

## **2023 My Brother Jack Awards Senior Secondary Short Story Award**

I really enjoyed reading the stories for the Senior Short Story competition and struggled to choose a winner, which is testament to the quality of stories submitted.

I was looking for originality and vibrancy in the writing, for something striking in the sentence structure and vocabulary, a compelling voice, and stories that lingered with me long after reading.

A number of the entries met those criteria. They ranged from romantic and contemporary family dramas to fantasy writing that drew on ancient mythology to stories about mistakes and regret. Some of the entries felt like vignettes from longer pieces and I look forward to reading those fuller works if they're ever completed in the future.

There was also nice variation in the approach to storytelling, whether presented as a private conversation with a diary or an Orwellian tale in which people have been reduced to numbers. Several of the stories also struck me as age-old fables with a new and interesting slant.

### ***The Clumsy Existence of Ditzzy Ackhurst – First Place***

*The clumsy existence of Ditzzy Ackhurst* really impressed me on first reading, and even more so on subsequent readings. Highly poetic, it tells the tale of Ditzzy who – as the name suggests – is prone to being disorganised and losing things: a frock, an unread magazine, a backpack. But there's also the suggestion that Ditzzy has lost her mother – a loss that surfaces in the image of 'the moons of her mother's cheeks', which provide light for Ditzzy in the dark of night but fade away when daylight returns. The handling of this loss is delicate but its effect on the reader profound, adding real depth and texture to the story.

The language sparkles throughout, with Ditzzy 'bumble stumbling' into night memories, reflecting on socks that have 'eloped with her hairbrush' and 'glancing down at her lanky, weedy, Alaskan moose legs'. The use of poetic stanzas throughout is lovely, and their incomplete final lines – 'Please do come back home s...', 'How is your loving w...' – leave us inevitably, and playfully, guessing at the missing words.

The closing section, in which Ditzzy reflects on the eight cats she's plucked from the streets in the hope they're her missing ginger cat, Pusskins, is nice too, as is Ditzzy's habit of feeding them milk in her house while she struggles to tell them apart. The story leaves us feeling that it's good to take care of what we have while staying mindful of all the things we have lost.