
“What I cherish in Christine Chia’s poetry: an uncompromising reverence for the heft of individual words, the singular gift of hewing a phrase anew, an unerring desire for cutting clarity in each poetic line, an ambitious striving toward epiphanic endings, and a most crystalline conviction in the solidity of absences.”

– Sam Ng, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*

“Christine’s sensitively crafted poems straddle the public and the private – political tumult is echoed in familial unrest, while patriarchal actions find their facsimile in national headlines. Together they allow us to be witnesses to a history both irresistibly Singaporean and irrefutably universal.”

– Damon Chua

History is made both personal and political in this poetic unravelling of family ties. With humour and tenderness, Chia constructs a narrative in which body and State become one.

– Tania De Rozario, author of *Tender Delirium*

“Christine Chia writes with a terrifying sparseness and intensity. Familial relationships come to dramatic life with her uncanny ability to cut straight to the bone in poems that reveal, yet again, how family life can be the first and greatest source of psychological trauma. But it is also through such painful encounters that the poet is able to walk the road of forgiveness to compassionate insight, lasting maturity and wisdom.”

– Cyril Wong, author of *Tilting Our Plates to Catch the Light*

Separation: a history

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SEPARATION

a history



Christine Chia

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In memory of my father
Chia Yong Ming 谢永明

IMAGINE families being torn apart,
uprooted,
and
separated by borders.

You may think that this only happened in countries like Korea,
Russia and Vietnam,

where the
separation of powers
divided
them.

But it once happened here,
when Singapore
left
Malaysia on August 9, 1965,
after an unstable,
short-lived union.

On that day,
a tearful Lee Kuan Yew
announced that

Singapore was a sovereign
and independent nation,
making Singapore
the only country in the modern world
to gain
independence against its own will.”

— ‘When Singapore and Malaysia were One’,
The Star, September 16, 2013

prologue:
a photo speaks (about) a thousand words

I don't know why the other photograph of the young man is so much more famous than me. I should be the more famous photograph; I'm the much prettier photograph: he looked much better in me.

Look at me, look at the composition; their hands symmetrically raised in victory; both of them, standing tall and proud, the young man in a white suit, the old man in black, like yin and yang. They look like honeymooners back from Hawaii with that gorgeous python-thick garland of flowers round their necks. They radiate joy like white heat even though they just came back from cold, foggy London, talking to ugly old men about unsexy things like self-determination and independence.

Happy people are just more photogenic; look at how you can't help looking at them, even though the young man is no beauty. The old man is a charmer though.

The other photograph? The young man's face is all scrunched up; he looks like he hasn't slept well for days; he needs a haircut too. He's hunched over, without his jacket. It's a mess.

The photo is grainy like it's crying too. It's a badly-taken photo of a badly-produced television broadcast; so many corruptions of light that it's almost a blasphemy.

Photo-graph: "light-writing". "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

“Then God said, “Let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness”. A photograph is a word of light. A photograph is light made flesh.

Photographs never lie. Humans do.

Your photos make you look uglier than you really are? Darling, nearly everyone has a bad angle – let me see. Your better side is the left side; tilt it to the camera the next time.

Isn't angling lying? Think of angling as standing so that the light falls on the best part; most humans are not very good at looking carefully. It's not lying if people can't see what's still there.

Speaking of lies, although I am no fan of the other photograph, I will defend its integrity and historicity; many Malaysians, young and old, think that the young man was shedding crocodile tears. They say that because Singapore is better off than Malaysia now; they were quite happy to see him cry then and where's the joy in that if they thought he was acting?

How do I know the other photograph is not a photo of a lie? Because we know. We are creatures of light like the angels. We are creatures of light and truth and the other photograph told me that the young man was really sad. How does the other photograph know? Because God gave us His ability, to “search the heart and examine the mind”.

I see you are scared now. Don't worry; I can't search your soul. But I can speak to a photograph that can.

We can only know the truth of your soul at the moment the photograph is taken; for the past and the future, we have to talk

to other photographs, real photographs, not the Photoshopped mutants that you humans created and are so fond of. They like to lie, just like you humans.

When Jesus finally comes, I will ask Him why He sacrificed Himself for creatures that ruin His Work and Glory in every way possible. I know He did it because God is Love. But still. I feel Light is wasted on them. Most of them, anyway.

But not my two men. Look at how gloriously happy they are. Now the young man is an old man, another photograph tells me, and desperately sad. What a pity. He was happy. Alas, he is now even sadder than in the other photograph because his wife died a few years ago and he never got over losing her.

Now, if he believes in God like his brothers, he will be consoled; he won't be separated from her forever. Stop rolling your eyes at me.

I know you are a cynic when it comes to love but even you will admit that he truly, deeply loves his wife even when she's gone. Just like another man in this book, except that man's wife was not really gone. But that man was a foolish man. My man is a much smarter man: he loves his wife because she loved him too. That man loved his wife even though she no longer loved him. The Truth hurts. Sorry.

Now, photographs, like angels, must never get proud, but still it's nice to be looked at, especially if you are pretty like me. But humans pay more attention to sad photographs.

Why do humans pay more attention to sad photographs and sad stories? You silly human, why do you ask me – you're the human. Let me know when you have an answer.

searching

blood rises in waves
wrapped by bounds of body,

conch roars in vessels tuned
to stars speaking in radio static,

crackle of the first chaos – blind convoys searching
for land

hati

I give up this heart
this dog that I starved,

beat, scolded, pleaded with
to stop going to you

when you don't even want it
lying at your feet

though you won't mind a dog
if it does just that.

marriage of symbols

Although I once made fun of the Merlion,
in the Old Parliament House, no less,
my unconscious adores it; it's a masterpiece
of madness, a marriage of symbols run amok:

the lion mounts the mermaid (it's her fault for swimming
too close to the shore), his claws hooking
into her slippery body for grip. She lost so much blood
she almost died, but she didn't.

Inconceivably, because the body should shut down
when raped (or so the born-again mermaids told her)
she gave birth to the half-lion, half-mermaid
nine blue moons later, and the Singapore Tourism Board

promptly caught it and, and in collaboration
with Wildlife Reserves Singapore,
set up a special enclosure,
at great expense but the ungrateful Merlion

never adapted, unlike the adorable pandas,
(who repaid their enclosure costs within a year,
despite the naysayers)
and died a month

after the enclosure was finished.
Since so much taxpayers' money was already spent,
the enclosure was quickly converted into a
SuperNatural History Museum,

to celebrate this symbol
of love against the odds,
and how Singapore was still
home to so much biodiversity,

even though you couldn't
see it anymore.

why did the lion rape the mermaid?

Nonsense, it wasn't rape.

Has the mermaid ever surfaced
to give her side of the story?

Did the mermaid submit
to a pelvic examination?

And even if her vagina showed
signs of forcible entry,

can you reasonably expect
lions to be gentle during sex?