

## PREFACE

### rare indeed

a man sent me an autograph from  
Beau Jack.  
he said that Beau Jack asked him  
to send it on to  
me.  
I told the man to tell  
Beau Jack that I was  
honored.  
have you heard of  
him?  
he was a prizefighter.  
many men box but he was a  
fighter, a terror,  
a champion.  
*Beau Jack.*  
the chills still  
run up and down my  
spine.  
you just can't  
know how good it  
feels to  
hear  
from  
him.  
(Charles Bukowski,  
*Slouching toward Nirvana*)

After all of the administrative work, all the organizational exertion shared between numerous staff and faculty of EDB, HKAGE, and HKBU, after all of the logistic labour, we do, we must, all know how good it feels to hear from our young, local Hong Kong *champions*, the ones collected in this anthology.

It is, it was, all-too-easy for my colleagues Dr Tammy Ho and Dr Jason Lee and myself to forget, to overlook, the words, the works, the efforts, the autographs, of the local students we had never heard of, while we travailed to organize our numerous workshops and interviews and activities. The prize, whilst in the hectic midst of our collective HKBPA programme coordination, was merely the deadline. Or, so I shortsightedly envisioned it, anyway.

Lost to me, at least, in the institutional paper trail, were the very people, the very fighters, now published herein. The voices of tomorrow—some celebratory, some saddened, some nostalgic, some whimsical, some playful, some critical, some cynical, all reflective—that we, our spines sometimes chilled up and down, get to hear from, get to learn from, get to feel with, today.

An honour of equal magnitude for me was the chance to meet most of the students printed in this volume. I had the opportunity to sit down with them. To talk. To question. And best of all: to listen. And not just listen to their poetry—but also to the narratives surrounding and contextualizing their creative works. What strikes me most, what makes me feel most good, and as a correlative result most bad, most badly, is the shift in tone, is the loss of wonder, is the boom of wariness, that readers will witness in the bulk of writers who have transitioned from primary to secondary school.

Certainly, much of this alteration in writerly tone and readerly mood has to do with the distinctive themes provided to students of varied age groups. Equally affecting, these variations in tone also bespeak how young adults cultivate their own senses of personal identity, of social critique and of institutional ennui. The time constraints and social pressures plaguing Hong Kong students are anything but clandestine. To hear students articulate the various pressures placed upon them, and to evoke these gravities in diverse creative, critical and empathetic ways, is to my mind a testament to how each one of them, like boxer Beau Jack, too is a fighter.

Even to submit a poem to HKBPA 2015-16 is an act of courage, and concomitantly, not to mention counterintuitively, one that also adds yet another item to their already outsized schoolwork burdens. This is precisely why the work collected here highlights my (and probably your) sense of animadversion vis-à-vis student life, student *lives*, in Hong Kong. Paradoxically, however, it is the very systems that Hong Kong students critique that equip these selfsame students with the necessary means to critique these systems. One student published here at once playfully and seriously describes the busy-ness of her daily life:

After piano, comes ballet,  
Spin and turn nonstop all day.  
On the ground my tiptoes lay,  
Sore and stinging but what can I say?

She closes her poetic apostrophe on modern youth culture ironically:

When would she ever let me complain?  
I can do nothing—not even explain.

The final rhetorical question and resignation to her interlocutor prove ironical precisely because this student has now explained. Poetry has permitted her, poetry permits her, to speak. To have a voice. To be heard.

The late, great Muhammad Ali (1942-2016), who could “float like a butterfly and sting like a bee,” the prizefighter of international repute, the activist of universal celebrity, delivered a commencement address to Harvard University’s class of 1975. Predictably, a number of the assembled students called upon the world heavyweight boxing champion, known as the “Louisville Lip” because of his gift of the gab, because of his competence at crafting couplets, to provide a poem on the spot. After little hesitation, Ali rewarded his audience, and all of posterity, with: “Me. We.”

This collection privileges multiple young Hong Kong voices. You’ll see and hear merriment and lament, contentment and resentment *and* love and loss. You’ll feel all

of these in equal measure. And this is the point of poetry. It humanizes us. It exposes us. It makes us *us*. It is us. We need narratives. We need to share these narratives. Poetry differentiates us. Poetry assembles us. It allows us to see how others see. To feel what others feel. Poetry has the connective, empathetic ability to transmute, for a time at least, every me into a we, every we into a me.

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