

Craft Chaps Vol. 1

You *MUST* Use the Word *Smoothie*:  
A Craft Essay in 50 Writing Prompts

By Chen Chen



**YOU MUST USE THE WORD *SMOOTHIE*:**

**A CRAFT ESSAY IN 50 WRITING PROMPTS**

CHEN CHEN

I'm thirsty for scents and for laughter.  
Thirsty for new songs

— Federico García Lorca, trans. Catherine Brown

Dear reader,

This sequence of fifty prompts grew out of my life, my imagination, and my needs. Not all of them will suit or speak to your life, imagination, needs. But I hope some will spark unexpected new writing for you. Or spark a fresh approach to revising an older piece.

Feel free to revise, remix, rebel against any of these prompts for your own purposes and detours. Some of these are meant to be challenges, provocations. Don't worry, though, if you feel like you aren't completing an exercise "correctly." Perhaps it's better to be incorrect.

A handful of these originally appeared on my Twitter account, @chenchenwrites; some appear here in edited, perhaps expanded, form. I'm grateful to the people who have talked to me on Twitter about these prompts. I'm grateful to the students and colleagues who've tried out versions or parts of these prompts. You've all helped to enliven my thinking and dreaming.

If you teach, you have my permission to use these prompts (and reconfigurations of them) with your students, so long as you mention where you found them. I'd love to see this weird manual live weirdly in the world, in brains and hands.

Some of these prompts might be considered NSFW. And some engage with racism, homophobia, sexual assault, state violence, and other violences. I do not believe writing can be separated from history and the political. My intention with many of these prompts is to open up engagement with difficult subjects and experiences.

I have also tried here to cultivate space for delight—and for the myriad emotional realms between difficulty and delight. But I want to reiterate: what is offered here reflects my idiosyncratic sensibilities. I have done my best not to prescribe a poetics, my own. I am sharing these linked fifty prompts as potential windows, ways. At the very least (or most?), I think some of them can make for excellent late-night snacks.

Love,  
Chen

**1:**

Make an omelet.

**2:**

Sit in your favorite chair.

If you do not have a favorite chair, why not?

Of course, the best thing of all is to lie on the floor with a friend, the both of you laughing over/within an inside joke.

Write a poem that feels like sitting in your favorite chair, then sliding to the floor with a bellyful of laughter, because a friend has just said, "Acorn!" Or something.

**3:**

Write more love poems. They don't have to be about/for people. They can be about/for/from the perspective of Digimon.

**4:**

Say your most necessary *No*.

**5:**

Write a sonnet.

Actually, don't.

Eat hot pot.

In a hot tub.

Choose four other people to dine & soak with.

Choose wisely.

(With love and thanks to Michelle Lin for inspiring this one.)

**6:**

Write from your armpits.

Write from your armpit hair.

**7:**

Write about fall without using the words *fall, autumn, leaf/leaves/leaving, tree(s), cold, dark, pumpkin, witch, gold, fiery, rain, cloud.*

You MUST use the word *smoothie* and at least two exclamation points.

No em dashes, though.

**8:**

Write a poem with the title, "The Cold Dark Pumpkin Witch Sent Gold Fire Raining from Every Cloud."

**9:**

Rest.

**10:**

Consider these lines from Aracelis Girmay's poem, "Jacaranda":

I do not know  
what happens to a body when it stops.  
But tell me a story that did not begin with love.

In five minutes, write as many sentences beginning with "I love..." as you can.

Then, pick your favorite one and write a poem around that sentence.

How many true-to-your-heartbeat sentences can you write (or live) in a day that begin with "I love..."?

**11:**

Write a homoerotic poem set in a Quiznos.

**12:**

Write a poem in which you flourish, fully and unapologetically and in your favorite outfit.



**13:**

Have you ever even seen a deer?

If not, make up a dream about seeing a deer.

Then, ask someone who has seen a deer about their experience seeing it.

Combine the dream and, with permission, the experience.

Stir in a few flakes of snow. Or sprigs of parsley.

Definitely put in a few sprigs of something bright.

Even if you have seen a deer, many deer, many times, do not skip this step.

**14:**

Read more books by women. Teach more books by women. Read and listen and listen.

**15:**

If you can afford to: go to therapy.

(Art can be therapeutic, but is not a substitute for therapy.)

**16:**

Consider these lines from Aracelis Girmay's poem, "Jacaranda":

I do not know  
what happens to a body when it stops.  
But tell me a story that did not begin with love.

Tell a story that did not begin with love.

**17:**

Make another omelet—one for the stranger, hungrier omelet eater inside your breath, your night.

**18:**

Take a trip to Saturn.

Metaphorically!

**19:**

Take a booty pic.

Just for you.

If this is your first time taking such a pic, don't worry if it takes several attempts, a multitude of attempts. Keep at it. I believe in you.

**20:**

Write the poem you've been meaning to write. You must write it in your head or by reciting it to yourself. And you must write it—some draft, some version of it—during the two minutes of brushing your teeth before bed.

Revise it in the morning, also while brushing your teeth.

(With love and thanks to Sam Herschel Wein for inspiring this one.)

**21:**

Which Sailor Soldier or Sailor Scout are you? Answer honestly.

(Watch or rewatch *Sailor Moon*, if necessary.)

(It is necessary.)

**22:**

Write a curse poem.

Curse the misogynists, the abusers, the gaslighters.

Curse those who provide cover to abusers instead of supporting survivors.

Curse the institutions that house abusers, that abusers and their allies built and build.

Curse this culture of violation.

Curse.

**23:**

Consider Sailor Moon's promise: "In the name of the moon, I'll punish you."

What is the name for the kind of justice you would like to see in the world?

To which celestial body does this justice belong? From which mouth can you, do you articulate this justice?

**24:**

Rage.

**25:**

Rest.

**26:**

Which best describes the aesthetic of your poems?

- A) Snow White and the Seven Despairs
- B) Leftover chicken tenders
- C) An aquarium full of bejeweled belugas
- D) Costco, but everyone's nude

Pick one and write a paragraph of five sentences elaborating on this descriptor. You may also combine two or more of the above options to create your own hybrid descriptor. For example, "An aquarium full of chicken tenders" or "Costco despair" or "Tender and the Seven Nudes."

Then:

Which word do you most frequently use in your poems?

- A) Snow
- B) Mouth
- C) Glass
- D) Hair
- E) Sky
- F) Hand
- G) Sea
- H) Eye
- I) Horse
- J) Bloom
- K) Death
- L) Dead
- M) Dying
- N) Die
- O) Butt

Pick one and write a haiku featuring this word. If you use them with equal(ish) frequency, you may also combine two or more of the above options to create your own compound word or phrase. For example, "Snowy butt" or "Mouthdeath."

Then:

Which best describes the day you're having?

- A) Anne Rice
- B) Anne Carson
- C) Ani DiFranco
- D) Fuck you

Pick one and write a single sentence featuring this descriptor. You may also combine two or more of the above options to create utter chaos. For example, "Cars in Rich Fructose."

And then:

Put the single sentence at the top. This is the title.

And put the haiku beneath the paragraph to construct a haibun.  
This is the poem.

Well, the title is part of the poem, too.

Well, everything you've just done is a poem.

Finally and for as long as it takes:

Revise this piece as though you always meant to write a haibun.

**27:**

Write a poem about snow that is also a poem about capitalism.

**28:**

Read Sarah Gambito's poem, "Grace."

Consider what it means, what it sounds like to write a blessing. To mean a blessing.  
To bless in your writing, with your words, and your whole breath.

The first line of "Grace" is: "You will transcend your ancestor's suffering."

Start a poem with that line as your first line.

In revision, cut that line.

(Perhaps keep it as an epigraph.)

(If your poem feels deeply indebted to Gambito's influence, write, "after Sarah Gambito" following your title.)

**29:**

Say the word *lugubrious* slowly, out loud, six times.

How can this word mean *sad, mournful, especially in an exaggerated fashion*?

Why can't it mean *the feeling you get when you kiss someone you're starting to really like and also you're wearing your best sweater, yes, that one*?



**30:**

Write about a time when your silence on an important matter ended up harming you.

Then, write about a time when being silent felt liberating or healing.

Interweave these two times and types of silence.

**31:**

Honor your kinks.

**32:**

If you can afford to:

Go to King Spa and Sauna in Niles, Illinois. Shower. Soak. Steam. Soak. Steam.

Try the Amethyst Room. Try the Fire Room, the Ice Room.

Sit.

Drink a mango smoothie.

Eat sundubu-jjigae with seafood medley.

Meditate on the word *medley* until you feel your own gooey melty center.

Drink slowly. Eat with relish.

Notice how your body is a body and yours.

**33:**

A term, a vocabulary, a language for: not being able to stop listening to a Janelle Monáe song.

**34:**

Write the poem that is a critique of your last poem.

Write the poem that is a critique of all your previous poems.

**35:**

Write a happy poem.

Think about how you define *happy*. Read Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* and think about the danger of certain kinds of happiness or happiness narratives (e.g. nationalist, white supremacist, heteronormative). Think about Ahmed's argument for remaining unhappy with an unjust world.

Reflect on Ahmed's insistence on reconnecting happiness with happenstance, with its root, *hap*. Happiness as happening rather than property or goal.

Remember that angry poems can be happy poems.

Poems demanding the abolition of violent institutions can be happy poems.

Poems refusing to be palatable to the tastes of white cis het literary-ness can be happy poems.

**36:**

Write a happy poem.

**37:**

For brilliant examples of happy poems, read Lucille Clifton's "new bones," "homage to my hips," and "won't you celebrate with me."

Read all of Lucille Clifton's poems.

**38:**

Write a letter to a past self, a younger self, a self you have not thought about in a while, maybe years.

In the letter, describe who you are now in language you think your younger self would understand. Instead of giving advice to this past self, ask for it. What would they tell you? What would they want for you? How would they say this?

Then, eat your favorite kind of sandwich.

Revise the letter to include a description of the sandwich.

**39:**

The next day (or week, month, year), write a version of the letter from prompt 38 that instead addresses a future self—a self yet to (fully) be, but is in the works, right this moment.

Give your letter to a friend. Ask them to mail it to you three months from now.

When you receive it, open it.

Read it. Then, add another two paragraphs to the letter.

Repeat these steps until you reach fourteen pages.

Use one line from each page to assemble a new poem, a sonnet of sorts.

Revise this sonnet of sorts into a sonnet (however many traditional features you'd like to adhere to). Or, add six more lines to this poem. In either case, use this Fiona Apple line as a title or an epigraph:

I'm all the fishes in the sea

(With love and thanks to Margaret Rhee for inspiring this one.)

**40:**

Rest.

**41:**

Rest.

**42:**

Rest.

**43:**

Rest. Hum. Practice. Vex. Crunch. Adorn. Go. Excavate. Bless. Deduce. Jolt. Underpin. Moo. Xerox. Whittle. Negotiate. Lumber. Zap. Stew. Inherit. Yodel. Keel. Finance. Quake. Outmaneuver. Try.

Write a sentence around each of these verbs. That verb must be the only verb in its sentence (excluding helping verbs like *be* and *have*). You may use any conjugation and tense.

For example: I have rested my curmudgeonly Tuesday on this windowsill.

And then: Who hums now, from so otherwise empty a pew?

Rearrange these sentences into alphabetical-by-verb order.

**44:**

Answer this question from Bhanu Kapil's *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*:

Who was responsible for the suffering of your mother?

Then, answer this question from Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions*:

Who wakes up the sun when it falls asleep  
on its burning bed?

**45:**

Look at a pug dog. Look again. Start writing.

**46:**

Make an omelet large enough to share with at least one other dear friend.

Write a somelet (omelet sonnet) about the difficulty around deciding what to put in the omelet that both you and your dear friend would enjoy.

**47:**

Read Ada Limón's poem, "Instructions on Not Giving Up."

Then, read Ross Gay's poem, "To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian."

Then, read Aimee Nezhukumatathil's poem, "The Woman Who Turned Down a Date with a Cherry Farmer."

Notice the trees in all three of these poems. The differences between these trees. And what they have in common. Their tree-ness.

Go to a tree somewhere close by. Stand beneath this tree. Sit.

Tell the tree your name, its meaning, if there's a story behind it.

Tell the tree three secrets.

Listen to the tree tell you something back.

**48:**

Consider the following passage from an interview with novelist Min Jin Lee:

When I write initial drafts, I think of my younger sister who thinks I'm wonderful. I'm kidding a bit, but I'm not. I find it helpful to think of a kind, loving person who values me. When I write, I am gentle with myself. When I re-write or edit, at best, I try to be detached and as smart as I can be, but never am I unkind to my writer-self. When I teach writing, I ask my students to please, please be gentle and generous with your creative self.

Consider the distinction Lee makes here between detachment and unkindness. Have you been unkind to your creative self lately?

Or usually? Always?

Write a list of three things you do well as a writer. Try to expand it to five.

Write a poem called "Myself."

Try to do the three to five things you do well.

Include the phrase, "I'm kidding a bit" somewhere in this poem.

**49:**

Ask a friend, someone you trust who has (smartly!) read and (deeply!) enjoyed your work, to tell you five things you do well as a writer. Write down each of those things, exactly as the friend tells them to you.

Read that list out loud to yourself.

Write a poem called "My Friend."

Try to do the five things you do well.

Include the phrase, "please, please" somewhere in this poem.

**50:**

You are wonderful.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chen Chen is the author of *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* (BOA Editions, 2017), which was longlisted for the National Book Award and won the A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize, the GLCA New Writers Award, the Texas Book Award for Poetry, and the Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry. Bloodaxe Books will be publishing a UK edition in June 2019. Chen's work appears in many publications, including *The New York Times Magazine*, *Poem-a-Day*, *The Best American Poetry*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *Best of the Net*, and *Bettering American Poetry*. He holds an MFA from Syracuse University and a PhD from Texas Tech University. He is a 2019 National Endowment for the Arts Fellow in Creative Writing. He has also received fellowships and scholarships from Kundiman, Lambda Literary, the Saltonstall Foundation, and Sundress Academy for the Arts. He co-edits *Underblong* and teaches at Brandeis University as the Jacob Ziskind Poet-in-Residence. He lives with his partner and their pug dog, Mr. Rupert Giles.

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