

Judge's Report — Paul Dalgarno

Open Short Story Category

First Prize — *The Springtime Paradox*

There's so much to love about this story. It follows Felix, a robot pastry chef having a midlife crisis even though, in the author's words, 'he didn't *have* a midlife'.

Aware that 'his circuits would never corrode, his memory would never degrade,' Felix is confused by the turning of the seasons and his emotional responses to life 'blooming rebelliously around him'. He even sneezes, in his own way, receiving a 'wholly human' *bless you* from his co-worker, Chef Ming.

It's funny, insightful, and very much of our time as we grapple with the differences between human and AI and wonder how long those distinctions will hold.

The argument that ensues between Felix and the uncannily human magpie Lila gets to the heart of those concerns. Felix's comment to her that 'You live a life cycle! I'm purposeless, I'm inorganic' juts beautifully against Lila's sassy response: 'Listen, tin can. You think having a bunch of screaming mouths to feed is purpose?'

The Springtime Paradox manages to be a whole heap of fun while tapping into our contemporary anxieties. It's a breath of fresh air and the standout story of this year's competition.

Third Prize — *Two Worlds Collide*

Maryanne and Tayla meet on a tram near the hospital, both fresh from receiving surprising, unsettling and – in different ways – upsetting news relating to motherhood. A couple of men (Tayla's 'part time boyfriend' Billy Sombrero and Maryanne's 'wonderful, supportive husband') bob about in the background, but this is a story centred on female friendship and solidarity that's really well told.

Second Prize — *Tea Cup House*

Addressed in part to us as readers through the clever use of second person, we are guided step by step towards 'the house at the beginning of the world'. We're told we must put our map into our bag, follow valleys that curve 'like the arms of a mother's hug', and ring a bell that tolls 'like a ship's bell in fog'.

In time we meet Lottie and Tilde, who have been dancing together in a vast hidden ballroom for a near eternity, the lines on their ageing faces, as Tilde puts it, like 'maps of our lives together, written close on our skins'.

Their disappearance, and the return of the author's focus to 'you' – which is to say to us, as readers – is a beautiful turn in the story that it home in unexpected ways. A very well-thought-through story.

Highly Commended — *Your Father's House, Your Father's Blood*

Raw, heartfelt and moving, this story presents the fraught – and quick – visit from a son to his estranged father in Morville. Through clipped, realistic dialogue and a well-wrought sense of inevitability, we know the reunion is tenuous at best and that the past will continue to weigh on both father and son.

Highly Commended — *Once The Hands Are Empty*

A story about grief, loss and, as the author puts it, 'the last time you do something without knowing it's the last time'.

I was really taken with the way this story was told – the motif of an engraved cup, the last text message chain between the griever and grieved, the messages that continue to be sent, even now, with no reply. It's very nicely done.

Highly Commended — *The apple*

Wowzers. A narrator reflects on his mother who – he thinks – hates him. Strong on the Biblical imagery, this story refuses to reveal itself completely and its relentlessly poetic turns of phrase make it a wonderful reading experience.