

Joel McKerrow – My Brother Jack Awards Judge's selection and report 2025

Judges' Report for Junior Secondary Category

Judging these poems was both a privilege and a challenge. The entries showed an impressive depth of thought, a willingness to explore the difficulty of emotions and a remarkable grasp of the poetic form for writers so early in their creative journey. The privilege was reading them all, the challenge was deciding the winners.

I began by reading each entry, seeking to ascertain my immediate felt, visceral response, and then come back to the language, imagery and structure, that brought up the various feelings within. Poetry is meant to evoke a response in the reader. And so this is always my first criteria. Some poems hit something immediately inside, others took a few reads to unfurl their impact. Taking this initial, instinctual felt response, I then analysed what was it about the poetry that achieved such a response. This back and forth between feeling and technicality, between fire and process. This, for me, is where the magic lies.

The range of voices that I read was heartening: some pieces shimmered with a quiet intimacy, others pulsed with raw emotion, whilst others took an abstract idea and coated it in concrete description. I loved seeing this use of imagery and metaphor to process lived experience. Those that did well moved away from structure and forced rhyme and allowed the humanness of their pieces to guide the poem. This clarity of thought led to a distinct winner and three commendations. I am excited to see what becomes of these writers.

First Prize – Creased Memories (C47)

Congratulations to this writer. The poem stood out immediately for its simplicity. It's restraint and it's precision. One image, but that image is all that we needed. A folded photo that holds the ache of loss. The photo that brings both a comfort and perhaps even a wound. I immediately found my imagination unfolding a worn, folded photo before me and seeing the two characters and feeling that ache. Lines such as "toothy grins with baby teeth" anchor the nostalgic detail. And then, ending the piece with "wondering where the time has gone" took the immediate moment and connected it to that sense of universality. The loss of time. The loss of moments. Growing up and forgetting. The flow of the piece feels natural and almost conversational. It felt like being invited into a really sacred little moment. Thank you and well done!

There were **two highly commended** pieces.

At the pier, waiting for apologies (C54) - The piece's opening lines are striking. Immediately connecting the metaphor of the sea with the loss of

names from gravestones was fantastic. It beautifully brought together the physical world with our emotional landscape. The double 'waiting' brings a sense of unresolved hurt and the salty name takes us back to the sea metaphor. The piece is not over-explained. Simply stated. This allows the reader to feel the sense of emptiness or unanswered cries.

Hello привет and hallo (C58)- This poem is held together by the threaded rhyming assonance. And it really works. It creates the rhythmic nature of the piece as the writer describes an identity caught between two worlds. The multilingual title immediately sets you up for this tension. The imagery used to explore it- fire and water, moon and sun, beautifully highlights and then the vivid, earthy, human picture of ones hair being too curly, skin too light- this nails the theme home and gives the poem it's emotional force. Great work!

Judges' Report for Senior Secondary Category

The poems in this category were thoughtful, articulate, descriptive, and above all...inventive. Especially the winner and commended piece. Those that stood out were the ones that both carried an emotional weight, but also experimented with form, pacing, layout and imagery in ways that were intentional and playful. In ways that meant I wasn't just reading a poem, I was immersed inside of it.

As with all my poetic readings I paid attention first to what was resonating inside and then began to ask questions about the poem itself around language, form, imagery and meaning, especially in relation to how the writer made me feel those feelings. My practice too is that I read all my poetry out loud. It is the only way for me to find the rhythm and the space taken up by each piece. The strongest works here understood that poetry lives not only in what is said, but in the way it moves and breathes on the page. The confidence of the poets to let a poem take its own shape, allowing the images and the rhythm and the silences to guide. The winner and the commended excelling at this...

First Prize – How to Become an Ocean (D9)

Congratulations to this poet for such a beautifully sustained and deeply felt piece. I loved the overall thematic thread that provided the structure. The series of numbered steps, written like a survival guide, that I could follow throughout. The opening phrase grabbed me instantly. The swallowing of tears to become the sea inside you. Brilliant phrasing. Brilliant metaphor. It is an image that perfectly captures where the rest of the poem takes us.

It felt like we then got to study to the theme through a microscope. The writer pointing out the different ways this metaphor strikes true. The surface and the depth. The tide. The ocean floor. The horizon. Each one inviting us to reflect on our own inner ocean.

I loved how the language moves between the vivid and lyrical, “succulent pigments of bright colours” and the more raw, human lines like “battle with your own mind.” The form keeps the reader anchored while the imagery rolls and crashes like the waves themselves. And then the final note that, “there is always serenity beyond the horizon”. This felt like a final breath out, or a final receding wave. A gentle reminder of hope.

Highly Commended – Love, is a two way beachwalk (D14)

This piece is striking in it’s form. Or, the way its form worked hand in hand with its meaning. The spacing, the interruptions, the shifting pace. It felt like a beach walk along, like the movement of the tide, pulling the reader in and pushing them back again. The page is part of the poem. There are not many poets who do that so well. It gives the work a texture and a rhythm that mirrors the relationship it’s exploring.

Lines like, “Your name holds more than just two syllables” hold such intimacy, only to be interrupted with the jolt of “Be quiet. / SHUT UP.” That back-and-forth captures the fragility and the friction of connection. I loved the grounded moments, the gritty sand, the crashing waves, set against the ending of big, unanswerable questions like “Can hope shoulder something it hasn’t envisioned?” It’s a poem that doesn’t rush to tie things up neatly, and the ending, “let’s visit the beach some time again, yeah?” It lands with such a tender, bittersweet openness. A fantastic piece

Judges’ Report for the Open Category

There were a LOT of entries for this category of the competition and so many of them were brilliant. It was VERY hard to choose a shortlist, let alone a winner and some highly commended.

The poems in the open category were vast and varied, with ranges of subjects and styles. The poems that were above the rest were so because they brought both an emotional precision and an ability to transform everyday experience into something profound. It was this interplay which truly stood out. The movement from concrete life-reality to abstract, universal reflection. The great writers were able to craft a beautiful poem, and draw deep layers of meaning from a single image. This was seen in the winner and the three highly commended pieces.

First Prize – Luchi (E161)

The winning poem, *Luchi* exemplifies these qualities with remarkable subtlety. At first glance, the poem is about the preparation of food, a traditional flatbread known as luchi. Yet it is immediately clear that this domestic act is a vessel for exploring the complex and unspoken dynamics of love between a mother and child.

The poet's choice to frame love through silence, "on the subject of love, my mother is silent / she works the dough instead", sets the tone for a work where physical labor, sensory detail, and family moments become the language of intimacy.

I love the tactile nature of the poem. "Arthritic hands pound and pull and plane" and the specificity of detail. By the repeated gestures of pressing, folding, kneading and stretching, the poet conveys the layers of family as well as food making. There is an awareness of what this moment means, especially in the last few lines, ending in a cyclical mode, only slightly tweaked. Not only is the mother silent. But the child too. But this is enough. Love is there, the quiet knowing of what causes pain. It is a STUNNING poem and brought me to tears. Thankyou! Cooking and emotional, who could ask for more.

Second Prize - In Mum's Garden (E141)- Again, a single image, packed with visual imagery and a few poignant moments of reflection. Not overstated, but just enough to allow the reader to reflect. Observation gives way to reflection in the best way. A literal and metaphoric garden. A family with cracks and fault lines. The language is rich and exact, "crooked ghost gums, whisper, bark peeling". These botanical observations becoming a lens for exploring loss, absence, inheritance and family dynamics. And the final line is sublime. A sun rising, without birdsong...my whole body shivered as I read it.

Third Prize - Gynandromorphism (E43)- The marrying of scientific metaphor and lived experience makes this poem wonderful. The struggle of identity within social structures taken from being simply a social reality and given flesh, given a human voice (the shape made in the world), a human experience (airport pat-downs, gendered pricing), threaded with the taxidermy of the butterfly. Oh, it was so profound. A meditation on gender fluidity and navigating a binary world. And then the final line dropped, "even pinned wings still remember how to move". It is particularly powerful. This poem succeeds in making the political intensely personal, using metaphor and lyrical detail to invite the reader into an intimate confrontation with questions of identity, resilience, and self-definition.

There was **one highly commended** piece.

Highly commended - Gallbladder (E103)- A meditation on embodiment, transformation, and the small things of life. The poet draws the reader into a richly textured inner world, where the body and its organs become mirrors for broader reflection. The layers are profound. *“a soft purple fig, a wasp inside, an egg within it, and a whole universe inside of that.”* Such density in these images. The gallbladder itself, a ‘steady witness,’ is a thing of both physical and emotional processing. The poem is spare yet expansive, moving seamlessly between anatomical observation and philosophical reflection, offering the reader an intimate and almost sacred encounter with the interconnections of life, pain, and renewal.