Cold Sleep Permanent Afternoon
by Ray Hsu

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Ray Hsu has published one previous collection of poetry, Anthropy (Nightwood, 2004). On a recent edition of Speaking of Poets he made a number of statements that have particular relevance for the understanding of this book. The first was that “if you’re doing poetry, one of the most interesting things you can do is that you can have poetry in tension with something else.” He indicated that, earlier in his career as an artist, this “something else” was prose but that now it is more often performance art. Cold Sleep Permanent Afternoon is in fact structured like a performance, with numerous poems bearing the same title, such as “citizen,” “chorus,” “offstage,” etc.

His second comment was that he had developed a profound interest in who was speaking the poem. This, again, is reflected in the repeated poetic titles, an indication of the nature of the speaker. Clearly, this is not going to be your regular poetry book but, rather, one that is intended to take you out of your complacency by challenging your expectations.

A third statement Hsu made can only be appreciated in the context of the opening poem, the first “citizen.” Here is the first stanza:

She peels at the bark. Once the heart is in my hand I realize that this must belong to someone. Many years since I had a garden in which I learned to give up each corner each gnarl bent like a tiny breaking stick. (13)

Hsu hasn’t completely left behind his earlier predilection for writing poems in tension with prose. He also, in this example, enjoys creating tension between the sentences that comprise this prose poem. Each one seems to float independent of the others. As he said, the most interesting poets “are people who are taking bits and pieces and collaging them together especially in our day and age where we are oversaturated with information coming at us from all directions in which case
we might think of the poet as a social sculptor or . . . a discourse jockey putting together different discourses.”

The untitled poem on page 15 represents another way by which he writes “in tension” with prose. He uses a couplet form more representative of the lyric but fills in the lines with a prosy narrative in a manner that Douglas Barbour refers to as lyric/anti-lyric:

The North is now clear.  
Parts of the East still resist.

In this next round, we expect  
To lose over 8,000

to government forces, so  
to gain Tamil Eelam

we have pushed our recruitment  
drive to Kilinochchi.

He employs the lyrical technique of enjambment for a military report that could have been dictated by a Tamil commander, bringing real-life conflict into one between lyric and narrative, poetry and prose. He then goes on to write a meta-narrative, which seems to provide a commentary on his procedure. This is the first “Narrator”:

Consider the unexpected building: a simultaneous world which even now confronts you with just itself, so indirect, off the path. You may as well consider the meaning of air, which remained unnoticed prior to its design as word. Let us pursue these suggestions: theories about the concrete, the warmth of snow. A compulsion for material. Until a narrator profits from such invention, determines their logic. (25)

The inclusion of “the warmth of snow” provides the linkage to poetry.  
Some pieces are undeniably poetry, such as the “chorus” on page 32:

The beautiful unexplained  
patterns that came from the millions  
dead. We struggle
to be happy. We learned, like the gods,
to mix the necessary
with the bitter, let smaller things
pass . . . .

There is no doubt whatsoever that this is a good free-verse lyrical poem. There are no indications of tension here with anything else other than the surrounding material.

It is essential to mention one last “poem,” because it serves to encapsulate the essence of Cold Sleep Permanent Afternoon as a war epic.

You have been given things to love, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa Perhaps you wait for bbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbbb The public eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee You give not the anthem nor the flag . . . (79)

This will give some indication of what Hsu has written although the strike-throughs are actually blacked-out portions such as one would find in a document obtained pursuant to the Access to Information Act or some similar foreign thing.

Hsu brings to mind the writings of Anne Carson, as both have sought to bridge the divide between genres, both in their own way and both quite successfully. This is a book that will challenge, that will have readers shaking their heads, that will have the more ossified and curmudgeonly of us shaking our heads and insisting that this is not poetry. Hsu’s probable response would be “So what is?”

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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