



Dark Eyes and Other Poems

R. Udaya Bhanu

TraffordSG (Jan 8, 2014)

Softcover \$13.98 (92pp)

978-1-4907-0324-4

With moments of humor and sensuality, these poems cover subjects that are universal.

In *Dark Eyes and Other Poems*, R. Udaya Bhanu explores the realms of eros, social consciousness, faith, and history. The book opens with a series of erotic poems that cloak their provocative nature in Latinate words and phrases. Then, the subject matter moves to racism and global concerns. Lacking a center, the book reads more like an assemblage of poems than a unified collection.

These poems speak to long years as they cover heartbreak both globally and personally, starting as early as the seventies and eighties. In the first half of the book, Bhanu writes poems of love and eros, often with humor. In “And Again On Christmas Day,” he writes, “The gift of pimpled adolescence / is a virgin’s sublime love,” a kind of self-deprecating smile for his younger self. Other poems use more formal language, which is not in keeping with contemporary poetry’s more decided preference for conversational language. He writes in “The Breeze,”

*A lovely apparition
delights my expectation.*

*My vigilance unpaid
yet I’m duty bound.
With unceasing hunger
my soul yearns for her.*

In this poem, the language distances the reader from the speaker and his love. Both lack detail and specificity, which makes them harder to engage. These kinds of abstractions—hunger, soul, duty, vigilance—fail to create a concrete sensual experience for the reader.

The book progresses to talk about the cease-fire in Burma (Myanmar) in 1989, caning as punishment, and the author’s own experiences with racism. In “Celebrating Malaysia’s Golden Anniversary,” Bhanu writes,

*“As we celebrate Malaysia’s
50th anniversary with a clear conscience
How many of us can reminisce
the dreams and diligence
of those who adeptly without bloodshed
created a watershed
by uniting Malaya, Sarawak and Sabah.”*

The stanza illustrates one of the problems in the more political poems—they tend toward the didactic, with little separating them from broken prose.

The book deviates from typical dimensions, featuring a wider page in order to accommodate a watermark of a forest. Each poem's title is closely followed by a stylized character before the poem begins. These two design features underscore the amateur nature of the volume.

Bhanu, who holds a master's in English literature and other graduate degrees, has taught English at the college level in Malaysia for thirty years. His poems have moments of humor and sensuality, and their subjects are universal. As a volume, little unites them, but readers will certainly find individual pieces that make it worth the read.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (April 28, 2014)

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