

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Michelle Cahill, *Vishvarupa* (Five Islands Press, 2011)

Vishvarupa

Sanskrit meaning: manifold, having all forms and colours.

Vishvarupa was the divine revelation of Krishna to Aravanan in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

(88)

Michelle Cahill's 2011 collection, *Vishvarupa*, establishes its scope prior even to the table of contents, with an acknowledgements page that spans thirty-six journals and magazines, eight different nations, and four separate continents. To this geographical diversity Cahill also brings a complex mixture of lenses – tourism, journalism, and migrancy, to name a few – through which the poems view various locales, cultures, and sub-cultures. Within this widely-travelled collection, however, is a striking capacity for focus expressed in poetry that establishes itself on the strengths of its images, stories, and reflections. And Cahill often brings these strengths to bear on the complex relationships of its speakers not only to the places and cultures in which they find themselves, but also to those speakers' interactions with their loved ones.

Given all this, *Vishvarupa* may sound a bit crowded. How does a poet make room for the disparate issues of so many locales and relationships in one collection? Although the poems do frequently trot the globe – from Mumbai to London to Darlinghurst, etc. – the most important space of this collection is imaginative. In 'The Dream Aesthetic of War,' for example, Cahill skillfully manages one of the major problems of any poet who seeks to reconcile within her work the cataclysms of war with the quotidian experiences of traffic, work, and parenthood. And she does so by unfolding the poem in multiple layers of reflection. From a suburban setting the speaker twice folds onto the space other scenes, from Beirut and El Baddhawi, with the simple gesture of 'I think,' until the multiple spaces come to act upon the present moment:

These scenes replayed like a drama,
a discourse, with its repetition
of consumption, interrogation.
We become agents of meaning
with our fetish of balance sheets,
transport, electronic mail. (60)

It is in a similar way that this variety can coexist in one book; *Vishvarupa*, though it is sometimes about this place or that place, is always about the speaker and his or her mind.

Vishvarupa, however, is not a book full of reflective abstractions. Cahill often brings a gritty bodily presence to poetry that is sometimes gruesome, sometimes technical (a medical perspective appears occasionally), and frequently erotic. These different presences overlap in powerful and beautiful ways, as in one poem, 'Agape,' in the series 'Six Myths of Love,' in which the speaker tells the story of a romantic affair in medical anatomical terms: 'Haunted by the heart's diction, I grew to love polysyllables like *myocardium*, *papillary*, *tricuspid*' (30). 'The Stinking Mantra,' one of the goriest and also most touching poems in the collection, involves both the speaker's young daughter and the rotting corpse of an electrocuted possum – and it evokes a striking *duende* in the mother-daughter relationship as

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the child rejects the pulsating, fetid and fecund corpse which the mother has adopted as a sort of sacred companion and confidant:

Soon her mouth began to fizz, filling with a residue
creamy as boot polish and everything pregnant with heat.
So the riddle of days, walking from doorstep to driveway
then back to school. *Disgusting*, my daughter said.
For at last the maggots came, teeming in the possum's
stopped, burned mouth. The air smelt of stewed semen, (46)

Cahill's focus is as brutally and entrancingly unwavering when she attends to the parent-child relationship as it is when she attends to the decaying possum.

Not all of *Vishvarupa* is as weighted as the excerpt above, however. In 'Kali from Abroad,' Cahill's work is nimble as it shifts from traditional reference to pop reference:

Kali, you are the poster-goddess, sticking out your black
tongue, like Gene Simmons from Kiss, a kick in the teeth,
with your punk-blue leggings, your skull-and-scissor charms. (56)

More striking, the connection has a depth, as do the rest of Cahill's pop culture references. Never does the pop pale in comparison to the traditional or vice versa. Instead, each aspect tends to vivify and develop the other while, usually, at the same time bringing them into a sort of autobiographical discourse, as in 'Durga: a Self-Portrait,' when the speaker imagines herself as either 'Phoolan Devi or Buffy the Vampire Slayer' (58).

Although *Vishvarupa* is rich sonically, filled with gorgeous words, phrases, and sentences, it does not dazzle by means of technical feats of rhythm. And, for the most part, the sonic qualities are not of the type that makes a reader stop and attend to them. Rather, they form a textured soundscape as we focus on the stories, images, and juxtaposed references that take the main stage of this collection.

In *Vishvarupa*, Michelle Cahill skilfully manages to balance the almost unerringly vibrant elements. The effect, as expected, is striking. Leaping from one locale, mood, or relationship to the next, Cahill manages neither to fall flat nor to bewilder the reader. The poems provide enough information (especially when coupled with the notes, which define most of the Sanskrit words that appear in the collection) to open themselves up to a reader, but not so much as to appear over-determined. Regardless of whether a poem attends to family, war, or the quotidian, each one offers the reader something multivalent and richly coloured.

Charles Manis