

**Aaron Lee Soon Yong, *Coastlands*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2014. 68 pp. ISBN 978-981-09-2478-2.**

Since his first collection, *A Visitation of Sunlight* (1997), Aaron Lee, both as a poet and as an editor, has made a definite contribution to Singaporean poetry. Reading *Coastlands*, his third collection, persuades one to think that the poet is essentially the same person in his philosophy of life though his experiences might have traversed more territory and, perhaps because of that, have culminated in possibly a little more certainty in his resolution of the persistent chasm between reality and ideality.

This collection of 50 poems begins with a “Story Sketch,” almost as an outline for the volume or for life itself, which inevitably begins in the midst of someone’s crisis and is awash with memories, mostly unhappy or blank, that hollow one into a continual longing, which can only be partly soothed by “the mountains’ brilliant and ruthless beauty” in Hawaii, a virgin space (“Story Sketch” 12). From the outset, Lee is aware that he is writing “a shudder of many lives lived/ but not one story told,” “only a longing gaze at the horizon” (“The Poet in Hawaii” 13).

The collection then moves through Hawaii, the “continent of joys” with its “diversion of birdsong blooms” and the many “tongues of light and leaves”; in this primeval land, geographical and spiritual, “a rainbow deflects all questions”; with faith, one can believe that “the prospect of drowning is not the fear of loss” and that eventually, “each of us will be borne home on waves” (“The Wayfarer’s Creed” 14). This faith is specifically reminiscent of Lee Tzu Pheng’s collections, *Prospect of a Drowning* and *Against the Next Wave*. As in Lee Tzu Pheng’s case, such faith underlies unobtrusively Aaron Lee’s work and perhaps accounts for his unusual capacity to question life, nation and self to painful limits without destroying himself or his readers.

The tone for the collection set in the first few poems, Lee moves on to explore the space between and along coastlands, the “many miles/ from one coast to another,” where one looks for home and almost finds it (“Time Lapse,” 16) in the “anonymous rain,” “the open hands of the mountain” (“Peace Like Rivers Falling” 17) and the folk tales, legends, dreams and songs, West and East. In some poems, using some well-known biblical texts as points of departure, Lee humanises the suffering that could have been (“Psalm 23 Reprised” 26; “Delilah” 27; “Judas, a Little While Later” 28).

Existential yearning leads naturally to imaginings of how life could be for unborn children (“A Letter to My Unborn Son” 29) and an attempt to search for hope in one’s childhood and poetic visitations in one’s homeland (“A Tiny Idea” 31; “The Poetic Reader” 34). Even if life might be “all fiction, anyway” (“Public Librarian” 37), Lee is able to confront even the unpleasant aspects of

life – a rough mother (“Disquiet” 38), a friend “barely conscious” lying in hospital (“Close Quarters” 39) and “a litter of sad melodies” (“From the Last Letter of Forgetting” 42). What can one do in the dilemma of life? Lee asks:

how hard is it to believe  
 this wild-song life, this now,  
 this sublime indifferent point in time  
 is all there is, and has not already passed?  
 (“I Sing the Domestic” 51)

To some, that might not be an important or necessary question. In Singapore, or similar urban landscapes for that matter, some appear to be able to just “keep walking until” they “pass the next bend” (“Crossing Lines” 53) and children “flee into that good night” (“Discursions” 55), not heeding Dylan Thomas’s entreaty that even old men should not “go gentle into that good night.” Life being what it is, perhaps retelling mythic tales has to be part of “how to build a nation’s history” (“A Mythic Tail” 57).

Beyond self and nation, the world appears to be in apocalyptic times (“Apocalypse” 58); “amidst the rise and fall of music,” a singer confesses that she is “drowning” (“Celebrity” 59). Ultimately, on this earth along the Milky Way, one of the many galactic coastlands in Laniakea or “immeasurable heaven,” what else can one do but to just “call things what they are” and find freedom in “Aloha” (“Laniakea” 65)?

If the odd reader should find the collection fragmentary in part, it would be because he or she did not read Lee carefully enough. The writing might move with an easy grace, effortlessly lyrical, in natural and unpretentious imagery, with the generosity of spirit characteristic of Lee’s work and himself, but the underlying refrains are violent, even if subdued. The poems as a whole, regardless of place, topic or context, hinge on a melodic phrase that searches for actualisation – personal, national, terrestrial or cosmic – but the environment, within and without, only proffers multiple “truths.” It takes poetic courage to face this fiction, this chasm, with honesty, yet with quietness and strength. As such, Lee’s voice will resonate with different generations of readers in Singapore or beyond for many years to come.

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