



CHRIS TSE



he's so MASC



*This is my blood oath with myself: the only
dead Chinese person I'll write about from now on
is me.*

In *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, Chris Tse took readers back to a shocking murder in 1905. Now he brings the reader much closer to home. *He's So MASC* confronts a contemporary world of self-loathing poets and compulsive liars, of youth and sexual identity, and of the author as character – as pop star, actor, hitman, and much more. These are poems that delve into worlds of hyper-masculine romanticism and dancing alone in night clubs.

With its many modes and influences, *He's So MASC* is an acerbic, acid-bright, yet unapologetically sentimental and personal reflection on what it means to perform and dissect identity, as a poet and a person.

Chris Tse was born and raised in Lower Hutt. He studied English literature and film at Victoria University of Wellington, where he also completed an MA in Creative Writing at the IIML. Tse was one of three poets featured in *AUP New Poets 4* (Auckland University Press, 2011) and his work has appeared in publications in New Zealand and overseas. His first collection, *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* (AUP, 2014) won the Jessie Mackay Award for Best First Book of Poetry in 2016.

Belated backstory

There were animals. They came to me
with their bloodstained murmurs

choking the night, the weight of misery
a gloom in their throats. Beasts of all

shapes and mythologies scratching
at the soil around my grave, each one

driven by its own unique hunger
but all intent on writing my end.

I can almost run my fingers through
the sun-streaked strands of those days

when I was nothing but a silhouette
disappearing into fog—just a sketch.

I could step into a crowd and never
resurface. No one would suspect a thing.

Heavy lifting

Once, I climbed a tree
too tall for climbing
and threw my voice out
into the world. I screamed.
I hollered. I snapped
innocent branches. I took the view
as a vivid but painful truth gifted
to me, but did not think to lay down
my own sight in recompense.
All I wanted was someone to say
they could hear me, but the tree said
that in order to be heard I must
first let silence do the heavy lifting
and clear my mind of any
questions and anxieties
such as contemplating whether
I am the favourite son. If I am not,
I am open to being a favourite uncle
or an ex-lover whose hands still cover
the former half's eyes. I'll probably never
have children of my own to disappoint
so I'll settle for being famous instead
with my mouth forced open on TV like
a Venus fly-trap lip-synching for its life.
The first and the last of everything
are always connected by
the dotted line of choice.
If there is an order to such things,
then surely I should resist it.

Chris Tse and His Imaginary Band

We were brighter when the world didn't know
about us or our rock 'n' roll dreams. Now
we dress in black, but we're not depressed—
we're just backlit, per record label instructions.
Fans come and go, but true fans stick with you
through the stigma of rib removal and that feud
with Jem and the Holograms. Nobody can win.
Nowadays, the world is made of oysters and
everyone's had a taste. Can I just say that I think
I've done too many drugs. (Or maybe it's gout?)
The bloggers won't stop reading into our
matching tattoos. Yes, they're of each other's wives,
but what's that got to do with the music?
Everyone has forgotten we're an imaginary band.
A suggested path back to relevancy: nip slip—rehab
ten-trip—a greatest hits. It'll take an untimely death
to seal our legend. No veins for overdose,
no doomed flight. Buried by a mountain
of french fries—that's how I want us all to go.

Selfie with landscape

Let's unpick what you think you know
about me—what I've revealed, what I've left
at the door of my favourite wolf, to force
eye contact the next time we pass
in the street. These stories all had emergency exits,
just like the rules adhered to by poets and liars
that we've never thought to record
for consistency's sake. Sometimes
I look at my face in a mirror and
all I see is a bruised blanket of dusk settling
on an increasingly unfamiliar terrain. I'm a man
who lets trouble back into his life
even though I have razed every highway
to and from that particular story. I'm both
a short breath and an age expanding into
minutes and days to be recycled as fact
by other writers in 100 years. Will they give
weight to my failed desires? Tell them I am
no vessel for their designs—sticky nights
forged into a vigil. Here's a true story:
I cut my wolf out of my night scenes
with a dull knife. He did not protest, and
therein lies the pathos. Here's a status update:
I cut my nails and now I can't scratch at the dust
caking over my eyes. I'll take a picture and
show the world what I'm too scared to keep
private. I just want them to like what I'm not.

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