

National Schools Poetry Award 2026

Judge's Report, by Rebecca Hawkes

It's been an honour to spend time with the work of these young poets. Living a few weeks with these pages printed and strewn about my room brought me right back to the intensities that drove and drew me to poetry as a teen. The old muses still sing – desire and suffering, loneliness and longing. The poets continue to find new ways to live through ancient myths. We take our linguistic inheritances of histories and sciences, recipes and religions, land and lore, and polish them into crystalline lenses through which our world is refracted. I was impressed by the breadth and vibrancy of this year's poets; their commitment and bravery, their desire to see others clearly and willingness to let themselves be seen.

As a teenager, both reading and writing poetry helped me name my expanding capacities for adoration and pain, and to find electric connection with others who felt the same. In the pages of poems offered for this contest, I found poets profoundly engaged with questions of faith and devotion, the brevity of mortality, and how to transform suffering – our own, of those we love, and of the world – into art, into opportunities for beauty and solidarity. This year's poets did not shy away from the challenges we face in a troubling time, but they were also steadfast in offering anchors to all that makes life worthwhile; the gifts of being sensing, social creatures in a world of wonders, and the bonds that hold us close to our communities.

To choose ten poems from over two hundred and fifty, then one winner from ten finalists, was a dizzying challenge. While I stand by the poems I've selected, another reader would probably have picked an entirely different array. The talent on display was astonishing. To all those who didn't see themselves named in this contest's results: there was much to admire in your poems, and you made my choices frightfully difficult. To not see your name typed in this document does not diminish the value of your art. While we may seize encouragement when it is offered, rejection is an inevitability in a poet's life. Much like on a social media feed, in a writer's publication record you only see successes – but every visible victory has its shadowy chorus of *nopes*: the not-quite-ready, the not-a-fit-this-issue, the occasional near-miss do-try-again-next-time-please. Careers are built on setting aside the sting of a *no* and holding close the fire that moves us to write in the first place. The writing of poetry can be a secluded activity but it also takes risk to offer your words until they find the right reader, who will see in them that blazing *yes*. External validation isn't

everything, but I for one need a smidge here and there – and it's impossible to attain without vulnerability. So keep writing, read widely, find platforms where people share the kind of work you're keen on, and – when you're ready for your work to be seen – don't be afraid to try and try again.

Poetry can be so many things. How, then, to select winners from this staggering variety? In 1870, Emily Dickinson wrote: *If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?* I was reading, too, for poems that froze me in place, that took the top of my head off. I read for lines I'd never heard before, and ways of seeing that felt complex and *true*, if not necessarily factual. With no information on the identities of the writers (only titles and numbers in a spreadsheet) I had to let each poem lead me by its own logic without the biographical context one often has to hand while editing elsewhere.

Many of the poems I hoarded in my (rather long) shortlist reckoned with questions of place, and language, and belonging. Several described English in relation to other their other languages – foregrounding the hegemonic weight of this competition's prevailing tongue, and demonstrating the power of poetry to draw our attention to aspects of language which are otherwise taken for granted. Using poetry to explore identity remains evergreen. Being able to say who you are and how you feel, to share what you see from where you stand, is important both for self-expression and to honour those who may not be so safe, permitted, or able to speak. Poems that imagine positions outside the poet's own perspective can also do valuable work; many persona poems were written with empathetic sensitivity, striving to connect to the worlds of others. I also loved to see poems that tested the boundaries of language's construction, whether through formal constraints like pantoums and abecedarians or through detonations that challenge the ways readers are used to seeing words behave on the page.

The winning poem is *The Left Spring's Soft* by Xavier Tapsell. It's categorically *Meat Lovers* of me to award the grand prize to a poem set in lambing season but let me count the ways this poem captured my attention beyond my admitted affinity for the rural gothic. *The Left Spring's Soft* reckons with an archetypal taciturn kiwi bloke: a farmer left by his wife and son, isolated by geography and even vaster emotional distance. Specific details give cinematic vividness to the farmer's life – V cans clatter across the truck floor, shearing handpieces are oiled to quell shaking hands. The poem is rich with particularity – locations, textures, sounds: "Rain past Taihape, / yellow streaks smeared across the glass, / wipers dragging a dry, rhythmic scrape." Despite the eloquent attention given to the physical realm, 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. The unspoken stretches far beyond what we see framed in the poem's vignettes. Relationships and histories remain opaque to the reader's judgement, revealed in glimpsed subtleties like the slippage between "how's the missus" and "how's *he*, then?". The poem is compassionate toward its subject, but also unflinching – like the final image of the farmer burying a stillborn lamb, once again wordless as he does not curse but digs

cold metal into clay. In returning to this poem, I admired the tactile concreteness of this poem's images, and its confidence in refraining from over-explanation, letting us sit with the inadequacy of language even where it is most needed. I have rarely been so enchanted by the inner workings of an old ute.

The nine finalists' poems moved me too, each in their own way. Love and loss, the personal and societal, seriousness and play all found their way close to my heart. Here are a few reflections, in no particular order.

Eve Hughes' *Early Works* made me do the Zendaya roar from *Challengers* with pure delight at the sport of it, each line traveling over its enjambment like a tennis ball sailing over the net, in a tightly-sprung late-boyhood sonnet (my view of the sonnet being capacious - "about yay big", or 14 lines here including the epigraph). The ordinariness of this young God is crucial to the poem – and hanging out with one's mates at the game is undeniable as an experience of holiness.

Miranda Yuan's *Galatea, Muse, and I* is a contrapuntal poem retelling the Classical myth of Pygmalion and the maiden he sculpts from ivory alabaster. This poem uses focused craft to bring to life the pressure of perfection. The technical command of language needed for the poem to read so smoothly both across and down the twin columns of the contrapuntal form perfectly amplifies its narrative of love, attention, and creation lavished as forms of control.

Hanxi Chen's *something in this world of orange sunsets* is charmingly candid as it charts an amber-lit atmosphere of longing, Instagram, and endless mandarin peels. The search for feeling reeled me through this poem in which the speaker scrolls for dopamine and hands over their heart like a skinned fruit, and the warmth of that last line felt like I myself had earned another minute of sunlight.

Charlotte Galvan's *Veins With* flows so beautifully on the page, its shape might trace an artery or a braided river; the flicking frond of flax in the wind or a tuna swimming lithely downstream. This poem gracefully weaves together sicknesses of body, culture, and whenua and lays this comorbid diagnosis on the white page like the sterile medical lighting that whitewashes the poem's scene. Deft and delicate, the fluid movement between kupu Māori and English in this poem breathes gentle life into a future that might yet surpass the colonial violence the verse describes.

Sabrina Liu's *soil lickers* is a work of sensory delights, roaming between surreal scenes of earth-eating at a starlit city's edge and generational migrant experiences. With memorable phrases, the speaker details grandparents' histories as they stumbled to learn a new language – "my grandmother... each child with a name she could understand"; "my grandfather was entombed in a country he could not by shoes in", while the speaker leaves the poem hoping again "how to write my forgotten name".

Jessica McIntosh's *The City I'll Never Know* illustrates post-quake Christchurch in a tapestry of hubris and hope. The speaker takes on the voice of a generation from a city "growing too fast / and growing not at all". Teenhood in transformational times is never easy – I was at highschool in Christchurch myself when the quakes first hit –

and this poem takes up the challenge of growing up in the debris of our forebears' mistakes.

Sarah Assadi's *FOB (First of Belonging)* upturns the acronym 'FOB' from 'fresh off the boat' to claim proud belonging for an Iranian family in Porirua. Friction between one place and another is present as parents bring kilos of mint to their new country's shore – "enough to concern the government" -- a symbol of nourishment and exile reduced to a biosecurity threat. The poet claims power in the struggle to call this country home while retaining the stories that brought them here – like "saffron in hot water, slowly giving up its colour without losing its taste".

Roseleen Kaur's *the clipped vowel* breaks open its own English language to interrogate the speaker's belonging in and through and beyond it. Between here and there, the poet finds herself as "ink bleeding across the border", making in this poem an expanded language capable of holding a self's multiple truths in tension. A name is pruned to bloom in a colonial garden; a suffix buried in playground dirt. Words are unzipped; opened up to b r e a t h e.

Thomas Palmer's *Pinecone's succulence* is pure language-play. It that tests the depths of irreverence in the poetic mode; lobbing a cheeky jest at the expense of hoity-toity capital-P Poetry. This audacious entry taps into storied histories of wordplay like the Dada and the Language poets, who pushed the boundaries of [non]sense. Speak this poem aloud and feel the joy in the sound before worrying about what it 'means'. Within its rhymes and zingers, pivots and echolalia, this work captures a justified suspicion of an epiphanic mode of poetry and a resistance to profundity, all romping along on a Dr-Seuss-style earworm. This poem reminds me not all art demands our suffering, or earnest striving for transcendental meaning – sometimes it can be fun, silly, satirical. Sometimes the music of the words can make the very material of speech itself strange and new again.

Poetry is often positioned as an opportunity for bonus points at school, and then an optional extra in adult life... a whimsical hobby if you can fit it in around a day job. But the work poets do is real and meaningful, too. We work with fundamental questions of communication, whether we're having fun with wordplay or searching for ways our most secret selves might speak. In a world of deepening division, the work of poets becomes more relevant to record our times and reach out to one another. Writing is often borne of hope – to be heard, to hear each other, to heal. Of course it's unfair to expect young people to have the answers to problems their predecessors couldn't protect them from. But the poems I've read speak to the bravery and insight of a generation coming into their own – using this art to make sense of your world, and your place in it.

Young writers: keep writing, and please keep sharing your work. In Aotearoa, despite our grievously underfunded arts scene, we are exceptionally lucky to have a growing platform for work by new writers – especially *Starling* with their focus on young authors, and also the constellation of journals from *Takahē* and *Landfall*, to newer players like *Symposia*, *Nine Lives*, *Circular*, *Bloodbath*, *Tarot*, *Yellow Lamp*, and my dear *Sweet Mammalian*. You can, if you're finding it tough to find a place that houses

the poems you most want to see in the world (and you're excited enough about reading poems to not mind a bit of email admin) even start your own journals!

I considered not mentioning the use of generative AI evident in some submissions this year, but it feels necessary to briefly address this new era for authors' integrity. I am not an editor because I wanted to be a cop; scanning for echoes of robotic cliché is not an enjoyable way to read. For me, the point of *writing* a poem is in the deep, difficult work of finding my own right words for what I need to say – or even the wrong ones, as close to right as I can make them, until the poem begins to move on the steam of its own little machinery. I can understand the wish to see the words click into place more quickly. But AI strip-mines its phrases from a chorus of millions of voices who fought to find the words before. It can rarely say anything new that might need saying now; that could perhaps only have been said by *you*. I understand, too, that we live in a world rife with pressures to perform (ie this very competition), to adapt, to keep up. But when the owners of these technologies, with all their money and power, want you to be dependent on their pay-to-play tools to shape the words you speak, I urge you to think very carefully before giving up your tongue. Your art. Your mighty human heart.

Thank you again to all who sent in poems this year. Keep writing, and reading, and listening; go to open mics and slams and literary festivals; find friends who love to experiment with language too, who you can share your new work with. Keep your poems brave and playful, free and true. I look forward to reading more from you in future.

Ngā mihi nui,

Rebecca Hawkes