

The Dictator's Eyebrow
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subjugated to him, returning him to them as the heroic face of their suffering to enjoy.

Accordingly, what Wong represents is not so much the strategies or psychology of power as its *vanity*, the phantom pageantry of self-importance inside the heads of political madmen. The central conceit here is self-love, and we are told very early: "Ideologies come and go, but self-/belief is everlasting." What follows as misuse of intelligence and talent is thus only procedural; the dictator could have become a great thinker since "The idea of freedom/ intrigues me"—but "the process/ of being reduced to less than nothing/ intrigues me less". Herein lies this trait that makes the dictator creepily close to any one of us. He is essentially another individual who has to make repeated choices between abstract good and good for himself.

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This magnificent book you have in your hand is such a *tour de force* that celebrates the archetypal life of corrupting power. In fifty-one compact chapters, Cyril Wong weaves an epic tale of a dictator's rise and fall, his rehearsals in self-validation and self-love, and his randomly inspired means of holding on to power. His eyebrow's trivial life becomes central to the map of his face turned inwards to a delusional mind and outwards to a grand social personality. This latest addition to

Wong's increasingly uncountable books of verse is Swiftian in humour and Ionescan in drama, bitchy, bathetic, and tragic at quiet turns. Through it, he has recovered the original political charge in a sustained absurdist study of the human condition.

Wong's current turn to politics may shock many of his followers who have come to regard him as a private poet, a confessional poet, and a writer of ideologically gay verse. These labels, to be fair, are now somewhat restrictive in view of the ever-broadening range of subject matters and modes that motivate Wong. I am rather always of the impression that what is being produced is closer to a poetry of *evasion*. There is certainly consistency in how Wong's poems do not go "in" but ride a rhythm between the representations of interiority and the outside. He creates anticipation for encounters that seldom solidify—as if he wants to spring traps in discourses themselves, what may be fatal to the spirit of verse.

Only such a poet attuned to the practicality of an interface, the skin between realities, can find profound beauty in the drama of an eyebrow. As you let yourself fall into this charming exploration of personality, try not to forget to work out the field of relevance being circled here. Wong's dictator is generic by design, but a born-and-bred Singaporean should also find the various charges and reflections strikingly familiar. This leader will "Stick on 'democracy' like a price-tag" before

stealthily removing it from a “society caught up in its pragmatisms/ and material pursuits”. He was once among *TIME* magazine’s hundred most influential people and has since turned white, outlived almost all his rivals, experienced his wife’s withering, and fallen to illness. What makes the book’s point better than the fact that every Singaporean can at once think of a face but still quivers to put a name to it?

Gwee Li Sui is a literary critic, a poet, and a graphic artist. He wrote Singapore’s first full-length comic-book novel, *Myth of the Stone*, in 1993 and published a volume of humorous verse, *Who Wants to Buy a Book of Poems?*, in 1998. A familiar name in Singapore’s literary scene, Gwee has written on a wide range of cultural subjects and edited books such as *Sharing Borders: Studies in Contemporary Singaporean-Malaysian Literature II* (2009), *Telltale: Eleven Stories* (2010), and *Man/Born/Free: Writings on the Human Spirit from Singapore* (2011).

Ideologies come and go, but self-belief is everlasting. No other eyebrow has my gravity; how I deepen cathexis during argumentation, dissuading dissent. (You cannot tell, but my wife readily agrees.) My stately stature and authority impossible to disprove, unlike God whose absent seat in the soul demands to be occupied. You must weigh in now or be ruled by it forever.

Physical brutality was so last century, yet murder can be carried out to appear like justice. No blood-splatter on my sable coat, only on the blinds at the back of a mind whispering shut behind me. (My wife tells me without telling me not to care.) You can pay to bury any rival underground or in a shroud of accusations spun to look like truth with the right media coverage.

According to records (spurious
as they can be about great men
who took what they wanted
and held it for as long as they could),
Caligula fed innocent bystanders to animals
because no criminals were available.
Madness is a tricky thing. I hold myself
in check when paranoia gets too much.
No uncontrollable ticks or tremors.
Also, nobody's truly innocent.

Stick on "democracy" like a price-tag
then pick it slowly off the dulled back
of society caught up in its pragmatisms
and material pursuits. Every part of the plan
is in place, oiled and ready. You can only
move on up from here. Gather intel
to ensnare rebels on bogus charges;
terrorism is so in this year. Let me do my job
on the news, suffusing your face with regretful
authority. The future's now ready for capture.

Evil is a game we play when we tire
of the good, which garners little returns.
With evil, you're guaranteed your time
in power, enforced adulation, funds
for the taking. You could tell yourself
that some good must have been achieved:
a boisterous economy, national security...
if such matters facilitate peace of mind,
since goodness can be its own reward
(which is no reward, after all).

At times, I hoped you'd mention
how I'm the august extension
of your conquering spirit,
so considerable it pours up
and out not from those cheap
baubles of your eyes but
via the length and profundity
of an eyebrow—your most
remarkable feature and secret
weapon. I made you what you are.

I could be more of a philosopher
than I care to admit. The idea of freedom
intrigues me. But the process
of being reduced to less than nothing
intrigues me less. I'm sure you must
agree, having transformed yourself
from nobody into somebody now
to stand apart from and revere.
With my help, no less; plus my wife's
composure upon your supercilious ridge.

So somebody has written in to denounce
the status quo. Ask your favourite journalist
to record the opinions of those eager
to praise the equilibrium we have achieved,
stoking apprehensions about alternatives.
Teach the populace the value of balanced
perspectives: no attacks without swift
response; no light without darkness;
one eyebrow alongside the other;
with evil the good arises.