

Gwee Li Sui, *This Floating World*. Singapore: Landmark Books, 2021. 232pp. ISBN 978-981-14-8561-9

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Gwee Li Sui's second haiku collection, *This Floating World*, attests to the poet, graphic artist and literary critic's fondness for the economy of words. The coincidence between the economy of words and the quick, easy and compact social media posts nowadays is perfect; almost as if this collection invites instant conversations and connections with the audience. Different from his first haiku collection, *Haikuku*, this collection presents a whopping 392 haikus, with each haiku untitled but numbered. Indeed, the titles of the haikus are only found in an index at the end of the collection. There is no page number. There are either one or two haikus per page which are not necessarily connected in terms of subject matter. One can't expect the traditional kind of haiku which relies heavily on nature-based imagery, season-based references and unexpected twist or deviation in the last line. The topics covered in this collection are indeed diverse and scattered; ranging from personal quips to political satire, all centered on the Singaporean experience and perspective. It is indeed tough to discern a coherent theme for this collection due to this rather erratic arrangement.

Nevertheless, Gwee's commitment to haiku is no less admirable. The collection is a handsome testimony to his lifelong commitment to the arts in Singapore. It has the elegiac, rueful tone of a poet looking back on places, public figures, events, food, media, nationhood, as well as nondescript things that inhabit "This Floating World" that he describes. Indeed, Gwee extends the meaning of these otherwise nondescript things like "crook", "omelet", "milk", "tissue pack", "fruit basket", "dolls", "Hex Key" and "tangerines", all the while inviting the readers to immerse themselves in metaphorical ambiguity:

1 The crock is broken

and words are gushing out to
make room for a void.

129 I am here in a
tissue pack on the table,
an absent presence.

The tone also alternates between being cynical and didactic. His cynicism for instance, often reveals a raw sense of political anxiety:

50 “We need people to
challenge authority,” say
people who didn’t.

280 Two roads diverge. If
we take the one less travelled,
the nation is doomed.

Those haikus that are didactic were written in a solemn, forbearing manner, often addressing the reader in direct terms:

84 When siblings live in
harmony, the very act
honours their parents.

91 At dusk, the long fast
ends. Forgiveness is a
feast before a new day.

And some haikus convey an unrestrained sense of paranoia:

25 Singapore welcomes
an infestation of big
fat dancing rodents!

28 Parents decry a
comic. On the main display
Fifty Shades of Grey.

Although haikus generally have a quiet, contemplative tone, Gwee's haikus offer an eclectic mix of tones, asking us to dwell upon the complexity of his subject matter rather than giving us straight, simple answers.

The poetic language used by Gwee does not simply depict the meaning he intends to convey, but rather reinforces it. He does this by alternating between Singlish and standard English – Singlish for events and people specific to Singapore, and standard English for events and people outside of Singapore. This limbo is heartfelt, a sign of how “This Floating World”, while minding its own interests, concerns and identities, is also a part of the global world and therefore affected by global events. Gwee slyly uses Singlish to poke fun at local happenings and issues:

8 Don't think of all your
 problems the Gahmen can't solve
 Focus on the world!

92 Hello, police? Here
 got some people anyhow
 Make police report.

While the use of Singlish in these haikus may resonate with local readers and allow them to experience related feelings, it may disarm non-local readers for the linguistic reticence.

Gwee uses standard English however, to engage, albeit obliquely, with the happenings in the world or popular historical figures:

36 The world awakes to
 your brand-new reality
 show: America.

24 A songwriter turns
 Nobel laureate. The times,
 they are a-changing!

However, the use of standard English does not guarantee that it will not put the reader right off the haikus. The lack of elaboration lingers, despite it being a given that not a lot can be done in a tiny three-line poem.

In short, Gwee Li Sui's *This Floating World* is a prime example of a poet's ability to capture the little details of observation. The impermanence of his surroundings, the irony in current events and trends, the nostalgia and longing for those times which are now lost, and the angst for unrealized potentials – all these are things we can all relate to in order to fill in the gaps in search of the deeper meaning implied by Gwee. The collection as a whole is a literary effusion of a sharp and tired voice. The latter is more protrusive, almost as if Gwee has arrived home spent after a long journey of observing and lamenting over things, hoping for changes which do not often give rise to hope.