

**Paul Dalgarno – My Brother Jack Awards
Judge's selection and report 2025**

Junior Secondary Short Story:

First Prize:

H16 – *Cold*

Highly Commended

- 1) H64 – *A Second Breath*
- 2) H18 – *If I Disappear*
- 3) H53 – *Autumn*

Senior Secondary Short Story:

First Prize:

I15 – *One Hell of a Trip*

Open Short Story:

First Prize:

J83 – *Abduction Day*

Second Prize:

J100 – *That time of the Month*

Third Prize:

J81 – *Bishops*

Highly Commended, in order of preference:

- 1) J78 – *The Extra*
- 2) J13 – *Yellow*
- 3) J25 – *South Road Life*

Junior Secondary Short Story – judge’s report

What a joy it has been to read the stories submitted for this year’s Junior Secondary Short Story competition. And what a headache trying to pick a winner!

From allegories about loneliness to poetic reflections on the climate, to thrilling tales about possible pasts, presents and futures, these stories left me in no doubt that the spirit of storytelling is alive and well in our young writers.

In making my final decision, I was guided by a few things: the originality of the idea, the pace and conviction of the storytelling, and – crucially – the liveliness and emotional impact of the writing itself.

I hummed, I hawed, reread, slept on it, woke up on it, and landed on one clear winner and three stories deserving of high commendation.

In ascending order, then, I highly commend the story *Autumn*, a beautifully told – and moving – tale about a pup coming to terms with the changing seasons and the fact that change, in all forms, is part of life.

I likewise highly commend *If I Disappear*. Stories about feeling lonely and alone were – alas – quite common among the entries this year – a sobering and sad truth.

If I Disappear really struck me for its language and approach to this pervasive topic. Essentially a conversation between a journal-keeper and a journal, it deals honestly and convincingly with the fear of being insignificant and the consolation to be won from writing about that experience.

I’d also like to highly commend *A Second Breath*. Written along the lines of a prose poem, with a splendid narrative structure, this story about a sister who died before the narrator’s birth, and how the narrator feels about that unrealised sibling relationship, is impressive and touching. Well done!

The First Prize this year goes to *Cold*, an excellent short story about a young violin player walking across snowy ground to a Grand Hall, where she’ll have the chance to prove herself as a musician. I loved the back and forth between the present moment and an earlier, quite recent memory of playing through her piece for her mother, and her mother being less than impressed.

What really brought the story to life for me were the exhilarating turns of phrase. We read that ‘silver sparks of fear licked at [the protagonist’s] sides’; of a memory that ‘wriggled and squirmed’; of the nighttime ‘leering its cruel face at her’.

The story ends as the narrator enters the Grand Hall, leaving the cold night behind, and we can’t help hoping her performance goes well.

Cold does a sterling job of building atmosphere and tension, with just enough backstory to raise the stakes in a way that brings us fully into the tale. A terrific story!

Senior Secondary Short Story – judge’s report

I love it when you think you’re reading one kind of story, and are happily along for the ride, only to discover that something completely different is going on.

And that was certainly the case with this year’s winner in the Senior Secondary Short Story Competition.

Across the entries as a whole, there were plenty of fabulous ideas. The death of a tree, told from the tree’s perspective, more than one take on a post-apocalyptic future, and a couple of wonderful ‘sliding doors’ stories where an alternate version of the protagonist got a chance to experience a life different to their own. In several, I was impressed with the skilful and unusual changes of perspective, as well as the originality of the writing voices.

The story that brought most of those elements together for me, and this year’s winner of the Senior Secondary Short Story Competition, is *One Hell of a Trip*.

At first, I thought it was a romance story of sorts, maybe even a speed-dating scenario, with two characters – Joe and Clem – engaged in awkward conversation about who they are and what they do for a living.

One, we learn, works in construction, the other as a scientist.

But as their conversation becomes less stilted, we start to suspect all may not be as it seems. They open up about the behaviours that may or may not have brought them together: the joy of ‘accidentally’ knocking ‘rocks, tools, pieces of wood’ from a rooftop on a building site, badly injuring those below; the decision to commandeer a live test subject (i.e. a lab colleague) for a life-ending scientific experiment.

Eventually, we realise Clem and Joe are in an elevator, and have been descending for quite a long time. At the bottom, they’ll be met by a demon surrounded by flames, with a voice ‘thick as smoke and twice as choking’.

These drip-fed details combine and build to a finale that in retrospect feels inevitable, but on first reading isn’t clear at all. There’s an impressive sleight of hand and understanding of dramatic tension. I’d like to congratulate the author, and all of the entrants this year, on your fantastic work.

Open Short Story – judge’s report

This year saw more than 120 entries to the Open Short Story competition, all of which I enjoyed reading and at least a couple of dozen of which showed tremendous potential and were close to winning top prize.

That said, the eventual winner felt clear as soon as I’d read it and, having read through the longlist several more times to reach my final decision, even more so.

Given the depth of talent on display, I’d like to highly commend three of this year’s stories as well as naming a Third, Second and First Prize.

I highly commend *South Road Life*. This gorgeous story recalls a family of *homo sapiens* from the point of view of a 60-year-old tree – a tree that remains in place, of course, as the parents and children grow up and move on. The memories are moving and well-rendered, as is the commentary on the community of trees now sharing the space.

I also highly commend *Yellow*, a fun – and immensely satisfying – story about a heroic and mysterious narrator turning the tables on the school bully, John. The message I took from this story was that imagination can ultimately defeat bullies and I applaud the author for the message and the excellent storytelling.

Also worthy of high commendation is *The Extra*, a story about feeling like an extra in your own life. It expertly layers in references to films, each of which relates to the story's main themes. And the sense of redemption at the end feels highly fitting. Excellent work.

And so: to the prizes.

Third Prize goes to *Bishops*. As a story about three tipsy bar colleagues who end up in an apartment late at night, the two men playing chess while the woman watches on, could have been handled badly. I take my hat off to the author for their careful, nuanced storytelling, the agency given to each of the characters, and the excellent unfolding of the story.

Second Prize goes to *That Time of the Month*. A time-travelling tale in which the protagonist – Yve – goes back five days every month when she has her period ... What a great concept, combining elements of high-school drama, coming-of-age, romance and sci-fi. This story was surprising at every turn, with excellent plotting, pace and pay-off.

The winner of this year's Open Story Competition is *Abduction Day*. The premise – *human gets abducted by aliens* – isn't new. But what the writer does with it is thoroughly engaging and extremely funny.

Humour is one of the hardest things to get right on the page, but this story nails it from beginning to end. With touches of *The Hitchhiker's Guide*, we're thrown into a universe where bureaucracy rules, staff shortages put strain on workers, and Medicare may or may not pay for the removal of a bodily probe. The harried protagonist Andy, an overworked vet, is happy for a break when he becomes one of many, regular alien abductees. He soon learns that aliens – in this case, just the one, doing several aliens' jobs – don't necessarily have it much easier than we humans. Andy's consideration for his abductor – *'Any sense of trepidation would never hold up to his deep fear of*

being conceived as an inconvenience’ – makes for pitch-perfect comedy, as do his complaints about not being able to get treatment for a tooth complaint in Australia, to which the narrator muses: ‘Maybe he could ask the aliens to take a look at it.’

It’s packed with satire, bursting with entertainment – and this year’s hands-down winner. Congratulations!