

So Rain

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For my families, given and chosen,

I love you to the moon and back.

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reading aria aber after a mediation

it comes to me
in the morning
i came like a man who
upon seeing a body
any body
pretends it's the beloved
and so grunts convinced
of perfect loneliness
having turned the body
over, to avoid looking
into the face of another
who from sheer humiliation
eats her fill of the sky
why do we, knowing
what kills us, choose
again what kills us
doesn't memory enrage

mouthful of glass
you can live ethically, or
you can live aesthetically
what once was sacred
speaks to the dirt
as crying newborns
we were exempt from use
what changed
but our bodies' want
for savvier outrage
i miss docility
these our families—
jaan, we were sullen mules
so much life goes unregistered
what worse, unmoved
miss me
i miss missing you

Snippet #15

Because the girls in my classes are always asking me about BTS. Because the evenings follow Arsenal's performances. Because Tomiyasu is doing well. Because one Facebook comment says, *our Jackie Chan is better than Tottenham's Bruce Lee*. Because today two Syrian girls followed me across a store and one of them says, *Hi, are you from China?* I say I'm from Singapore. Because she says I love people from China and Japan, because I love people with no eyebrows. Because she makes her eyes into slits. Because she uses her fingers to stretch the edges. Because my sister wanted to ask you too but she doesn't speak much English, she hasn't gone to school in years you know, because there are no answers, and then what are you going to do. Because the war.

Carcasses of Light

During the month of the poems, you walked
into the kitchen, glass pouring from your eyes.

The wind ripped open the door like a grapefruit.
I couldn't be sure if you were ghost or person,

fact or fiction. Will you remember this? you asked.
How could I not? I said, forgetting the sound of your voice.

Halfway across the world watching a car start up,
I called you. You appeared, pixelated.

Now when I write the joyful poems,
this is what I return to the most.

I don't remember much anymore,
only the laughter, the illogic of it.

When will you talk to me? I asked once, making
another invisible mistake. You made an unbreakable

face, started on the first of a series of leavings.
You could have been going to fix a water pipe.

When you said that you would miss me, I cried.
All around us were the carcasses of light.

These days I hope for you to appear in my dream
again—the one where we are still nervous, pliant

and not yet in love. The park still the park,
not yet a symbol of some greater grief.

addendum

as if a switch flicked and all the lights blew out at once,

as if no fluvoxamine left unturned,

as if the oxen became a wolf by choice

::

what do i know of malcontent oranges
the almanac of kitchen knives
reams of bark on a tutor's face
all the good ways of the old ways

not the first thing of courage either
just its imitation

ice in the veins, tundra
stretching for miles

across the world i entered and loved
that first denied my mother

what gave me these books
this language
i loved
i betrayed

::

loneley lord, i feral

if you must come

come

like a serrated lung

Continents

In the week of roses,
my life was still my life.

Everywhere I went, I took
a piece of dried grass with me.

Less grass than corpse, gentle
balled up thing. Do you want

children? My mother took to asking,
in the same tone of voice by which

she asked, will you ever have money?
My brother nudged me, as if it were

only natural. When had we crossed
the line between childhood and this?

I was just beginning to own myself,
untethered to shiny sordid things.

Years ago in Grantchester
I didn't want to die, so I didn't.

I was still sick. Some days in the other
place, I wanted a home so bad I

stayed in bed all weekend, not moving.
Wanting the home to find me. Wanting.

Return costs more than bed sores.
When I didn't know my name, any

handcuff, if golden, would do.
The walks wound themselves round

staghorn ferns, the anonymity of trees.
Opposite, a skeletal tembusu, branches

lancing the sky. He was ageing.
Improbably, I wanted to live. I have

always been weakened by beauty.

After the After

After Aria Aber and Carl Phillips

What ways in particular we'd been terrible
to each other matter less now that you're
lost again. Our airport pictures songlike
as song. The moon in your mouth face
paper-towel-skating with the blackberries.
I'm sorry but I'm always sorry. If not us save

seaford gochugaru the dinner parties the house parties
janet the sofa bed the bed bed the walks beers open mics
cigarettes egg masala putting up the posters the creeks
of light in kion's loft postcards emails letters falling
asleep on video call sorry for overcooking the noodles
train noise on the phone call me on whatsapp tell me
something good flibus to victoria ghent my
grandmother watching you hold hannah jemput jemput
the aeropresses your family busting down my door on
lonely nights every protest fundraiser community
organiser every reading film play stream field forest
ghost friend karaoke halun's orange pants your mouth
open when you sleep your phone falling golder's green
you're peeing in the stream cheek to cheek are you
taking a shit holding hands from king's cross for the last
time i love you come as a ladybird not a butterfly the
wind if anything if there were only two trees or another
fence to climb over another friend to host if it can't be
us i beg you no more yesterdays just spare dalston
morley's bachir's the stupid jokes spare one more life for
the verity of the good thing if you can't leave even that
just come back for one more argument about syntax one
more note on a poem one more tree to climb come just
to touch toes tell me a story tell me another one tell me
the one about the print shop or the one with dodgeball
in the hallways the one where you raced up the hill let
me memorise your ears do just one more impossible
thing don't wait by the door or the basement just tell me

mero sathi mero mutu mero parewa if you can bear it
would you just leave the field field field field field field—

I would trade my life to save yours, sings
the aeroplane. In your mouth even my
name isn't dirty. In jealousy I was quiet
animal, mostly keening to myself. I
don't remember quietude or anger,
I just miss you. All night I listen to
voice messages floating like spangled
fireflies curving towards the map of
the world we first loved into being,
it dims quickly but still whistles, *let
me die before you, let me* and if you can't
do it then I promise, I'll go first

Refuge

After Beqaa

Say the figs fell
already dead.

Say I saw you again
by the cedars
rippling like sand.

Say we loved each other
relentlessly.

In the world where
we are alive and well,
we are no longer dreaming
of olives.

It's not that we need
reminding—
pain argues for peace
well enough.

Poem in Which the Father is the Metaphor

The room has forgotten my name
Bird remembers my name
Call me by my name

The gay movie? bird asks
Can movies be gay? I ask bird

Late-blooming cinephile, early-blooming
plaid-wearer, bird, panic-stricken,
rechristens me *Charlie*

I resist like a wet towel

Alright then, Xuan

Bird and I standing by a beach
I'm standing, bird is perching
Unknown infant has infant softness
Surprise: bird is the infant
Surprise: I'm the one perching

Go to confession alone
Damn it, it's still bird
Bird, priest and confessor
Bird, infant, infant holder

Call bird solitude. Call bird desertion.

Call me blank object

In this changed form, bird is still whiny
Bird wants to be a wantaway ox

Bird flinches when I call him orange sky of evening
Bird asks me for Afrobeats recommendations
Bird is high on possible emotional connection

Bird and I rise upon the stroke, strobe, smoke
Bird promises, *I will die away soon*
Bird warns, any time now
Bird says, maybe I'm depressed
Bird, I am so lonely

I give up my name for bird
I let him rechristen me over and over
Bird is helplessness, bird is pity
Bird is thought, bird is weakness
Bird, I want the weakness of human love
Bird doesn't believe in weakness

Diss Track (Scholarship)

After Aishwarya Arora and Hala Alyan

i lost my life

then i lost my life

i hunger

to feel hunger

beluga god

like you

i was born again

twice

you slept in the garage

of my ruined body

call us generation rubble
we solved nothing

o lord

o god

o emissary of salt

take my ugly desire

to own my own life

else take

kallang leisure park

before the grass

there was grass

how many times can you say

please

Pathos Fallacy

Instability of the bicycle
then the instability of boys,
two to a vessel, still needing

each other to survive.

One evaporates into a rustle
of laughter, the other becomes

a duck sitting on water.

Intimacy sits on his legs.

A honk becomes another,

then the pleasurable sea rises

bobbing with profanity.

Boys topple onto pavement.

Be my father, boy says, and boy says

I can never return to this moment.

Acre of ache, ruin of body.

Ruin of water, acre of knee.

One boy keeps the territory,

the other keeps the dopamine.

The mommy-presenting city is mom

in fact, maybe in subcutaneity.

Tell me this, if the bus runs over

protestors, is it murder or accident?

The reason for Singaporean sepia is

the reason for boyhood soundtracks.

The reason for activism is

the reason for suicide.

Also, the rolex. Golf.

Boys spill out of the high school
playing first person shooters.
This is before they become

first person shooters.
There is still a way to
keep needing our need.

Snippet #7

Deir Taanayel has many ducks. Some days the ducks walk round the park. They don't have to pay the small entrance fee, they just live there. Fig trees look for the ducks. Exhale loudly. They have a growing photo gallery, the ducks. A real scream of fig trees. Most days the ducks amble, find small children, make faces at them. The ducks witness suffering. Sometimes the ducks see their friends. They never really link up. It's like what they say. Justifying the life of a refugee is a waste of time. It's particularly galling when there is a religious component to it. Once, on a walk, the ducks said, *no one is asking you to have clean hands, in fact they said get your hands dirty.* Wings still flapping.

Ars Poetica (When I keep learning you, something breaks)

After Cindy Juyoung Ok

I saw an antelope in my mind when talking to Aissatou about Cameroon. I was trying to not say anything ignorant. I said, I did my thesis on the law of territory concerning the British and French Cameroons. I said, they carved up Africa with a straight line. Aissatou said, *let's eat some fucking poulet yassa*. The effigy was summoned, it appeared in my mind.

Association has its roots in mechanical movement. At least, this is what I heard somewhere. Once, Kion writes to me, *or actually I don't know if Nabokov said it, but the point still stands*. What is the etymology of the word “mechanic”? I walk into the quarry of the past so that I can say in circles where this sort of language operates like currency, *I walk into the quarry of the past*. My nice grandmother went to school till she was sixteen. Then she left because she had no money. She taught herself English, then taught herself to teach. I know so little about her despite giving legal advice to leave my grandfather. He stopped abusing her after the heart surgery. She says, *I am too old to not have a husband*. Jaan says, *I am the first woman in my lineage to live alone*.

Yesterday I saw Xiang standing in the corner of the room. That's not true, it was this morning. *Where are my poems?* she asked again. I said, *I am searching for the entire capacity for love*. Here is where it finds me—here where I am not there. I kept looking and she kept asking. We lay on lines of ruined bees. Everywhere we looked, it was the exogenous march of bodies.

At music festivals it's always about the acoustics of the friend group. The presence lingers long after the body leaves. The body, or movement. The body, as in every DJ moves like Peggy Gou now—skeptically. The room calls out to the sea. When I

do a close quarter combat exercise with night vision goggles, the bodies look like we are in a techno club. It's not a place if you haven't place-made. It's not a homeland if it's not a home.

Aissatou and I went to a Masego concert and she nearly fainted. *I am Masego's wife*, she said, and I said, *me too*. I talked to her white friend all evening. When I look at Aissatou, I am convinced of her sheer belief. If I squint, I can make out the bees. When I write "these days I keep returning to my dishonesty", I cross out the word "my". At my high school graduation, everyone cried. Three hundred boys crying, the rugby boys crying the hardest, is a kind of minor miracle. I loved those boys with joy. When she moved to Geneva, I told Aissatou to look for Leo. Leo is a white friend. Kion says, *collective cultures operate in nuclear silos, that's why no one invites you to their home in Singapore, or Seoul*.

I was always a cold child. I feel awkward looking my grandmothers in the eyes. Even the nice one. I am unable to connect to those I love aphoristically. My uncle wanted to give me his motorcycle and I didn't get my license for three years. Then I moved to France. *Go to the gym with me next week*, he asked. I said I wasn't free. I was afraid of birds. I understood he was forgiving me, and I was not ready to be forgiven.

When I look at Xiang, she is always running her hands through her hair pre-emptively. Every time I reference her mother, Xiang tightens her eyebrows like a bow. *I thought you'd be over it by now*, I said once. *I thought you had sense*, she said.

We are in a car and the car is lurching. My mother is saying, *how can we not see my mother?* (This is the nice grandmother. We are back at the nice grandmother.) We were coming back from a run and my father kicked my mother out of the house. He took it back straight away and years later I learned to do that too.

Every time I think of birds, I think of candles. I have become a person of wandering eyes. I am tired of prose poems. No prose poem saved my mother. My mother says, *I didn't need saving*. One version is, she gave as good as she got. Another version is, we tell ourselves stories to keep us off the ledge.

When I thought I couldn't find pleasure, I found pleasure in detaching from my emotions. Abstraction is so safe. It doesn't demand anything of you. Everything I scrutinise is a distraction from unsayable things. Kion and Iris came to visit me in France. When Kion left five years ago I cried for many days. I didn't speak to Iris for a year. I told her a year later, *I felt like I lost you both*. She said, *don't be mad at me, I couldn't have you and not him*. I think about this all the time. How we rather lose the forest than the tree. How being together is tough sanctuary, or not sanctuary at all.

My brother sends me a video of my nice grandmother dancing with a parrot. It sets my body on fire. Cursing my clichés, I ask her for a recipe because I don't know how. She texts me, *don't overcook the cabbage, remember to add meatballs*. She sends two emojis.

In an email, jaan writes, *it doesn't need to be good, just true*. The email is two thousand words long. I think of the French Cameroons.

I understand this is a poem that lacks focus. I understand poetry has no focus. I understand the poem is a container. No one in my family has ever had a container. No one in my family has ever heard of Nabokov. I am the first person in my family to dream in bees. I am the mouthpiece of the chorus. In collective cultures, I. In tough sanctuary. In love.

Everyone who loves me is in the room. The room has no shape.
The room has a key to my shame. Everyone I love is not effigy.
Everyone I love I ask to run towards me. I do.

Reading Ross Gay in the Cubicle of Legal Aid

If quickness is leanness I'm counting my calories like I'm sixteen again. How many calories is one affidavit first cut? How many calories is one battered wife? If every day I get an hour of my life. I am not a poet how a people is not a state. I am not a poet how an immigrant is not the citizenry. Sometimes when I get angry, or sleepy, or suicidal, I count the dead nation-states. Most mistakes are recoverable. Someone becomes a thunderstorm of ladybirds, and then that thunderstorm finds a new thunderstorm of ladybirds, and then. There's a kind of mistake that's irrecoverable. Polyamory is one example. Cross-examination is another. Okay, here's one more: sometimes you make a mistake at eighteen and then nothing gives you your life back except your enduring. The moral of the story is that contractual arrangements are irrecoverable. I spent my early twenties and all the money I signed my life away to get trying to become myself. I cannot guarantee goodness. I have written many poems trying to be good. Goodness is a virtue and a technical standard and a leash. I am more technocratic than I think I am. I am moved by the idea of being good how a leaf is moved by its place of origin, how it hopes to fall to the ground and start afresh and so become a tree. The poem is neither the leaf nor the tree but the forest. Writing a poem feels like being back in the elevatorless days. If I didn't write I would already be dead. That's not an exaggeration. Anyone who has looked death in the face will tell you that being alive is the more painful choice. Death is easy. I can't tell you where a poem comes from but I can tell you when. Good. Which meaning of goodness. I am not a poet how a pipe is not the stream. I am not a poet how the tunnel is not the car. The way through me is the way through. I listen and I speak. I receive and I give. I take. The "we" in the "I" is the clearing.

Masculinity Studies

::

I investigate the sea

Turrets grab my eyes
from their sockets

My socks fill with marbles

In this life men ask me questions

::

Weeks after the end I start a fight in the club

I imagine this boy is the baker I shove him from behind

Get in his face

I decide to hit him even better I decide to get hit

I want him to break my nose my jaw my face

I want him to level me and crack my ribs

What good would anything do

This boy is not the baker

The baker is not my mother

::

I won't lie about compersion
for years I imagined everything

That's fair isn't it?
Two angels in paradise
kicking it with checkers

::

It comes up in therapy

My mother once described me
as cruel emotionless a robot
or something like that a magazine
article she wrote for kicks

I was six and she was ill
wasn't supposed to find it

All my life my parents called me

小气
little air

petty

::

I have become unforgivable

I ask my therapist *will this stop me from hurting people?*

She says *we'll start by not hurting you*

I want to change so badly

I fear my capacity for cruelty

I know she says but I'm not sure she does

How much will this all cost

::

Boyhood is a country
I left it like a homeland

People from there expect me to stay
Take it personally when I don't

What would it say about them

*Children deemed too sensitive become
emotional bulldozers as adults*

In primary school two brothers in my class
fought and one of them stapled the other

The bullet lays roots in the finger
like a tree

I swear I wasn't making it up
I've got nothing against trees

Questions—
What do you do with a boy so soft
he wakes with eyes like saucers

Is public humiliation best

Is whipping more genderfluid

Or a slap

Mothers use silence till you beg

小气
The air thins
into nothing

::

How pointless
circling the drain

In therapy I keep saying I am a grown-ass man still weeping
and my shirt is wet now and my nose is a thicket of barbarians

and so what

In the end
I couldn't beat it

My biggest regret
losing your love

::

Eighteen and I start a fight on the basketball court

not the boy who punched me but still I

swing him into a thornbush then

he's coming back with his brother for more

Grinning I dap him up

For days I rail at the planets and my father suffers

As a boy I bullied my brother I apologised later what's the use

If you can just say sorry why do anything at all

I dive in front of a bus so elegantly

I melt into a cacophony of geese

::

Boyhood is a wilderness
I know it like a home

When they said *go back to where you came from*

I did

::

I apologise to my therapist for wasting her time
She could be in the aquarium or some shit

Instead she's watching me heave
saying things like *I made myself so
small no one could ever touch me* or
I am so lonely and just once I wasn't

小气

Small temper
Seed of longing

Even here I'm apologising

My fists bloom into dahlias

::

What is the wingspan of my devotion?

Will there be more light in the next life?

If we are reincarnated, what about our shadows?

::

Fifteen jacking off into a medical tube

Eighteen standing on a rooftop not moving

Twenty six my brother tearing up and down the island looking for bodies

What else?

Scything down the Cam seven white boys the sun using the loch as a bathtub

Letting the sperm bank dispose of my sperm

Love of my life howling through the door jambs

Flying across the world when she's going to die

Meeting the baker when I do

Making my mind up to marry her and he replaces me either side of the end

Everything comes back it's a day just like any other day and

The field what about the field does even the field come back

The day I can first afford a therapist I stand outside her office and cry for us

the past selves, me at three, six, twelve, nine, nineteen

Boyhood is an elegy

Who was there to stand up for us?

The little ones are still here I can still corral us into the boat there is still time

小气 scything through the same questions

小气 in the water still begging

Yungngese o yungngese

Is tomorrow a place you are?

at the end

just a sound
like a gunshot

the dog walks in
finds us prone

like doormats
how did this happen

the dog asks
we cannot speak

being dead. so the dog
puts his glasses on

does the post-mortem
he holds up the arguments

& counterarguments, lies
& half-lies, prims his

glasses like a doctor
when he says god,

he cannot look at god
silence blooms like magnolias

you get up, alive & adrenal—
step gingerly over my body

walk out into the rain, into
pasture, with your past

selves, you love
like wild horses

like wild horses
you run

Diss Track Sonnet

lord, let the blues poison my body or let me inherit
my mother's generous eyes. the oeuvre of personable
people is made up of toes. softness lies between them
the toes. I've always known there was something rabid
about me, her calculation and his rage live inside me like
a blowtorch. who said the sonnet is a good form for a
psycho. who said you can't wreak that much damage in
fourteen lines. fuck, what have i done. fourteen lines all
it takes, keeps taking. implicate the self. am afraid. am
honest. okay. i'll add the "i". *i* keep taking. *i* blowtorch.
i shit the blues. yeah last year i sat in a lecture, your face
printing my pocket. lecture said, get in there and change
your mind. i couldn't even change my spit. now we're here
at last. no volta, no curtain, animal. *god, sonnet, save me, i*

Grace

On the day my mother forgives me, the watermelons in NTUC are on offer. I remember to drum the green bodies and listen for echoes, choose one that seems better only because he is mine. We stare at each other in silence on the way home, my belonging sitting upright in my lap. His black stripes remind me of a tiger, but then so does everything else. In the dream where it happens, the tigers are lying on their sides in the sun; when we stop in front of them, one gets up and paces in front like a tensile bodyguard. It might have been a zoo, or a forest, or a documentary. I am no longer sure if this is a memory from my youth or a story that I had read. When the jam-break happens, there is surprise like it comes from outside of me. All of a sudden the bus uncle is shouting and there is pink flesh flooding the floor of the bus; all of a sudden, my heart is filled with a brutal loving.

writing on sunday

i sweat under an ikea pillow
i wonder about learning turkish
i want humidity without the catastrophising
all day i fight with my long-distance lover
and think about the sofa. how she learns it
and we break each other anew every day

when i tell my lover she carries the
bare capacity to learn me, she cries
in the universal language of thought
we weigh each other's tears in
upturned palms, so that my shadow
looks like it opens from the heavens

she says, *i don't know what's up or down
anymore*. anymore, i hear her breathe
on the line like an oxen. every day
is the last day is an open day and
every day i look around thinking
so what, all of this too?

i think i call it dreaming but

in the barbershop michael jackson
plays on the tv / a man shears my
syllables near the windpipe / you
moon walk into the chair coming
out like an accident & eyes glint
like a lake sheen / barber playing
with clouds are silver / ing all day
now / the bathroom floor hosts
lost finches flying in circles / search
ing for / what cannot be searched
for / some days it's september & i'm
still here / in the shower / my cheek
on your neck / your mouth in my
ear / the car boot / a garden
gentling / if i'm dreaming just let me
dream / your head under my chin /
nose on my collarbone / o oblong
god / is that you / come at last / to
wipe it all away / when will my want
ing be rid of me / kiss you on the
forehead / wide and thin / as a flat
palm on the chest / box breathing
by the reservoir we were really married

Road Trip Sonnet

Tooth-drop car on the highway. One brother
each side jostling the way only brothers
do—without care. Boyhood elbows. The car
running till it forgets the path of rain

drops. I am ten switching the radio
from folk song to Kendrick. Past the raindrops.
Boyhood soundtrack. Eating my father's for
mine. Pa met Ma in the club and now they

dance a country. Bucktooth country. Raintooth
country. Brothers and I eating pears in
the backseat. Someone crying faster than
raindrops. Fastest raindrop wins. This one called

Kendrick. That one boyhood. Last one country.
So rain. All we are is each other.

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EPOCH: “Reading Ross Gay in the Cubicle of Legal Aid”

Foglifter: “Masculinity Studies”

The Hajar Book of Rage: “Diss Track Sonnet”

Indiana Review: “Road Trip Sonnet”

The Madison Review: “at the end”

The Missouri Review: “Poem in which the father is the metaphor”

New Singapore Poetries: “Grace”

Oxford Poetry: “Carcasses of Light”

Sundog Lit: “Refuge”, “Snippet #7” (originally published as “Social Justice is not social capital, or”)

Tupelo Quarterly: “i think I call it dreaming but”

Washington Square Review: “Ars Poetica (When I keep learning you, something breaks)”

About the Author



Christian Yeo Xuan is a writer based in Singapore by way of Paris and Beirut. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *EPOCH*, *ANMLY*, *Sundog Lit*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Madison Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Foglifter*, and *Oxford Poetry*, among others. He won the Arthur Sale Poetry Prize and has placed or been a finalist for the *Washington Square Review* New Voices Award, Poetry London Pamphlet Prize, and the Bridport Prize. A Fall '25 Brooklyn Poets Fellow, he has received support from the *Kenyon Review* Writers' Workshop, McCormack Writing Centre, and Fine Arts Work Centre in Provincetown. He is working on a novel, a poetry collection, and a play. He holds a BA in Law from Cambridge. Find out more at christianyeoxuan.com.

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