

22 August 2019

National Schools Poetry Award celebrates New Zealand's poets of the future

A year 13 student at Auckland's Westlake Girls High School has won first place in the 2019 International Institute of Modern Letters' (IIML) National Schools Poetry Award, with her poem 'Mammalian'.

Xiaole Zhan receives a prize of \$500 and the opportunity to attend a poetry masterclass with poet Chris Tse and *Starling* editor Francis Cooke at the IIML, home of Victoria University of Wellington's prestigious creative writing programme. Xiaole's school library also receives a \$500 book grant. Nine others were shortlisted in the awards and they will also attend the masterclass.



Xiaole Zhan

"This is very exciting news—I feel encouraged and supported as a young poet," says Xiaole. "Opportunities like this are crucial in the development of young writers like myself, and help us to gain confidence, have the rare opportunity of extending our skills with established writers, and connect with like-minded students across New Zealand."

Judge Chris Tse—whose poetry has been widely published and performed in New Zealand and overseas—says the young poets who entered the competition are writing about topics that reflect the interests and concerns of young people today, from the frustration of wanting to grow up faster, to the desire for the world to slow down.

"Xiaole Zhan's evocative poem, 'Mammalian' triggers a multi-sensory response in the reader. From its bold, imagistic opening to the breathless desperation of its final lines, 'Mammalian' reeled me in and refused to let me go until the final word."

The nine shortlisted poets are: Maia Armistead, Waikato Diocesan School for Girls; Charlotte Boyle, Cashmere High School; Sebastian Macaulay, Wellington High School; Claudia Snow, Wakatipu High School; Pippi Duncan, Takapuna Grammar School; Rachel Lockwood, Taradale High School; E Wen Wong, Burnside High School; Emily Blennerhassett, Cashmere High School; Elizabeth Nahu, Onslow College.

IIML Senior Lecturer and poet Chris Price says, "From compelling responses to the Christchurch mosque shooting to an intimate portrait of a father-son relationship, the shortlisted poems are alert to the big issues and the small moments of connection in human

relationships. If this shortlist is anything to go by, the future of New Zealand poetry is in good hands.”

The winner also receives an additional package of literary prizes provided by the New Zealand Book Council, Victoria University Press, *Sport, Landfall* and the New Zealand Society of Authors. The nine finalists receive prizes from the New Zealand Book Council and Sport, as well as \$100. Flights and accommodation costs are covered for students outside of Wellington to attend the masterclass at the IIML.

The 2019 National Schools Poetry Award is organised by the IIML with the support of Creative New Zealand and advertising agency Ogilvy (formerly Ogilvy & Mather), with promotional support from Wonderlab.

The winning poem, the judge’s report and all the shortlisted poems are available on the [National Schools Poetry Award website](#).

The complete judge’s report, which includes comments on all the shortlisted poems and a list of highly commended writers can be read [here](#).

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Issued by Victoria University of Wellington Communications & Marketing.

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NATIONAL SCHOOLS POETRY AWARD 2019



OVERALL WINNER 2019 : XIAOLE ZHAN

Yr 13, Westlake Girls' College

Mammalian

mamma, your back is flowered dark red and purple perfect circles, mamma, fleshy hills along the road of your spine, your blood suctioned to the surface of your skin, you tell me it helps with your pain, paints you the colour of tender bruises, blisters oozing with yellow liquid along the rim of each cup, too much moisture in the body, you say, I imagine the body as a dark cave, bones dripping stalactites, corroding canals and canals, there seems to be such a fine line between hurting and healing, mamma, remember sleeping in the summer, mamma, the mosquitoes plodding down on our wet skins, bellies fat with the mingling of our blood, the watery softness of your flesh in the dark startled me, mamma, I imagined you old and soft and dead beneath my arms, remember when we made tomato soup together, and I couldn't cut a tomato without the insides pulping out, red, red, the raw warmth of it round in my belly, remember when you told me you'd never be able to hate me, mamma, and I'm sorry for all my livid love, mamma, all this tender violence, and you're doubled over dripping snot onto the road, sobbing how could you do this to me how could you do this to me, and I was the size of a kitten, you say, when I was born, and when I mewed for you in the dark you thought you'd imagined it, you say, you thought you'd lost me, lost me, and they say the heart is a muscle the size of a fist, mamma, your nails are bloodied with the seeping bruise of my heart, mamma, and there's all this blood between us, mamma, all this blood because of us, mamma. there's such a fine line between hurting and loving.

The National Schools Poetry Award is organised by the International Institute of Modern Letters.

Read all ten 2019 finalists and learn more about the Award at schoolspoetryaward.co.nz