Hypoderm: notes to myself
by Weyman Chan

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Weyman Chan is the author of two earlier, much acclaimed books – Before a Blue Sky (Frontenac House, 2002), winner of the Stephan. G Stephansson Award, and Noise from the Laundry (Talonbooks, 2008), shortlisted for that year’s Governor General’s Literary Award and shortlisted as well for the Acorn-Plantos People’s Poet Award.

Chan’s work is an evolution in form. Between Before a Blue Sky and Hypoderm, the deep ocean rift is seized by seismographic activity on an unprecedented scale causing the earth to dramatically shift. Out of this eruption is born Hypoderm, as can be seen in its opening poem, “global,” which is reminiscent of a Jackson Pollock splatter painting, with trace elements of splintered syntax littering the page:

across an oil-slicked bay a dog howls

dog howls

movement of the lens and vice versa
sets another field
for artificial lighting
the machine mirrored medium
monitors each frame

spreading ocean floors and the sides of an ice cube (6)

This example of poetic discursiveness is a dog's breakfast – and a lovely one at that. How do you account for “lunar milk lantern vinyl slicing roof’s ear” except as the splay of syllables after last night’s binge. This is not to mock but to applaud, as the poem becomes a picture, the page a canvas. We admire the white space become the silence surrounding these outpourings of language fragments. This is fun to read and we always attempt to decipher, to piece together something approaching meaning within a collection of words, to put together the jigsaw only to discover that one piece is missing.
This is not the only scattering that concerns Chan. He fills the diasporic gap with a coming together of cultures, both his and others’, noting that, as light is clear because it subsumes all colours, so should be the society in which he finds himself. And so, we find coalescence in “burning”:

The ancients saw it: entire ages
ended. Aztecs called their existence the Fifth Sun.
Chinese said that Yi the Archer shot
nine suns, sparing only one. (10)

This poem is noteworthy for another reason. Hidden within the rhythm of its second stanza is a nursery rhyme: “A banded roach mounts liquid rock, to eat the ground that spins the cloud / that fans today’s parched cooling.” This old man would like that. This layering of language combined with the filling of that diasporic gap calls for a levelling of society, a Marxian utopian dream.

And then there’s “the reader,” a brilliantly successful foray into the world that Anne Carson initially explored, the world in which forms and genres come together – in this case, seamlessly. Perhaps it is because the prose poem that concludes the piece does just that:

used me for its vanishing point,
the nowhere look that wanders, strums,
naps behind its own front,

child of mine, child I once was, collecting purple the first time Mrs. Kinney let us open our Jumbo Crayola 8s. I felt purple’s sunny stick streaking a full sheet – don’t use it up – so I didn’t I coloured Cheryl Jones (13)

falling into line with the flow rather than interrupting it as would happen if it fell in the middle.

In the prose poem “letting out string,” Chan describes an eight-year-old child finding a ball of string attached to a caragana hedge, which becomes the means by which to make his passage until he is stopped by police who demand that he return home after rolling the ball back up. Although he does this, the ball has become fused with his identity and while “I became myself again, feet almost too heavy to walk. To this day, I’m still letting out string wherever I go – though the home I find my way back to is never the same” (22).
The prose poem format then becomes fused to the ending of an even more radical version of the first poem in which sentence fragments explode in disconnected phrases. The opening lines of “fatal sure” are the tamer of what is to follow:

bored    borrowed
         amnio narcissist

branch Dravidian    obey

absolute padwans    so say (24)

This randomized excrescence of words tumbles into our consciousness and we grasp at the familiar “Henny-Penny” and “Chicken Little” – lifelines in this assault on our sensibilities. The admonition to “make it strange” is magnified.

Chan incorporates the wisdom of ancient Chinese sages into “eat pray love and war.” Lines from the Chuang Tzu and other sources are adopted entire:

Clouds were the first mind. Confusion, the first lamp.
Men and women conceived politeness with nothing better to do at night.
The name that can be named is not the real name.
A plum is that which ends in sourness;
salt is that which ends in saltiness – says Ssu-k’ung Tu. (32)

There must be a Philip Whalen revival taking place, as twice now in recent times I’ve come across poems that bring to mind his discursive structure. This is the case in “the big picture.” Chan incorporates lyrics, slightly modified, from Jefferson Airplane’s “White Rabbit”: “One makes you happy. / One makes you small. / And the one that Mother gives you takes what you can’t swallow” (36). He immediately follows this with a reference to Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass: “this rabbit hole sky fell through.” In this pastiche from the worlds of popular culture, nursery rhyme, science and elsewhere, Chan demonstrates a sense of humour with lines like “This vacuum should’ve learned to abhor nature.”

The potpourri of pop and high culture, an aromatic trail winding through Hypoderm, is a result of a mind ever in ferment seeking inspiration from widely dispersed sources. Chan does not shy away from risk and, as such, creates an exciting new poetry. This is one of those back pocket books you want to keep with you, as it offers so much.
John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for Malahat Review, Arc, Antigonish Review, Fiddlehead and The Danforth Review, in the U.S. for Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge and Galatea Revisits, and in Australia for Jacket.

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