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Bite Hard: Three Poems by Justin Chin (1969-2015)

‘when I am dark/ when I am no more light/ when I am no / more an
abomination/ when I am no more shame/ when I am face / again/ when the
collective being of me worships god, family, / education and the collective
administrative silver spoon, / then I will be back in the fold.’

By Justin Chin



Photo by R.E. Morrison

POETRY | AMERASIANS AMERICA BITE HARD CHINESE NEW YEAR IMMIGRATION
PAIN POETRY TUESDAY RENEWAL INTERSECTIONALITY
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Today marks the 40th day since the death of poet Justin Chin on December 24, 2015. As his Poetry Foundation biography reads, “With humor and raw vulnerability, Chin’s poems interrogate the personal, political, and commercial implications of claiming a queer Asian American identity. Fiercely political, Chin stated in an interview with Frigate magazine, ‘Every work of art that works as art is a critique.’”

We remember and celebrate his life and work with three poems from his first book, *Bite Hard* (Manic D Press, 1997).

A History of Geography

America is a place far away,
as far as London/ Australia/ or Canada
any Western country where people speak English,
All a page in an atlas/ a place on a map, can't drive/ walk/
take a bus to-
I want to go there, so I buy magazines, take a Biro felt pen,
draw arrows to people in the photographs & write my name
on their foreheads,
I want to go there so I fuck their people,
don't care if they're good-looking/ or turn me on or not,
I let them take me,
do what they want with me
even if it hurts me bad/ makes me bleed/ makes me bruise/ sore/ &
sad/ satisfied/ & happy/ mad/ desolate,
let them do what they want with a slab of meat
because they're giving me a place I cannot get to.
So I throw my legs up in the air,
spread them in toilets/ spread them in parks/ spread them in
hotel rooms
rich hotels/ with real fancy sheets and bedspreads/ with mint
chocolates and strawberries by starched white pillows &
fancy room service/ & nice uniformed bellmen/ &
receptionists who look at me and know what I'm doing/ cos
they want to do it too/ done it before,
maybe cheap rundown hotels/ with shared bathrooms & thin
walls/ creaky beds/ bed lice & stinking men.
But I don't care cos I'm in America/ in London/ in Australia/
in France/ in anywhere but this town.
This town where I am the son of a generation/ lost
to 25 years of what price paradise.
This town so clean and green, everything wiped over with
Dettol every week,

wiped so clean, they take away your insides
& give you dog biscuits & standard rations to replace what
they've disinfected.

I hold things I cannot say in my mouth,
I hold acts I cannot do in my chest,
hold a bitter stinking love in my groin.
Let them wipe away everything else,
wipe me/ disinfect me/ hose me down,
but I got what nobody else got
and they can't wipe that away
not even with their industrial strength bleach.
& I don't/ won't care what they make me sing/chant *justice*,
equality, peace, progress, prosperity, happiness for my
life,

it's all words that I sing/ chant/ move my lips/
know what it means,
and that is dangerous.

Wrap myself in newsprint,
wrap myself in satellite transmissions,
wrap myself in truth/ lies/ truth/ half truths,
believe what I wrap myself in knowing
I cannot go back.

They want to distill me,
take the queer sky out of my body.
Let it sit, simmer until my fire burns up in itself.
& when I am dark/ when I have no more life/ when I am no
more so abomination/ when I am no more shame/ when I am face
again/ when the collective being of me worships god, family,
education and the collective administrative silver spoon,
then I will be back in the fold.
The prodigal child, back from exile.

Please let me live
and rage in the realm of wonderment,

to know that the hand in the glove is not the fascist halal
rationed kiss that makes me feel like a stranger/ an
outsider in my own.

Let me live in all that my blood is mine,
in the color of spirits
backwards.

I am blind,

born blind, spirits come to me in polaroids of abstract
paintings that throw mud and saliva on my eyes to see
the new issue of Blue Boy,
who show me that love is deaf,

born deaf, spirits come to me as a bluesy lullably, a
cat's howl at night that fills my ears/ that I can't
hear/ don't want to hear/ whispers yes that chokes me
till I can't speak, born dumb,
spirit is a voice that no one will hear because everybody is
born deaf, dumb and blind

in the bright lights holding us in a circle jerk, to the
music we speak of nothing that cannot find our minds
& I am in this world of pirates, prayers, ascensions, coups,
attacks, counterattacks, shadows, illness, deceptions
manipulations, addictions, metaphysicians, hyperboles
poetics, politics, plays, perspiration, and love.

Chinese New Year

It is Chinese New Year and I am standing
at the corner of Broadway and Kearny
feeling the warm brush of bodies scurrying
into stores frantic, pleased
and brisk with the glow of celebration.
Soon the gleaming roast ducks,
the carefully spit-turned roasted pork ribs,
the translucent skinned chicken steamed
in sesame oil and the raw fish tossed
in lettuce, mint and peanut sauce
will grace someone's table:
a feast of richness, a wish
of prosperity,
a life of blessing.

No heads will be washed today, no houses swept
& don't think about death: it's bad
luck. I cast my numbers,
and as I age another year,
superstitions don't hold their weight
anymore than voodoo heebie-jeebie
medicinal claims.

So come take me Year of the Monkey:
witty, articulate, passionate, youthful, vain, immature.
Make me happy with your promises
of luck and life
because it is Chinese New Year
and for a few blocks, the train
of pom pom girls, the Lowell High School band
and sequined Ms. Chinatown will pass
on the same streets where I opened my body
in the rattle of festivities, the creed
of color, the spook of flesh.

You took the uncompromising facts
of my living. Spread it out maplike

as a dangerous game. *Spy vs. Spy*
like in *MAD* magazine. You appear to me
as golden frogs. You pour rain water
from pitchers colored with familiarity over me.
I bathe in smells of palm oil, rubber
sap, cannon fodder. Fireworks
grace my feet. I put white
smoke billowing from homemade
crackers on your forehead.
Somehow this might soothe your pain
and mine. Tie ginger in sackcloth,
the tips soaked in kerosene. Suck
illness right out. Strength
nudes itself to my scrawny arms
barely able to throw a good punch
and your life starts unraveling
as mine reveals itself in
this viral flash. A 25¢ peepshow
separated by a sliding opaque
screen flashing ex-lovers,
ex-boyfriends, one night stands, blind dates
and ex-families. Tokens
fill empty jars in our respective rooms.
Candles light the stuff of our
secrets. Sometimes we lie like mad
and civility spurts
like Chinese New Year and I come
festooned with ashes and bones,
hard crumbling and all
too memorable. Miserable. Teal
pours from my mouth. Blood
of every wound, every conceivable
brilliance hides in my hair.
The hard work of walking and waking
ploughs itself in my skull

and I am ready to be brimmed
with the tasks of renewals
and burials.

I have prepared for my feasting.
I've paid my debts. I've housecleaned:
updated the address book, keeping
the names and numbers unused
anymore, written in disparate script
each, in its safe place.

The last grounding on memory must be respected.

On the day that I am nothing more
than handwriting in some trick's
book, I will return to your memory
and the hundreds of others.

I will stand in pink fog.

Cats will breathe silent over me.

Talismans will hang from my chest.

Shiny prophecies will pierce my nipples.

My flesh will be smooth as cold coffee.

I will be a haunting
that speaks across waters, borders
and peacetime.

Did I ever think I would make it this far?

Did I make it anywhere at all?

For now, let's push all that
to the back of our minds like shame,
let's wave to Ms. Chinatown,
fill our bellies with food and laughter,
entertain our guests, visitors,
families, tell stories — real
and made up, be together, make love, sweat
into each other's body because
it is Chinese New Year and I'm filling

my trays with candies, peanuts, kana,
sweets, embers, hard, nothing;
and I am looking
for the reddest red, the sweetest meats,
the loudest firecrackers and the hardest
plum blossoms to help me make
another year.

Lick My Butt

Lick the dry shit out of my sweaty buttcheeks

I've had my hepatitis shots so it's okay

Lick my butt
cos I'm an angry ethnic fag
& I'm in so much pain
so lick my butt

& the next time
when there's a multicultural extravaganza
& I'm asked for referrals
I can say

“I know this guy,
he's really cool,
he licked my butt.”

Lick my butt & tell me about
 Michel Foucault's theories of deconstruction
 & how it applies to popular culture,
 a depressed economy & this overwhelming
 tide of alienation.

Lick my butt from the center to the margins
 & all the way back again.

Read Noam Chomsky in bed to me & lick my butt.

Lick my butt & give me my Prozac.
 Lick my butt & call your mother, she misses you.
 Flea-dip the cat & lick my butt.
 Recycle & lick my butt.

Lick my butt like you really mean it.
 Don't just put your tongue there
 because you think it's something you should do
 Do it cos you really really want to lick my butt.

My butt didn't always liked to be licked;
 on the contrary, it hated anything wet
 and sloppy, poking blindly at its puckered dour grimace.
 All it wanted was a nice pat,
 an occasional squeeze,
 a good warm sear and snug underwear.

It was happy with those,
 but then all those other butts sta

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on the sidewalks and under my bea,
 there were all these butts that said,
 no, demanded,

LICK ME.

My butt got tired of all that shit
 & it just had to see what the fuss was all about.

At first it approached
the licking with extreme caution,
making sure all the checks
& balances were clearly present.

Hey — my butt had ever reason to be careful
it knows where it's been;
it's had enough of this bigotry
& poverty & violence
it's been on the wrong end of muggings & bashings
it's been working like a damn dog for years to make ends meet
it's been on the lam, on the block, on the contrary
& on sale for far too long

so when that first slobber, smack,
slurp found its way into that
crack & up that uptight little asshole
it was like the Gay Pride Parade,
the Ice Capades, the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade
and Christmas happening all at once.

Now when I walk down the street
and you see me smiling
it's because I'm imagining
your tongue nestled in my buttcheeks
flicking away like a lizard
in a mad tweak.

Lick my butt & I'll lick yours;
we'll deal with shit of the world later.

“A History of Geography,” “Chinese New Year,” and “Lick My Butt” are
excerpted from *Bite Hard* (1997) by Justin Chin, published with the

permission of Manic D Press.

Justin Chin was the author of several collections of poetry, including *Bite Hard* (1997), *Harmless Medicine* (2001), and *Gutted* (2006), which won the Publishing Triangle's Thom Gunn Award for Poetry and was a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award. His prose collections, which weave criticism with memoir and fiction, include *Mongrel: Essays, Diatribes, & Pranks* (1998), *Burden of Ashes* (2002), *Attack of the Man-Eating Lotus Blossoms* (2005), and *98 Wounds* (2011). He lived in San Francisco before his death in late 2015.

Tags: Amerasians, America, Bite Hard, Chinese New Year, Immigration, Pain, Poetry Tuesday, Renewal, intersectionality



*When the Chant
Comes: Two Poems*
by Kay Ulanday
Barrett

'After midnight you
assemble your limbs
back to / their rightful
place as you rid the
pressure formed / by
all day heat and no
privacy.'



*History Lesson
Disguised as a Love
Poem*

i love you / too much /
let us reason in
dissonance / play
mozart on mondays /
barefoot & / the
wisteria i grow wild /
the hands i keep sharp
—



*There is No Me
Inside Me: Four
Poems by Kim
Yideum*

I write myself into the
fiction / whether you
see me or not.