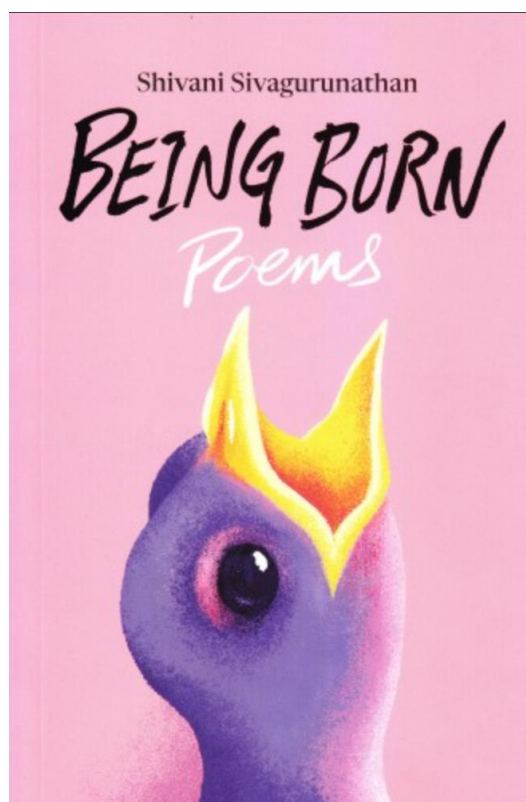


Shivani Sivagurunathan, *Being Born*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press Sdn. Bhd, 2022. viii + 122 pp. ISBN: 978-983-2737-67-4

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Being Born, Shivani Sivagurunathan’s first poetry collection of 64 free-verse poems, spans over nearly two decades. Traversing the realms of imaginary bewilderment, and micro-realistic portraits and landscapes etched by nature, her poems ultimately unite into a central theme: poetry as a new-born.

To begin, Sivagurunathan treats all her poems within this collection with much care and love, as a mother would do for her own child. She describes poetry as “a process of coming into life” (4). Such emotions emanate from observing *Being Born*’s front cover illustration (designed by the well-known Jun Kit). It is a chick—its beak wide open, expecting to be fed.

Yet, having awakened, it hungers not for food, but for “more dots and/ space and spare pages,/ more lights and twins/ and partners” (‘Being Born’). From where does this intellectual hunger come? Sivagurunathan has previously mentioned her attempts to give a voice “to this perennial greed for wanting to make tangible the secrets of not simply human life, but all life” (2). Therefore, we are given a glimpse into the world the poet has tried to paint for us—one where *every organism hungers for a voice*. With that said, ‘Being Born,’ namesake of this collection, is a poem from the second section: ‘Voyages in the Dark.’ The poems here come from the perspective of a human being stuck “in a state of perpetual exile” (3).

In ‘Consolation,’ for example, the persona begins with “Despite my tongue’s surrender,/ I did not die”—hinting towards limbo and isolation. The exiled state of the persona is further accentuated in both the third stanza, “We both move,/ I from light,/ you, collaborated people,/ from yourselves” and sixth stanza, “you may say it’s a consolation/ that as we drift further,/ then closer, the bulb.../ hoards for itself”. A push-pull relationship reinforces the isolated nature of the persona, ending with, “Nobody can pretend/ to bear this consolation.” Fluctuating within this poem, is a helplessness from the voice of an object wanting to find a place for itself, but constantly failing. This poem is an excellent demonstration of Sivagurunathan’s ability to weave the connection between a non-human perspective with a human emotion.

Although to cherish the voices of the non-human is not uncommon, the poems Sivagurunathan has chosen to highlight the *significance* of these voices are echelons above the rest. There are five other sections in *Being Born*—each having its own standout piece. ‘Emerging Animals’ depicts the experiences of animals that have incorporated themselves into human society. This harmonious, symbiotic relationship “reveals the complexity and mysteriousness of what we call life, the world, existence” (2). These poems primarily deal with

the inclusion of animals within an urban lifestyle. The grumbling python, for one, with “its jaws ajar, its body quiet/ and patient...,” slumbers under the roof in the afternoon (‘The Python’s Predicament’); in ‘Cats,’ a feline encounters its “doppelganger/ in another neighbour’s compound” and “they play, and mate” —eventually filling the neighbourhood with more cats!

The next category, ‘This Whole Earth,’ makes an enquiry into being observant of our surroundings. Inspired, crafted, and birthed during the lockdown, in these poems Sivagurunathan delves deep into her consciousness to evoke the bleak conditions prevalent during the height of the pandemic. ‘This Whole Damn Earth’ faithfully recreates that landscape for us, with images of “Lampposts morose,” “buildings empty,” and even “the gates to our beach/ shut.” Such gloominess is banished when readers are introduced to the section ‘Light, Distilled.’ They are guided along a path darkened by “total exhaustion” (4)—worn out by the pandemic and lockdown itself. Their guides are the radiant, effervescent poems “[glittering] like the finest, rarest gold” (‘Heartbreak’).

This is in direct contrast to ‘Birthing Places’ – the third section of *Being Born*. Investigating the notion of “place and belonging” (4), whilst questioning the dislocation of one’s identity, Sivagurunathan wrestles with the overlapping of cultural and religious ideas. An example would be ‘Day at the Mosque.’ The interrelationship between a prevalence of Islamic imagery (“mosque,” “*kitab*,” “Akbar”) and instances of Indian tradition (“frangipanis” and “vellum”) remains questionable due to issues of sensitivity. Yet, Sivagurunathan treads carefully to avoid any possibility of blasphemy—to her credit.

Though Shivani’s arsenal of masterfully-crafted poems revolves around rebirth and creation, their antitheses – death and destruction - are not explicitly mentioned. This is intriguing for rebirth will not be feasible if there is no death. In the poem, ‘An Event,’ the

‘language’ of death is woven meticulously by Sivagurunathan. Its opening lines, “Neon lines in the black/ propounded a confused body/ because this was like nothing before” convey an early hint towards something sinister brewing. This is later affirmed by the line: “It was death”—an evocative, powerful, *provocative* line. How such a line is provocative comes from understanding the vision Sivagurunathan has laid out for this collection of poems. *Being Born* is to be read in a positive light, emphasising the importance of beauty being birthed from death.

The other dichotomy worth mentioning is between re-creation and destruction. ‘Diminutive’ is an example of this ‘balance’ Sivagurunathan hoped to achieve, especially within its last few lines: “Images are composed/ and strung into melodies/ that shatter what was once birthed.” This goes against the destructive ideal of ‘Thought-dawn.’ Beginning with, “In the lawless heat, purgation awaits,” the poem gives a strong indication of the arrival of chaos. Readers follow a woman carrying “lemons that corrode,” wanting to “escape.” From these lines, it is plausible to acknowledge that destruction yearns freedom, having been subdued within the entirety of this collection. What follows is a continuous series of calamitous events—a rare occurrence within *Being Born*. Recognising the opportunity to break free of these shackles, destruction storms over the poem “in the hills of dry ruptured land,” “insults destroyed by amnesia,” and “dawn is strangled” (‘Thought-dawn’).

Being Born, a collection twenty years in the making, embodies a dusty childhood bookshelf; each book a poem containing its own memory, its own forgotten and buried story. As Sivagurunathan states in the final few lines of her introduction, she sees poetry as a “movement,” a never-ending circular motion of rebirth and creation. Poetry is undoubtedly resilient. It is a persistent force continuously finding new ways to convey its essence—its true meaning—even as its methods are unconventional or unthought of. *Being Born*, then, is a call

for poets to be “courageous” and to nurture these unborn poems, and ultimately, to give them a life.