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Tsunami poem wins National Schools Poetry Award 2022

Joshua Toumu'a, a Year 12 student from Wellington High School, has won the 2022 International Institute of Modern Letters (IIML) National Schools Poetry Award with a poem that creates a vivid snapshot of the aftermath of the Hunga-Tonga Hunga-Ha'apai eruption and the ensuing tsunami.



Joshua, who is of Tongan, Papua New Guinean, and Palangi descent, lived in Tonga for six years as a kid. The day of the eruption, he was messaging his friend just before communications were cut off. "My concern for family and friends, combined with memories of childhood years in Tonga manifested as this poem."

The announcement comes as Aotearoa New Zealand celebrates the 25th celebration of [New Zealand Poetry Day](#).

Judge Ash Davida Jane says, "After I first read the winning poem 'Veitongo', it stayed with me for days." She adds, "The range of images and sensations in Joshua Toumu'a's poem creates a vivid snapshot of Tonga. The real context of the poem is withheld until we reach the final two lines—at this point, we rethink the previous lines altogether." Joshua will join other poets to read his winning poem in an event marking Poetry Day at Vic Books on 26 August (12.30pm).

The 2022 National Schools Poetry Award is organised by Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington's IIML with funding from Creative New Zealand, and sponsorship and promotional support from Wonderlab.

Joshua, who happens to be the first male poet to win this award, receives a prize of \$500 and his school library receives a book grant of \$500. He also receives a package of literary prizes provided by Read NZ Te Pou Muramura, Te Herenga Waka University Press, *Landfall*, and the New Zealand Society of Authors. As part of the prize, Joshua will attend a poetry masterclass on Saturday 27 August with Ash Davida Jane and Stacey Teague, along with the nine other poets shortlisted for their entries.

Joshua says it is both exciting and validating to win this award. "I love to write and experiment with poetry and having a piece of mine recognised by an acclaimed poet like Ash Davida Jane made me feel proud of my work. I am looking forward to getting professional

tips and feedback on my writing and having the chance to hear some of the other pieces students have created.”

There were more than 190 entries this year from senior high school students. “The writing we do when we’re young is powerful because it’s the things we feel we have to say,” says Ash.

“One thing that stood out was how much emotion these poems carry. 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 suggests these students are being encouraged to push back against colonial, capitalist structures. I love to see it.”

Ms. Chris Price, senior lecturer at the IIML, says, “I was blown away by the winning and shortlisted poems. The intensity and depth of thought shown by these young poets makes me confident the future of poetry in Aotearoa is in good hands.”

The other nine finalists are: Sofia Drew (Takapuna Grammar School, Auckland), Ivy Evaaliyah Lyden-Hancy (Papakura High School, Auckland), Natalya Newman (Huanui College, Whangarei), Louie Feltham (Samuel Marsden Collegiate, Wellington), Hannah Wilson (Raphael House Rudolf Steiner School, Wellington), Bella Laban (Michael Park School, Auckland), Ella Sage (Westland High School, Hokitika), Cassia Song (Otumoetai College, Tauranga), and Lucas Te Rangi (St Andrew’s College, Christchurch).

All finalists will join Joshua at the poetry masterclass and will receive prizes from Read NZ Te Pou Muramura and Te Herenga Waka University Press, and \$100 cash each.

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

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