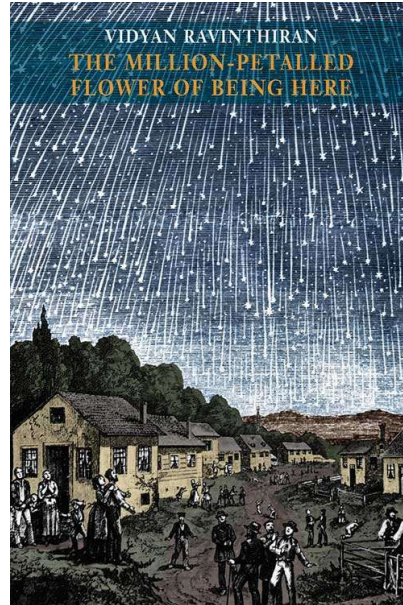


The Million Petalled Flower of Being Here **by Vidyan Ravinthiran**



Vidyan Ravinthiran was born in Leeds to Sri Lankan Tamils. He is the author of *Elizabeth Bishop's Prosaic* (Bucknell, 2015), His first book of poems, *Grun-tu-molani* (Bloodaxe, 2014), was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, the Seamus Heaney Centre Poetry Prize and the Michael Murphy Memorial Prize. His second, *The Million-petalled Flower of Being Here* (Bloodaxe, 2019) won a Northern Writers Award and a Poetry Book Society Recommendation, and is shortlisted for both the 2019 T. S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Prize for Best Collection. He is moving to the US in January 2020 to teach at Harvard.

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Reviews

“Formally assured but far from formulaic, this book of sonnets for the poet’s wife is testament, at its best, to the ways in which poetry can reach from the particular to the universal. Moving and inviting in their conversational ease, Ravinthiran’s sonnets stretch from the grounding details of life for a mixed-race couple in England today – “over the years we’d find the money / but in that area no one smiled at us” – to thoughtfully touch on themes of identity, class, work and community. If references to the Tough Mudder endurance event, Super Mario and Brexit seem strenuously current, they also authenticate poems that manage to be both hard-thinking and sensitive, wondering at “the ways we love and hurt one another”.” (The *Guardian*)

“Vidyan Ravinthiran’s collection is both bracing and complex, and it is difficult to give a comprehensive review of such a diversionary, inclusive body of work without venturing into essay territory. But a sense of non-specific, mild anxiety, of the feeling of the ground moving

beneath his feet, pervades his poetics. And there can be no doubt that the current socio-political climate is feeding the narrative of family concerns, of cultural dislocation, of mixed-race marriage. Against a backdrop of mutable urban dereliction where a sense of stability is craved, the poem 'Transition' struggles to locate meaning when it is most necessary. Grappling with an 'abstruse system', as the filmic character of Daniel Blake does in the contrapuntal 'Contrarities', the seeker of answers in 'Transition' is met with a wall of jargon whose obfuscatory mechanisms are both deliberate and frightening."

(*The Yorkshire Times*)

'Ceylon'

– the word's on the tip of your tongue
(or, as you say it, tong), as we take tea.
Waiting for you to speak, I sip mine:
Tetley's tastes of nothing, but I suppose
it's good to know true flavourlessness,
the prose of life we sugar over with verse.
Ceylon you say – a trochee not an iamb –
referring to the drink I drink
with two spoonfuls at home and, here, none.
Though by 'home', I mean the house
my parents live in and where I grew up;
like, and unlike, them saying 'back at home'
when they intend Sri Lanka, and not Leeds
where they live and I haven't, not for years.

'In My Father's Room I Discover'

among the Wilbur Smiths and icons for pooja
W.C. Lefroy's *The Ruined Abbeys of Yorkshire*.
Its blood-red leather's like a sari;
only the spine is worn by the touch of the air
to the colour of your shoulder-blades when we
forget sun-cream abroad. 'Like the sound of brave words
or fine music in dreary scenes and moments of depression
is the sight of Kirkstall Abbey', writes the author,
'in the purlieu of dim, laborious Leeds.' We've been,
of course, but did you know my parents took me as a teen
to see *Hamlet* performed in the ruins?
We brought green bean and potato curry in buns,
a thermos of hot lemon; crisps as provoking of tuts
as my dad flipping through his York Notes.

'Strictly'

– hard to live up to, on Saturday night. I mean
the frictionless assimilation

of sundry cultures – a sparkly cult
insisting on their joy and asking why
anyone must leave. Watching millionaires *on a journey*,
I sense my face when you glance over fail in its smile
for we've drunk too much, or not enough, and I'm too full
of the thought of the passing weekend and the time we while
away on the couch, both together and not. The time we kill
with irony and ritual. Sometimes we embrace
the spirit of the age – ordering, for instance, many takeaways.
Sometimes we're ashamed and to save face
try hard to like what we're given. As if it were us
grinning at the camera, not allowed to not be joyous.

Discussion Ideas

- What food, drink or taste reminds you of home in the same way tea does in 'Ceylon'? Is it a dish or drink you still make? If not, why not? What are its complications – are they the same as the ones which come with the tea in the poem?
- Do you think it was actually *Hamlet* they went to see (in 'In My Father's Room I Discover'), or might this be poetic licence? What purpose is Hamlet serving in this poem? What do you notice about the rhyme scheme in the poem – what does the pattern draw your attention towards?
- Are you 'Strictly' fans? Who is the 'sparkly cult' in the poem – are you part of it or not? What might 'not allowed to be joyous' mean – to the contestants, to the poet and his wife, to the viewers of the show, to the readers of the poem?
- How will 'Strictly' be read in fifty years' time? Will it make sense? If not, does it matter?
- *The Million Petalled Flower of Being Here* is a book of sonnets to the poet's wife. Where does the book's general reader come in to that relationship? Who else reads your love notes?

Other books by Vidyan Ravinthiran

Grun-tu-Molani (Bloodaxe, 2014)

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Vidyan Ravinthiran online

northernwritersawards.com/winners/profile/vidyan-ravinthiran