

Yearning and erasure

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He's so MASC

Chris Tse
Auckland University Press, \$30.00,
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The Facts

Therese Lloyd
Victoria University Press, \$25.00,
ISBN 9781776561810

Dark Days at the Oxygen Café

James Norcliffe
Victoria University Press, \$25.00,
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I started reading Chris Tse's second poetry collection while on a train crossing Australia's Nullarbor Plain. The monotonous expanse of grey saltbush and red dirt was far from the maelstrom of imaginings in *He's So MASC*; yet the confined carriage on the train seemed an appropriate place to get to know poems that so often take their energy from varieties of containment, escape and transformation – from a childhood home; to a future time; from advice by older poets; into dating apps; James Dean-like knife fights; the urgings of an inner wolf. There are breakthroughs, but they are likely to be qualified. A splendid and tender dawn song, "Release", recalls the parting from a lover, but includes the lines:

I try to sing every syllable
of your name, to fill the room once
again
with what was always temporary.

This is the structure found in many of the poems – a moment of fulfilment or yearning, followed by erasure. In "Astronaut", for instance, there is a series of images of "unforgiving attraction / to things that draw us near but never reach out".

The continual uncertainty about any final directions is tied closely to questions of identity: Tse presents himself ironically as a "self-loathing poet" whose vocation estranges him from his family. He is also Asian, gay and a lover (not to mention a bandleader, a figure in a selfie, a rock star, a king or queen, a hitman, a local celebrity and ... Chris Tse). The number of proposed identities destroys the notion of a stable and circumscribed self. In "Next Year's Colours", he describes the process of searching his own memories

for those that might be lasting:

On the topic of my own past, I am a teacher wielding a red pen, slipping in words I wish I'd known and laying proof for the years to come.

If "Every possible narrative is a disappearing act", even supposedly definitive records like photographs can also prove unreliable, though they might once have meant something.

This exuberant uncertainty can be seen in the variety of styles among the poems: the short passages of prose; cancelled refrains (in "The Compulsive Liar's Autobiography"); sonnets; capitalised lists; stanzas; indented words and lines. The helter-skelter outpouring occasionally produces risky moments, as in the deliberate use of cliché in a meditation about being 30 ("crash scene", "the dark side", "fit for purpose") – a poem that is like a gritty riposte to Dylan Thomas's sacramental images in his piece on the same subject. Yet there is a coherence in the fine longer poems, such as "Release" and "The Saddest Song in the World", as well as in the sequence which concludes with "Wolf Spirit". Desire as the motivator holds many of the other poems together; from the frankness of a teenage boy's first homosexual encounter in "I Made it Through the Wilderness" to subterranean and anarchic needs symbolised by images of wolves.

"The Saddest Song in the World", with its elegiac tone, seems to represent the spirit underlying this diverse collection, a weight of melancholy that is sometimes masked by the accumulated tricks, evasions and shifts of perspective. In "Choose Your Own Adventure", disappointment is also promised, but at the same time there is a series of injunctions to search, to "turn to unknown pleasures", and not to "shrink into oneself". This is the other side of the poems, their record of explorations and affirmations. Tse's poems can be brilliant and entertaining, but they are not soft. Discomforting at times, yes. Honest, certainly.

Many of the poems in Therese Lloyd's second collection, *The Facts*, are based around the passage of a relationship from its beginning until its final disintegration. In addressing this topic, she had in mind the work of the acclaimed Canadian poet Ann

Carson, who dealt with similar subjects in her poem sequence, *The Beauty of the Husband. A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos*. Last year, Lloyd completed a PhD at the International Institute of Modern Letters at Victoria University; this included a study of Carson's work.

Having read and admired the poems in *The Facts*, I was curious about how Carson's poetry might have stimulated Lloyd's poems. It was disappointing to find that what I read of Carson's work seemed itchy-bitsy, banal, and monotonously declarative. All that I can suppose is that Carson might have provided models for a structural framework, as well as some observations about love. Lloyd is a much more appealing writer.

In the first place, there is more warmth in her poems, as well as something described by an old term from rhetoric, amplitude. This is seen at its best in the signature poem, "The Facts", which itself sets out the need "to stay the completion", yet deftly compares this with the reality, "dedicating lines to the short glitch of us". The poem is a glorious meander from one extended metaphor for a relationship to another, starting with the effort to find design

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and form in a painting. In between this process, the facts of the affair are laid out – longing, infatuation, betrayal, lies, anger, thoughts of revenge and, finally, a detached analysis of the minutiae that dominate the disappointed partner's memories.

Such minutiae also provide the humour that leavens the description of grief. She comforts a jealous cat in a spare room, "crowded us both with blankets", and muses that her lover voted National, had never heard of

Carson, and was not interested in the night sky. A friend who is interested in astral travel is more fortunate. He simply meditates on an ideal woman, then meets her by the bucket fountain. These quirky insertions are engaging essentials in a long poem about frustrated love, a topic that is usually suited to a much briefer treatment.

The shorter poems are equally satisfying, in part because they usually contain at least one image that brings one to a halt, such as the opening to "French Friends": "The sadness in your bones travels like waves / on a river". The images are not always conventionally poetic. The wedding in "This Time Around" is memorable because of the offence given by a celebrant who mispronounces a name and wears sandals, while the newly married couple return to an undressed bed with a "scratchy woolen underlay".

Other poems are reflections on everyday moments such as the brief flowering of pohutukawa, or the meaning of an offering of a grapefruit to a friend: "What do we do when we serve? / Offer little things / as stand-ins for ourselves." Lloyd also expands on random ideas like the possibility of a phobia about antique furniture, or plunges sideways into metaphysical speculations. "Little Air" is a chilling disquisition on daybreak: "All the deciphering in the dark / has made icicles of air / dangerous if you're not careful!" These more jagged, exploratory pieces can deliver intriguingly unexpected lines: "Painful blonde at the ice machine"; "The minutes are on fire while we wait / for a new dictator"; "Perhaps I'm stealing this stillness". Such twists provide much of the pleasure in reading Lloyd's poems, even if I found I often had to simply go with them, without necessarily knowing what they signified.

Lloyd's poems often ask questions. In these, she is usually interrogating herself, leaving a sense that she is an explorer unabashed about taking readers along on the most intimate journeys. I look forward to the next trip.

James Norcliffe's poetry has appeared in many publications, both here and overseas in places such as the *Harvard Review* and *Manhattan Grip*. *Dark Days at the Oxygen Café* is his ninth collection of poems.

Norcliffe himself is an elusive presence in many of the poems, even when appearing as the "I" of a narrative. This enables him to inhabit multiple contexts and introduce fantastical characters, such as a giant woman whose new husband will have to stand on a stepladder to reach their wedding bed, then lift a veil as vast as a spinnaker in order to see her. They kiss "warily",

while she steadies the ladder by holding it with a finger banded with a ring the size of a hula hoop. Imaginative play like this includes an encounter with Peter the Great, who announces in the Hermitage Museum that he is dying for a hot chicken, while in "The Flying Saucer is a Breast", a woman who is a devotee of the authority on saucers, Charles Adamski, sees a flying saucer that is like a "stainless breast slick and silvery", an icon of good tidings. There are also poems that advise on how to interrogate a witch, a disquisition on National Sandfly Day, and a long prose piece on a pilot called Wayne, who wants to fly a plane pushed by a turbo prop. Marlene does not agree.

Humorous, imaginative, entertaining. To leave it at that would be to damn these poems with faint praise. The urbanity and ease with which Norcliffe handles such bizarre topics is deceptive, for they cut indirectly to matters that are more serious – persecution, love, perceptions of historical figures, credulity and devotion to follies. In "Nursery Story", he examines the nature of duty by speculating about how Princess Elizabeth and her sister ("imagined as little pink meringues") might have responded to the death of their father, George VI. A dismissive metaphor, yet one that leads to a taut conclusion:

we too must grip duty in turn
in a blind embrace, in a clutch of
bitter understanding.

The bogus noir poems which introduce the collection, with their hints of thefts, bodies, poisoning and cinematic staging, do more than provide amusing resonances for readers of thrillers. The "hard faraway smile" of the woman in the poem "Mistakes" could be worn by anyone indifferent to the wreckage caused by his or her decisions.

The earlier poems in the book are like athletic stretches before the actual event. Once Norcliffe has got out of his tracksuit, the topics become more personal, though feelings of curiosity, wariness, and regret are still likely to be presented elliptically rather than directly. The strongest poems are here, such as "Crossing the Bar" a complex reminiscence about forebears, which is built upon experiences in a "tin pot / smack tugged between the wind and tide". "Poem / Epithalamium" sums up the spirit of many of these later poems – the "struggling to find / the sweetest promises / to write on paper". *Dark Days at the Oxygen Café* demonstrates the variety of ways this struggle can be successful.

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