Chinese Blue
by Weyman Chan

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Having reviewed Chan's Hypoderm for Prairie Fire Review of Books a while back, my arm made an involuntary extension and I began salivating when I saw his new book, Chinese Blue, sitting on the shelf at the Prairie Fire office. I had also enjoyed his Governor General’s Award–nominated collection, Noise from the Laundry. I must admit that the lyrical offerings with an overtone of experimentation, continuing along the lines of his three previous books, in this collection didn’t fill me with the rapture that the two previously mentioned books elevated me into. Still, there is much to admire in this one.

Chan continues to write some of the edgiest lyrics in Canadian poetry, lyrics filled with science and music. The third stanza of “nothing goes by without being spoken,” spilling over into the fourth as if the structure could not contain the words bursting forth from Chan, reads:

     for if sound is grammar
     revolving its parasol against carbon credits,
     if Mort Feldman's Victrola pimps out
     cubist expenditures for its own sake,
     then, Frank, aren't you the

     toast of aesthetes . . . (7)

The “Frank” in question is Frank O'Hara, friend and lover of John Ashbery, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City and one of the key personages of the New York School. Mort(on) Feldman was a composer around the same period who was well regarded for his total serialist compositions.

Chan's poetry makes the most obscure connections, as demonstrated in “it's all for you, baby”:

     In walks Joe Clark with his grandkids. We talk.
     You tell him you make a living off poetry. I wish.
     You speak too loud and, by way of acquaintance,
     about Yma Sumac? How apt –
     five-octave romance
     or jungle calls too shrill to lunch with? (19)

The vocal pyrotechnics of the Bolivian songstress Yma Sumac, with her incredible range, are not well known outside a relatively small group of aficionados.

In “Alberta blues,” which begins the second section, Chan decries the effect of oil on reservation life:

     every sulphide oracle fume
     shaking hands with fields
     of mill rates and royalties
     while city gaps part the grass
and teepee rings
meet the disappeared  our tick
boom logic will bounce
any twig to flip its shiny bird (22-23)

This is poetry defined by a razor’s edge that cuts through the smog to talk about how the suffering environment has acceded to profit. These stuttering short lines that slow down the reading raise rhetoric into the dominant aspect of this poetry. Notice how the “i” sounds of the last line sing – the half rhyme of “twig” and “flip” contrasting with the long “i” of “shiny” before settling into the “u” sound of “bird.” You can hear the beating of the drum in the first line, “every sulphide oracle fume.”

The next poem, “current infrastructure,” is a poetic sequence in which each part is titled. The first is “safe enclosures.” Chan uses a cubist technique with lines coming together like jump cuts:

Ryanne says that my name tastes like chocolate bananas.
But a bit of synesthesia never cut up anyone.
Persistent sightings of Kurt Cobain on cruise ships will build consensus that one’s showy pant cuffs won’t normally typify.
Learn to separate ideas from wounds. (24)

Flickering synapses lead to an epitaph. That third line is the epitome of the poet’s art. Note the alliteration on the “c” sound in that snippet: “Kurt Cobain on cruise ships”; note the interesting, almost danceable, rhythm created by that anapest in the middle followed as it is by an elision at the end of the line. This poetic sequence justifies the entire book. It is that good. Filled with rhetorical flourishes, it is a delight to any poetic sensibility. ♦


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