth child taking longer, the sheet inexplicably falling from my hands and puddling on the floor as she recounts a hot night after a day at the beach, she waking him to rub salve into her sunburn, the salve reaching places the sun never did, and by the time we get to the last sheet and child number five and they're in the laundry in the middle of the night putting a tube of contraceptive jelly through the wringer, we're both laughing and the sheet is as tangled as theirs that night, but when finally it's folded, something has shifted, and with the brief touch of our hands as I step forward and she takes it to place with the rest, it is as two women, meeting for the first time.

2024 Bruce Dawe National Poetry Highly Commended Entry

Shey Marque

In the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death

title borrowed from *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath

When you take to my hands, I ask how you see yourself held

—an insect, a ripe fruit, a dog's ear?

You say,

some days I might be a tree that needs pruning, or a mandolin with an extra string—somehow capable of things far beyond my ordinary potential.

I sense something exotic about the supernumerary string, as if the mere tenor of it might send one falling into a death-like sleep.

I suffer soft auditory illusions in the night, a vague ticking in the walls, a sound like stars dropping out of the sky one by one to the earth—put simply a lone gratuitous loose wire arcing wild with disconnect.

A sudden rattle of dry leaves, a thousand tongues clicking, mocking all belief that we have crossed a mortal boundary. Are we so perilously superhuman in this wind?

I look around at the tree for a casting of untimely figs, you bring me back to the moment. Sliding onto the back

of my hand is your sun-ripened hand,
curved, consonant, a vein pulsing.

Say your palm is edible.

If it *were* a fig, I would know right away that you were
ready to consume—slightly soft with a strong sweet smell,
with only the smallest of bruises, a few brown spots, a light
wrinkling of skin. I could feel its willingness to break.

*—I think how a wasp has to die inside a fig for it to mature,
the female enters an opening so tight it peels off her wings,
the flower liquefies her with ficin, feasts on her entrails—*

You talk about a study on reading emotions from hands,
squeeze my fingers,

you're a baby bird, unfeathered, hungry—

I twitch and counter with

nesting insect, suffocating.

This makes you release my hand,

at first a blanched fist,

mottled pink and white, its subcutaneous wiring of small bones
and vessels. When it opens, you place in it a fig, inverted.

Here, can you eat this?

I tell you I can

see myself feeding in the flower of your eye.

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Laura Shore

When Eve Returns in the Twenty-First Century

she spills to her knees, bows
to the silence of frogs, bees, the felling
of eight-hundred-year-old trees.
Her fists become claws. Under her breath,
she roars.

Her friends drink and joke. Glasses clink and she hears
polar ice caps crack.
It's Sunday afternoon— Jazz at the Outdoor Pub.
Adrift on the saxophone's languid sob,

all she has is her dance-trance unwinding
the myth of dominion and lack,
Pink Lady
apple tattooed above her right breast.

She stirs stagnant pools in her solar plexus,
scapegoat
for all the plunder and loss.
Surface tension of skin, a twitch
within softens the brunt of her grief.

At the bar, men stand wooden: a forest,
lit up by lightning.
Her arms are clouds
amassing, dispersing, cradling the earth.

Overhead, a pandemonium of parrots
swoop into the Norfolk pines, the darkening
branches haloed in red.

She craves the hollowing
of her own bones, wants wings capable of flight.
A preening pair of noisy familiars.

Chin lifted, her hips sway to blue
notes snaking out of the guitar. Solace
in the rush and spin
as if with her limbs, she could melt
into the wind, rise up and join her feathered kin.

The crowd makes way for her trajectory. Her shoulders swerve.

Toss of her auburn hair.

Unaware of their stare, her fingers
flare. A door cracks open, her green eyes
bruise. A just-lit fuse.