

Theophilus Kwek, *Giving Ground*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2016. 76 pp. ISBN978-981-09-8599-8.

More often than not, “landscape” or “place” is perceived merely as a backdrop and often reduced, in popular discourse, to an afterthought of one’s experience. Yet, the ways in which people feel about place, their desire for a space to belong to and their attachment to specific places reveal the actual worth of place. Key scholars of Human Geography, such as Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre and Yi-Fu Tuan, stress the affective relationship between the spatial dimension and human experience, and how sometimes identity and place are tightly interwoven. Without human experience, “place” is just “space.” Theophilus Kwek’s third collection of poetry, *Giving Ground*, explores and demonstrates this relationship by positioning spatiality as an active presence in the poems.

Kwek, winner of the Martin Starkie Prize in 2014 and the Jane Martin Prize the following year, is one of Singapore’s most celebrated young poets and is a testament to the island nation’s thriving poetry scene. His collection of forty poems is divided into four sections: “Road Works,” “Desire Lines,” “Slow Motion” and “Cross Country.” These first-hand impressions of different places and landscapes guide the reader on a “pilgrimage” or rather on a wanderer’s trail across Europe and Asia. We are taken from the countryside to cityscapes, and into the past, present and distant future. The poems highlight the variety of ways in which experiences shape and are shaped by the power of place. The association between space and experience cannot be discounted as Kwek shares with the reader his observations and acute understanding of the different places highlighted in the poems.

The collection begins with an epigraph from Seamus Heaney’s 1995 Nobel Prize Lecture in which Heaney mentions how his experiences have taught him about the nature of journeys. For Heaney, points of arrivals are not destinations but, instead, are only part of an on-going passage. Similarly, Kwek’s poems are also like a series of stops in one continuous journey, as if they are all accumulating into one larger narrative. “A417,” which is not part of the four sections mentioned earlier, opens the collection by announcing the start of a journey into tranquil English countryside. The journey described in the poem has a point of departure, but does not seem to have a specific end. The speaker, instead, talks about the suspension of temporality:

Imagine you have enough time here for a meal. An
afternoon. The sun does not set. Your phone does not
ring. Either side, the valley is a somnolent sea, two pairs
of cresting sails, the walls of your street, back home.
Woods along both ridges peer into the centrefold. The
silence is warm, unfenced; a parcel at the foot of the stairs.

Today is none of the days of the week, so tuck your legs
in. Listen for a creek. (11)

Rather than being swept away by the flow of time, the speaker urges the reader to pause for a moment and take in the physical landscape. At the same time, the reader is also advised to “write nothing down” (11), to be present and savour what is at hand. This line serves as a gentle reminder to the reader that our penchant to commemorate our experiences by rendering them into something tangible may hinder us from fully feeling the power of place.

This preoccupation with space and time continues in poems such as “On History” and “Archaeology” which show what is past, present and future, and exemplify how the flow of time has affected these places. “On History” is dedicated to the people who live in an ancient village called Ein Karem, in Jerusalem. This site is believed by many to be the birthplace of John the Baptist. The poem is about how one sacred site full of history and meaning is prepared for the arrival of pilgrims and tourist: “while travellers return to gather round/ in their flagged groups, the historical grounds/ and take pictures/ As they come/ from afar in their strange pilgrim way/ to see what’s past, and presently here” (21). Going into the distant future, “Archaeology” looks at the fate of a city in the year 3015. Here, we can see what a thousand years can do to a city. It is no longer the thriving metropolis it once was, but it has become a barren space: “Nothing else remains: a troubling thought,/ since in the period’s best cartographer’s plans/ on this site more than a city stood” (70). The location described in the poem reveals how one space can be a palimpsest, with layers of meaning and history inscribed on its soil.

Additionally, the motif of the bird in flight is frequently used in *Giving Ground*, not only in the poems, but also the accompanying illustrations courtesy of Alvin Ong. As we go through every section of the book, we see many images of birds flying over different landscapes. The use of this image exemplifies the idea of the pilgrim and the wanderer in the poems, where it is used to highlight other key themes such as mobility, discovery and exploration.

These observations, experiences and stops along the way eventually lead us to the final poem in the collection, “On Ultimate and Penultimate Things.” The poem is written in a series of tercets that consider the cycle of the seasons. It is a poem about the uncertainty of things, of the plans we make, and of our life experiences. It is an apt conclusion to the collection, with life coming full circle and beginning anew. This can be seen in the first line, which reads, “Forsythia in spring” (72); the poem concludes by repeating the same line.

What I have found rather enjoyable in the collection is the way in which Kwek employs many literary devices and figures of speech in the poems to serve their key themes. The use of alliteration, coupled with striking and rich imagery, for example, gives life and vivacity to the places described: “Somewhere in the

unseen sea swayed/ tomorrow's tide" (29). The use of this kind of style really helps to emphasise how places are active participants in a journey whilst at the same time conveying a quietness and a sense of magic in the overall narrative.

While I have mostly enjoyed reading the poems in this collection, however, the one reservation I have is that some of the poems, at times, may linger on one particular image or message for far too long. They tend to feel a bit repetitive as one goes through the poems. Yet, this is only a minor issue because Kwek's detailed observations offset this weakness in the collection.

Giving Ground is in many ways an engaging collection of poems about identity and belonging. On the whole, this is a fascinating collection about mapping and locating a sense of home by giving in to the unfamiliar. These two ideas, which are contingent on a sense of familiarity, are juxtaposed against the uncertainty of the unknown. At the same time, the collection also reveals a wanderer's intimate observations of the physical landscape and the people inhabiting these spaces.

Madiha Ramlan
International Islamic University of Malaysia