

HOW
TO BE
DEAD

CHRIS TSE

IN A
YEAR

OF
SNAKES

On a Sunday in 1905 – a year of the snake – a man ‘went hunting for a Chinaman’ on Haining Street, Wellington.

In his first full-length collection, Chris Tse revisits the murder of Cantonese goldminer Joe Kum Yung. By paying ‘proper respect’ to the many lives consumed by the crime, Tse gives a voice to the dead man and his tragic chorus, and asks us to consider our collective responsibility to remember the dead and the injustices of our past.

In poems of quietly polished, resonant language and charged imagery, Tse circles these events and the viewpoints from which they could be seen or told: The fantails see the whole of the sky / and fill the clouds / with their opinions. Pondering the gap between then and now, he asks who owns the stories, what we should seek from the past, and what we should take forward to the future. In its remarkable lyric narrative, *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* is an unusually expansive first collection.

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Born and raised in Lower Hutt, Chris Tse is an editor, writer, actor, musician and occasional filmmaker. He studied English literature and film at Victoria University of Wellington, where he also completed an MA in Creative Writing. Tse was one of three poets featured in *AUP New Poets 4* (Auckland University Press, 2011); and his work has also appeared in *Turbine*, *Sport*, *Landfall*, *Cha* and *Best New Zealand Poems* and been recorded for Radio New Zealand.



•
1871: first impressions – there is something
unsettling about this country, how its generosity
of space is inflicted upon bright eyes.

A stone sky meets the cradle
of New Gold Mountain
and its promise of good money.

The light spills wild over the landscape.
Shadows ease into undiscovered terrain.
Earth shifts and those first sparks

are short-lived before a veil of regret
sickens the view and needy hands
scratch at sky for solace.

- *(Good law)*

They made special provisions by virtue to control restricted immigrants (that being the Chinese, and the Chinese alone). *The whole object of the statute was to prevent people of the Chinese race from coming into the Dominion and engaging in industrial pursuits.*¹

A limitation in number – a fine for not declaring the correct number of Chinese on board – an arbitrary ratio of one Chinaman to every one hundred tons of cargo. *The master of the ship shall be liable to a fine not exceeding one hundred pounds for each such Chinese so carried in excess.* That was our standing in 1905, our lives reduced to administrative shepherding:

- name;
- place of birth;
- apparent age;
- former place of residence;

They tested our tongues too, to see if we could sound like them, with their words and their ideas of privilege.

No interest in:

- skills;
- past achievements;
- personal ambitions;
- an openness to change.

*Part III [of the Immigration Restriction Act 1908] is specially devoted to Chinese immigration, which presupposes that the persons at whom it is aimed and who are likely to commit the offences described are ignorant Chinese who know nothing of English or of New Zealand law . . .*²

¹ *Lum v Attorney-General* [1919] NZLR 741 (SC) at 746.

² *Van Chu Lin v Brabazon* [1916] NZLR 1095 (SC) at 1096.

•

Your wife in Canton –
you carry her in your bones
a private ghost a slippage.

Time is set to thieving
your everything
lost to the barren ink.

She probably moved on
you tell yourself –
a defeated man's consolation –

like so many other left-behind wives
with hearts retreating
whose husbands broke bones

and endured loaded looks to
provide them with happiness.
The echoes of heartache must exist

just as a serpent's trail will taint
the things we neglect
if we turn from instinct.

•
The accident – your leg crushed
in the mine such misery of bone.
There was menace on the wind that day

riding in to greet one unfortunate soul.
The fates played their song its melody
an echo in your lame limb.

A man can only welcome so much miserable luck,
courage eventually splintering
under pressure, so you wished

for death – the easy exit
from this charade of misfortunes.
Let death enter

and bring light back into your life
to stage your great finale. Your fellow
countrymen would care for your bones

and oversee the finalities –
perform the proper rituals
chant the proper words.

The path home would be free
from trouble –
so your heart promised.

- *(Charm attack)*

A snake prefers to work alone, calculating his own rhythm. He is a creature of charm, seduction and pursuit, although he will not be pleased with others' excitement – it must be of his design, and his alone.

...

From the beginning Lionel knew he was bound for greatness and thought he might very much like to live forever. To this end he claimed as much space as possible, never looking back.

...

Harmony holds a snake's home intact to reign over voices of the meek.

...

A belly intimate with the earth will not prevent the snake from elevation, through philosophy, deep thought and private schemes.

...

A snake can be slow to forgive and hateful in nature; he is unafraid to settle the score.

...

Lionel was a creature fooled into keeping score for all the wrong reasons. He felt it spreading in his mind, that nameless hollow thrumming with pros and cons. Suspicion.

...

Some snakes tempt with more than just apples.

...

They do not know how the snake got in. All they know is that for days they sensed a presence, a tainted breath upon their shoulders.

...

That breath found a voice to hook on to.

...

However, Lionel wasn't born a snake. Some say he may have been born in a Year of the Dog: loyal, compassionate, *of assistance*.

Still, madness can hide in the most open of minds.

...

Indeed, not all men are beholden to the fate with which they are pinned.

...

Lionel kept trouble in his blood and it demanded to be soothed.

- *(Disturber)*

Man is proud, but in desperation man will invite a snake into his home as a good omen. He sees in snakes a will

to survive, how their glossy scales ripple like rumours and eat the air with their mere presence. A snake adapts.

...

Take pause for constellations; hang prayers to walls. There is little to feel within a snakeskin home. Build,

destroy, then build again. Stretch and climb, only to fall again every time we steal the light from one another.

...

When we are old we will look back upon gold. When we are time we will settle for passing.

This is destruction – old forms shift to frame new views in common-tongue forums. Speak slowly; speak of calm.

...

We can start at the end, where the earth is king, with a grave and its maggots, with bones stripped of skin.

When the dead are consulted, the world inverts. They are all restless. It has been so long the sky is now a stranger.

•

On Sunday

the good people go to church,
the roasts are carved

the children play in their gardens, warned
to stay away from *that street*

where they will catch
incurable diseases or disappear

into some Chinaman's shed
never to see daylight again, destined

to become an example
for other children.

On Sunday

Lionel Terry went hunting
for a Chinaman.

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