

Preface

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Early this year, our adjudicators received more than 2000 poem entries from primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. These poems were written under three themes: 'because', 'be grateful for' and 'family'. The poems reflect the lives and experiences of many of Hong Kong students during a truly extraordinary time, and likewise they demonstrate how life goes on even in the midst of something as earth-shaking as the COVID-19 pandemic. While many poets elected to write about the pandemic, several others chose to explore other topics with these themes.

Beginning with the theme of 'because', we saw poets grapple with the question of why the world is the way that it is, offering insight into their daily struggles and perspectives. In 'The Bane of Our Existence', Audrey So talks about the human condition in today's glamorous society. 'In our modern day society', she writes, 'we judge and are judged./ A thing we take pride in, could be in others' eyes, sin./ We love what is praised, and hate those that are not,/ causing many to strive to be what they're not'. The poem depicts a society where true expression is hidden away during everyday human interactions. What is prioritised instead is other people's recognition and commendation. The poem digs into the fundamental question of who we are as individuals and how to be authentic. Why are people lost in this dire situation? The poem answers by saying: 'Because we're afraid'. What we are afraid of, the poem does not answer, but it is a sharp analysis of how to live a good life in today's performance-oriented world.

With the theme 'be grateful for', many writers naturally chose to voice their thanks for any number of sources of gratitude, but in Eyunni Naarayani Gayathri's poem entitled 'Depression', we instead see a sophisticated portrayal of a disillusioned mind. The poem does not rush to a conclusion of whether one should be grateful or not. Towards the end of the poem, the poet writes: 'Must I be grateful,/ For the grey skies,/ That pour black rain,/ To blind my eye./ Must I be grateful,/ When the world dies,/ And all that remains,/ Is a memory of goodbyes'. The poem is not only a description of a depressed person; it hints at the strained relationship between the individual and society. It is not only a personal account of someone who feels they have been abandoned by society; it can also be taken as a social critique.

In the Primary section, Chan Hei Tung Hayden takes a very different approach to the theme of 'be grateful for'. Her poem, entitled 'A Firefly's Glow', gives a beautiful sketch of how a firefly interacts with the natural world. The writer goes on to explain how the beauty of the firefly changes her state of mind, which is comparable to how the British Romantic poets sought solace from the Lake District two hundred years ago. Hayden writes: 'I see its glowing glare every day,/ A small, bright flame in the dark./ Like a fiery stream lighting the way,/ Healed by its light, my once broken heart.'

Preface (cont.)

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Finally, under 'Family', we have many lively portrayals of familial activities. Some of them are joyful, and some of them less so. 'You' by Shek Tsoi Yee Chloe, is a poem structured around a list of action verbs which characterise infants. The first line of each stanza begins with an action of the infant: 'You blink... you wail... you scream... you wait... you beam... you fume... you stare... you wave.' Then, the poem concludes by returning to the act of blinking. The poem begins with an infant looking up at his parents and ends by using the same movement of looking, but this time the infant has grown up and is now looking at their own child. The poem resembles a chronicle of a person's life, from one birth to another. The poem also celebrates continuation, a key spirit in the formation of families.

The more I read of these poems, the more I find the richness of our participants' work. These young writers are coming of age in a time of rapid change and uncertainty, yet the sharpness and wit of these poems indicate a level of presence and awareness that is difficult to achieve early in life. As a result, many of the poets express concern for the future, but this concern is often tempered with hope. Returning to 'The Bane of Our Existence', the poet concludes that, despite the flaws and hardships in our society, there is hope for the times ahead by saying, 'Only when we take the first step to a better future,/ Will we save our society... And for a better future, we continue to strive.'

I sincerely hope these poems prove to be as enlightening for you as they have been for me.