

MEDIA RELEASE



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Poem charting emotional distance wins 2026 National Schools Poetry Award



Xavier Tapsell, a Year 13 student from Tauranga Boys' College, is the winner of the 2026 National Schools Poetry Award. His poem 'The Left Spring's Soft' movingly portrays a parent and child struggling to bridge the gulf between them.

"It's about two people who've drifted so far apart neither of them really knows how to close the gap," says Xavier. "Every time they get close to something real, one of them backs off."

He describes the poem's father and son as "magnets pushing away from each other". In the end, a crucial conversation is spent "avoiding the parts that would actually mean something".

The National Schools Poetry Award is run by Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington's International Institute of Modern Letters (IIML) with funding from Creative New Zealand, and sponsorship and promotional support from Wonderlab.

Judge Rebecca Hawkes says Xavier's compassionate but unflinching poem evokes "the inadequacy of language even when it is most needed".

Set in lambing season, 'The Left Spring's Soft' is rich with specific details of farm life, but it's also preoccupied with the unspoken. "The right words often fail to arrive for the poem's characters, leaving silence to ride in the passenger seat and only halting, awkward speech between the farmer and his boy."

Xavier's poem will feature on the [Books page of The Spinoff](#) on Friday 28 August, National Poetry Day.

As the winner of the 2026 National Schools Poetry Award, Xavier receives a \$500 cash prize, a \$500 book grant for his school library, Read NZ Te Pou Muramura posters, a year's membership of the New Zealand Society of Authors (NZSA), and a year's subscription to leading New Zealand literary journal *Landfall*.

Choosing ten finalists, and ultimately a winner, from more than 250 poems was "a dizzying challenge", Rebecca says. "The talent on display was astonishing."

The other nine finalists are: Roseleen Kaur (Year 12, Botany Downs Secondary College), Sabrina Liu (Year 13, Kristin School), Charlotte Galvan (Year 13, St Andrew's College), Thomas Rowe Palmer (Year 13, St Andrew's College), Sara Assadi (Year 13, Wellington Girls' College), Miranda Yuan (Year 12, Burnside High School), Jessica McIntosh (Year 12, Hillmorton High School), Eve Hughes (Year 13, Cashmere High School) and Hanxi (Cicy) Chen (Year 12, St Andrew's College).

Poems by all the finalists are available on the [Schools Poetry Award](#) website.

Xavier and the other nine finalists will attend a one-day poetry masterclass with poets Rebecca Hawkes and Tony DiCarlo at the International Institute of Modern Letters.

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