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.