

Chris TSE

Poems

It wasn't a phase, Mum—I still listen to Celine Dion

I'm almost the same age you were when
I asked you to bring back a copy of *Falling Into You*
from one of your long weekends in Melbourne.
I could've asked for a boomerang but I didn't
because I was.....very gay. I thrashed that album,
dubbed a copy for the car, and belted its songs
in the shower until they became hymns of
steam and soap. At 41, you were a mother of two
teenage boys and a small business owner.
At 41, I am a childless poet with stacks of CDs
I can't play anymore. These days my fingers
search soju-sticky karaoke catalogues for Celine's
deep cuts while time plays its circular tricks on me in
darkened rooms of déjà-vu. Everything comes back
to trend; everything is in fashion again to remind us
how many times we have danced around the sun.
I've lost count of how many parties I've passed through
like Marty McFly desperate for home, dazed and careless,
my youth trickling away in friends-of-friends' flats
thick with smoke and bass. I sought reprieve in kitchens,
where everyone bluffed their way through conversations
that felt epiphanous in the moment, their bravado
on full display for anyone who might meet them
vibe to vibe. Remember that night R punched a
concrete wall just because someone told him to?
The party inside carried on despite his cries of pain.
Someone put on a dance remix of 'My Heart Will Go On'
as a joke, but the whole house shook with the drunken
conviction of thirty theatre students. Nowadays I walk
past that same house with students crouched outside
passing a precious joint between them. The walls
talk to those who have spoken to them. The years
are always waiting for someone to hit 'play' again.

Midnight, somewhere

The night remembers how I made myself smaller every time I left a mess trailing behind me—running from the obsessive thoughts I couldn't evade even at midnight when I donned my counterfeit mask to dodge my ghosts and monsters. I folded, shrunk and compressed to fit into those slow hours hoping it would allow me to step into joy without being throttled by a cold open—the *Previously on...* that prefaces all my terrors. I should've introduced this poem with a disclaimer: *Based on true events. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely intentional.* Then maybe I'd forgive myself for making a montage with all the memories I've deliberately dissected and over-analysed so I can't return them while they're still warm and lit by a blood moon while I have the time and space to worry myself sick while I stare at my reflection and see only the past. Sometimes the past is us watching the 'Blank Space' music video and me telling him *I want to be that horse.* (Now I see this fantasy meant I wanted to be an accessory to someone else's power.) Other times the past is playing 'Traacherous' on loop for a week straight because he wouldn't return my calls. I wanted so badly to ask the million-dollar question knowing all too well any answer would leave me broken. It's always *close enough* or *not enough* when you're constantly running late for a rehearsal for the worst night of your life. I like to eat alone, or go to the movies on my own and not have to fret about having opinions or critical thoughts to share while the credits roll. I imagine this is the kind of thing my popular twin would be very good at—knowing what insightful things to say to make everyone in the world fall in love with them. Instead I'm the sad song you only listen to when you need a good cry in the colourless dark. Night won't always let me let go, but it also reminds me of other brighter fevers: karaoke in Portland, hands clasped under the table at Vegie Bar, the waves crashing outside our window in Mataikona. He tried to wake me to watch the sunset from our bed but my head was in knots, counting down the days we had left. Not everything gets clearer with the lights on or when the sun comes up. It's always midnight, somewhere.

廣東話 | Cantonese

如果同一個人用佢識嘅語言溝通，佢會聽入腦。
如果用佢自己嘅語言同佢嚟溝通，佢就會聽入心。

*If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head.
If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.*

The list of topics in which I can have conversations with my Dad in Cantonese shrinks with each passing year. I can ask him how to steam egg to the perfect silky consistency. I can tell him I'm too busy to visit because I have a poem to write. He can share his regrets with me, but I can't offer comfort back to him in his first tongue. I can only nod to show that I understand. The limits of your language define the limits of your world. In the world I share with my Dad we're both on the side lines expecting each other to leap onto the court with effortless words to play a syncopated game. Instead we fault ourselves in two languages and I hear the hesitation in his voice when he switches to English because we've reached an impasse. In these moments my biggest regret is not having done enough to speak to his heart. Even this poem won't make a difference. Even this poem is a wall.

X / O / X

"You never gain weight from a doughnut hole."

– Tori Amos

the smaller the hole, the sharper the whistle / paperclip in power socket /
needle eye glowing in the dark / tonight X is no name / X is no callback or
trace of outline / tonight O is escape / with distance to be closed on both
sides of the loophole / cracks in secrets and facades used to bait the line /
like Leonard Cohen said, that's how the light gets in / peek through and
you'll see the hungry void O / ready to rip through a stranger's body / in
place of X / the subtitles read: [dark portal waits for silent scream] / [a body
cocooned in the core of a glass sun] / [threshold braces for breach] /
[question receives long-awaited answer] / what to do with knowledge
hard-earned through arcane means / shame and pleasure gathered in equal
parts / part O and part X / like a reverse-moon casting spells to turn /
grainy VHS fantasy into hard reality / smalltown boy arrives in the big city
/ businessman seeks lunchtime escapades / X is a dare / teasing desires
until a tide takes everything under / we give everything we crave a name /
so we can summon it when we are weak / and all that we love / is cursed
with an expiry date / as if to give and receive is a limited offer / loss can feel
more permanent than gain / especially when your absences are in
communion with someone else's advances / O on knees / asking for signs /
for a weight to be lifted / or passed on to the next insatiable soul for
caretaking / trade void for joy / X on knees with hands raised / praying or
protesting or washing the feet of the man who loves you / trade O for X / if
love is the answer / the question is the breadcrumb trail to midnight
awakening / if X is the answer / the question is whispering a confession into
a tree's hollow / plugging it with mud / and marking it with your silence /
answer O only if the circle closes / the question is a book that writes itself /
learning how to gain from absence

Wish list — Permadeath

'I wish the racism were not so predictable.' — Chen Chen

I wish I didn't feel compelled to write about racism, but there it is patrolling my everyday thoughts like a mall cop drunk with power.

I wish people didn't ask me how to solve a problem like racism, as if it is a cloud they cannot pin down. I am not an expert spokesperson

holding an elusive truth. I wish I could predict when racism would exit stage right to wherever bad things go to die rusty

non-biodegradable deaths, but I can't predict the death of something with a robust business continuity plan that involves moving from

host body to host body. I am not an exorcist — I am a sympathetic vomiter. Is it predictable for me to write this poem? I suppose so.

What I really want to write about are things with promise, to offer up whiskers on kittens when the outlook is for Nazis upon Nazis. I wish

I could sing my way out of this while the man I love applauds from the front row, our adorable Jack Russell terrier Rocket sat by his feet.

I wish I could start a love poem with a line like 'He thumbs me like the *Oxford Dictionary*' and consider it a job well done. I wish

I didn't always feel this way — always tired of explaining why I am tired and why writing this poem is more need than want.

I never felt the need to be the gunshot during a knife fight until they told me there was no such thing as 'let's finish this once and for all'.

I realise now nothing is ever truly finished. I get knocked out but I am a flashing corpse regenerating in a video game with limited credits.

I guess there's always the pull of more to do — flags to fly and words to scratch into the world's longest stretch of wet concrete.

I guess what I'm saying is — I am not done with snakes and wolves; I am not done with feathers or glitter on the roof of my mouth.

This is me begging for a fountain to take all my wishes.
This is me speaking a storm into my every day.

Identikit

when asked to explain the lines that lead to now, you describe /
the shape of your body as it hits water / the shape of cold water
shocking muscle / the shape of fleshy chambers forced to loosen
and acquiesce / the shape of your grandparents in their coffins /
the shape of coffins that are too small to contain entire lifetimes /
the soft and hard moments we can't forget no matter how often we
turn our backs to the light / [you write this poem out of love / but
even love can be a blindfold] / the shape of you and your parents
standing in your grandparents' driveway / after being kicked out
for talking to your aunty's white boyfriend / your hand reaching
out to someone you don't recognise in a dream / their silhouette
branded upon your brain / [you've tried to swallow the night and
all its inhabitants / but they weren't designed for consumption] / the
night standing in for doubt / as you argue with your own memory /
waking up to the smell of 皮蛋瘦肉粥 / the shape of a bowl designed
to hold love / love that is never spoken of because to do so would
silence it / the shape of silence when you tell your parents you've
fallen in love with a white boy / the shape of that white boy pressed
against your body / both your hearts / shaped like hungry mouths /
the shape of your mouth biting into the world's biggest egg / the
shape of years spent running before walking / your knees shredded
and bloody / even after you grew the thick skin they said you would
need in this lifetime / the years pass like a watched pot / but you imagine
steam rising from its wide open body / flashbacks to the shape of air
being forced into a lifeless body / some incisions are made to clean
blood, others to fast-forward a certain end / when your grandparents
spoke of life it was whatever came their way / no one back then had
time to hide behind the sky / to pull strings / to taste control / the shape
of control does not fit with the shape of effort / a grounded bird tries
to climb an invisible ladder to heaven / to correct a path the world
wouldn't let it look upon / in case it traced a line too close to comfort /
we all fear the shape of comfort when it belongs to someone else /
forgetting that we all look the same buried six feet under / both your
grandparents appear before you on the night you learn how to take off
your blindfold / when you finally recognise the shape of acceptance /
and how it might fit among the ruins of your rejections / it goes like this: /
the fights, the kisses, the direct hits / unfolding yourself into a shape
the world doesn't know how to contain / what doesn't fit / what doesn't
hold true / the shape of your name / the shape of a bowl that never
empties / all of these things fit together if you turn them the right way up /
you run your finger along the lip of the bowl and remember / what it
means to be laced in time and not know how to use your hands to feed
yourself / you count the years / you feel their shape flooding your
throat / making a noise / making a space for what's to come

Love theme for the end of the world

He thumbs me like the *Oxford Dictionary* until he finds what he's looking for. To find the definition of love, the eyes must hover over every new feeling before moving on.



The first time he broke my heart I thought he was rejecting what I meant to him. 'Love is pain—oh, oh, oh!' sang Girls Aloud on *Out of Control* (2008), their last album before taking a hiatus, which is pop music euphemism for breaking up. It's good to see yourself in pain even if you refuse to believe that's what your voice really sounds like, even if you refute that shadow cast over your face in the last photo of the two of you taken together as together.



We can make sense out of anything if we're given enough time—enough for two to find their way back to each other to invent a word and keep it between them. My scattershot approach to loving him was pulling apart every half-finished love poem until I found what I was looking for: meaning where there was no meaning, or our history reduced to a thousand papercuts.



My favourite type of gay porn is when two men talk about their day and nobody dies. When I was fifteen the internet moved like honey—slow but with a sweet return. Nowadays, frustration is a photo of two men holding hands censored by Instagram. I know porn isn't the best place to find love, but I don't always have the time to shave and iron a shirt. He irons my shirts; he doesn't shave. I wonder what he'd look like without a beard, so he shows me photos of himself when the internet wasn't around for us to look back at our past selves. I'm too scared to tell him that his is the only photo on my phone when I look at my future self.



I wonder about the end of the world and whether it would be reason enough to give up on love, or if it is in fact the reason we should keep banging on about it. I wonder if a heartless body can learn to keep loving. I wonder if knowing the meaning of now will be enough to prepare me to embrace tomorrow.



When 公公 taught me how to use a dictionary he explained how it was for more than just learning how to spell a word. Here were all the meanings of the world in my hand; I felt so powerful holding such nourishment. Every time I see my parents they ask if I've eaten before sending me home with enough meals for the rest of the week. Dad moved to New Zealand to start a new life knowing only my mum. I never assumed courage could be inherited, but sometimes I can't bear to be in a room surrounded by people I know and love. And so is love—too bright to look in the eye, too bright to ignore.

Like a queen

I should be king
I should be torn from your stuffy pages

I should be monster
I should be undeterred by scars on shoulder blades

I should be tempted
I should be blackened, cum-stained and bleeding from love

I should be everything
I should be twenty-something with no heel

I should be wanton
I should be leaning over ledges with my fortune

I should be happy
I should be a bottle that never empties

I should be cruel
I should be crime scene bathed in unforgiving flash

I should be looking
I should be Maria on a hilltop desperate for reception

I should be mirrored
I should be blanketed in folds of rolling silk

I should be child
I should be tender at their protests

I should be ready
I should be volume up on open roads

I should be paper
I should be leading you all into war

I should be visible
I should be on every street corner as is

I should be bold
I should be the reason you know my name

I should be spill
I should be more than enough

I should be queen
I should be your closing credits

Performance—Part 2

CHRIS TSE AS DELETED SCENE:

The test audience said I didn't have the right look
to play a New Zealander even though I
'sound like a native speaker'
so I got cut out
and tucked away in DVD bonus feature hell.
I can sound like a dead bell in a hurricane too
or a confronting newspaper cartoon
or talkback radio hold music
or an episode of *Girls* that fails the Bechdel test
or hate crimes covered up as death by misadventure.

CHRIS TSE AS ASIAN HITMAN #1:
(non-speaking part)

QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE #1:

When I was a young girl growing up in 1960s Petone there were Chinese kids at my school. Good grief—did their lunches smell! And when they talk it's all yabba yabba yabba. I only ever made fun of them behind their backs, and I walked to school with one whose family lived on my street, so I couldn't possibly be racist. Look, there's nothing wrong with the ones who have been here for generations. It's the new ones coming here, buying our houses, and taking our jobs, and not making the effort to understand our culture. I guess what I'm asking is—are you really a third-generation Chinese New Zealander?

CHRIS TSE AS CHRIS TSE:

No, I just play one on TV.

QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE #2:

My question is in two parts. Aren't you being racist yourself by calling me a racist? And what will you write about when you run out of otherness?

CHRIS TSE AS CHRIS TSE:

If by otherness

you really mean that rock in your fist

you really mean instructions for DIY walls

you really mean burning crosses

then

lest we forget whoever invented the faggot

say a little prayer for politicians who play

the Yellow Peril card

and raise your glass to the anonymous

who haunt comments sections.

You see although

my oceans deep know no light and

my sky is forever CinemaScope

I have nowhere to hide.

I know I have to trust my own body and voice

like an understudy waits for that call to step up

and feel those eyes on him

and know that they're all thinking

You are good, you belong

on that stage, but you are not who we paid to see, you are not

the one we were promised.

My friends—I can be
anything you don't want.

Lupine

When I was a young wolf undergoing transformation
that trickster moon, so rich with gravitational pull,
drew the buried beast out of me. Stalking the streets
with my sharpened howls seeking out the night
I set my sights on warm hearts whose keepers did not
believe in my kind or in fear. Something in their delusion
dragged at my thirst, which had no trouble finding
its way into their homes and shelters. I showed them fear.
Such were my nights for years as a fallow soul; I shed my
goatskin and terrorised. I licked their wounds with glee
until one chanced night the moon refused my skin.
The beast did not come. Confused and rejected, I ran
until I dipped headfirst into a solemn silver lake not knowing
whether I was unravelling in a spent dream or simply drowning.