

National Schools Poetry Award 2022

Judge's Report, by Ash Davida Jane

Being trusted with the poems of so many Year 12 and 13 students from across Aotearoa is a real honour. I really enjoyed sitting down with the hefty pile of entries to this year's National Schools Poetry Award. In every single poem I was struck by something powerful, something I wouldn't have encountered that day if not for that poem, so I'm grateful to everyone who submitted.

One thing that stood out was how much emotion these poems carry. Not to sound jaded and old, but I think the writing we do when we're young is powerful because it's the things we feel we have to say. It's often very personal and emotional, as if these words have been screaming inside us all along and suddenly they have to be poured out. There's a really beautiful moment when the feelings and the craft line up perfectly. I wrote a lot of poems as a teenager – a lot more than I manage now – and I cherish how that practice helped my writing, but also what it meant to learn to articulate myself. I saw a lot of that in these poems – young poets finding new ways to express their most urgent feelings.

I was also thrilled by how many of the entries dealt with the impacts of colonisation and the climate crisis. It shows how conversations about these issues, and how they intertwine, are present and thriving. It also suggests that these students are being encouraged to broaden their thinking and push back against colonial, capitalist structures. I love to see it.

The poems that impressed me most felt immediate and contemporary. They were playful with form or with imagery, and they steered away from poeticisms and clichés. They engaged with significant issues, but they never felt didactic or over-explanatory. These poets interacted with their subject matter in ways that felt new and meaningful.

After I first read the winning poem, 'Veitongo', it stayed with me for days. It's in conversation with Kaveh Akbar's incredible piece 'Orchids Are Sprouting From the Floorboards', and easily holds its own next to it. The range of images and sensations in Joshua Toumu'a's poem create a vivid snapshot of Tonga. At the beginning of the poem, the water could be completely metaphorical, at times pushing into surrealism: 'A fresh loaf is split in two. It gushes rainwater.' The real context of the poem is withheld until we reach the final two lines, separated from the rest. It comes like a punch in the gut. The fact of the waves taking out communications, combined with the title, is all that's needed to place us in time and space. It's impressive how the poem situates us so specifically with just a few words. At this point, we rethink the previous lines altogether. The rainwater becomes something tangible.

Juxtaposed with the waves, it becomes a completely different kind of threat, while also being a necessary resource. The children running to buy rainwater for their families are now in search of fresh drinking water in the middle of a crisis.

I keep coming back to 'Veitongo' and each time I read it I discover something else. I can't wait to see more work from Joshua Toumu'a in the future.

The rest of the finalists' works range widely in style and subject, but they're all strong, polished poems. In no particular order, I want to talk a little about each one.

When something in a poem catches me by surprise, I know it's working. In 'Remnants' (by Sofia Drew), the poem journeys from trading strange and wonderful objects – a milk tooth, a chrysalis – in the school playground to the pinkness of living bones to imagining oneself as the thing to be examined. This feels natural but not obvious, like the thinking you do when you just let your mind drift. It follows a kind of life cycle, from living to fossil, while new creatures pore over the leftover parts of us just as we did with those before.

In 'Te pō, Te kore, Te ao Marama' (by Ivy Evaaliyah Lyden-Hancy), the plants do a lot of work to build up what the poem says more directly elsewhere. The speaker enacts decolonisation literally, by digging up 'the white man's grass' and planting kōwhai, pōhutukawa, kauri and pikopiko. This poem is connected to and built upon the whenua in a way that feels like it's reclaiming something, while also grieving what was lost. The parallel of digging in 'unbury the mass graves' means that the line hits even harder. The directness is earned, and it's a line I can't stop thinking about.

In 'Transparent eyeball' (by Natalya Newman), there's this incredible contrast between its conversational tone and strange, wonderful images: 'A shopping cart is exposed at low tide, / rusting and lonely with its two back wheels / reaching for the sky.' This could be a trivial sight but the attention given to it turns it into something meaningful. In this poem, the everyday physical thing becomes otherworldly just through looking.

The physical details are also what stands out in 'Blue' (by Louie Feltham). As a poem that begins with an abstract idea of masculinity, it's the concrete objects that ground it in reality. The 'old sweater on the chair', the 'mother's shaky hand', the 'crinkling plastic of blooms and blush' that package tampons and pads place us right beside the speaker and let us feel what they feel.

'Bath time' (by Hannah Wilson) reads like a meditation on the bathtub. We run through her series of 'lovers', each built out into full and rounded characters even though they only appear briefly. I was impressed by how clearly I could see each of these people, and how much compassion the poem invites for each of them. The poem brings us to an unexpected ending, as the 'moon's light splashes / across the bath's porcelain skin', the two finding comfort in each other. It's sometimes considered clichéd to write about the moon but most good poets do it at least once, and the descriptions in 'Bath time' are as fresh as they are lovely. The way the poem starts with a mention of the moon and circles back at the end makes it feel complete, like a full moon.

The poem 'Tūpuna' (by Bella Laban) starts strong and carries the energy throughout. With only forward slashes to break up the lines, the momentum builds and demands our attention. The lines carry us along with a rhythm that feels natural. Though this poem starts with the singular I, it reads as if spoken by a chorus of voices. It's like the poet is channelling the voices of their tūpuna, with all their anger and grief, but also their strength.

In long poems, ideas can be teased out over time, but sometimes a really short poem captures something so perfectly that nothing more needs to be said. Reading 'long pause' (by Ella Sage), every character pulls its weight, down to the repeated 'g' sound of 'god in the garden' and the satisfying pause between 'life' and 'i mean'. It's like each line is perfectly weighted. The final image of the 'cabbage butterfly in your garden of poems' opens up so many potential meanings that the poem could easily go on, but the fact that it stops there means that all of those meanings can exist simultaneously.

In 'Erosion' (by Cassia Song), we follow a well-known journey – the stages of grief from shock through to acceptance. What I love about this poem is how well it evokes the emotions of each stage without ever needing to tell us what's happened. Through the details ('in the kitchen i'll set the table for two / i won't bother with coffee / neither of us liked it anyway') the poem creates the feeling instead of explicitly telling us, aside from the one-word heading of each section.

One of the best things I've ever learned about poetry is that writing in your own voice – the way you speak to your friends – makes your poems more natural and more interesting than anything else you can do. Your readers can tell if you're writing in a voice that isn't yours, because you think it's how poetry is supposed to sound. 'I'm not fluent but I will learn' (by Lucas Te Rangi) is a great example of a natural voice. The poem enacts its own meaning, with the poet practising their reo in the poem as they describe trying to find their way to it. The title, echoed in the final line of the poem, is a powerful statement and one that looks to the future. Without diminishing the complexity of language and the history of loss that comes with this learning, the poet brings us to a sense of hope that feels effortless.

If you submitted this year, thanks for letting me read your work. I really hope you keep writing – write about all kinds of different things, and try out different forms and styles. Push the boundaries of what you think poetry should do. Try to write some real weird stuff. I look forward to reading it.

Also, read a lot, especially poetry, especially new writing. Read work in places like *Starling*, *Sweet Mammalian*, and *eel mag* (all local literary journals available for free online). There's so much to learn from reading other people's work and figuring out what you do or don't like about it. I'm so happy to see the flood of talent coming through in our young poets. We're in good hands.

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Joshua Toumu'a is from Wellington High School
Sofia Drew is from Takapuna Grammar School, Auckland
Ivy Evaaliyah Lyden-Hancy is from Papakura High School, Auckland
Natalya Newman is from Huanui College, Whangarei
Louie Feltham is from Samuel Marsden Collegiate School, Wellington
Hannah Wilson is from Raphael House Rudolf Steiner School, Wellington
Bella Laban is from Michael Park School, Auckland
Ella Sage is from Westland High School, Hokitika
Cassia Song is from Otumoetai College, Tauranga
Lucas Te Rangi is from St Andrew's College, Christchurch