Clarion Review

Poetry

Chinese Incarnation
Sha Yan
Lulu
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One Star (out of Five)

Sha Yan shares more closely in a tradition more recent than this book's title would suggest. His attention to sound and love of consonance speaks to the language poets—although it is unclear as to whether that kinship is intentional or not.

Yan is the author of two previous volumes, Yuan's Place and Imminent Ferns, and he writes in both Chinese and English. In this collection, the poet, currently a resident of Canada, takes a number of everyday places and situations and strives to wring from them a greater resonance. He sees children playing, enjoys a cup of coffee, witnesses autumn. Unfortunately, the majority of the poems add up to little more than their situations and an urge for the reader to be attentive and to enjoy life. These messages are worthy enough, but offer little that is new.

Yan does use words in new ways: swash, sleigh, dough, and other words repeat throughout the book, but the way that readers are meant to understand the words is unclear. For instance, in "Key, key in the ray," Yan writes, "Key, key in the ray / Sleigh, in the adjacent desert spirit / Key is not a lie / And ray is written, may." Meaning eludes, but what is clear is the enjoyment of sound—the assonance of the long a sound in contrast to the hard k. Unfortunately, without meaning, the sound ultimately becomes a pleasurable pattern but little more. "Sleigh" is reused repeatedly and sometimes with great potential. In "Sleigh in the Ash" the very title creates a provocative image and one need not work hard to imagine blades sluicing through ash and ember, but the poet never arrives at the image. He never actually explores or broadens the idea. Often, the poems suffer from that lack of curiosity and depth. Poems remain one dimensional and explanatory if they have meaning at all.

The poet also largely disdains punctuation, and his lines lack intention. They break without attention to meaning or nuance, and the book lacks a cohesive idea or practice to connect it. Still, Yan does show occasional moments of loveliness. In "Merry Lover's Grace,"

for example, he writes, “Light up a cigarette, / Let the thin memory, / Supplementing the floating smoke / Rise up slow.” In this brief moment, the metaphor of the diaphanous smoke works well with the idea of a reluctant memory rising to the surface. In moments like these, Yan achieves his self-proclaimed status as a poet.

Camille-Yvette Welsch