



When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities

Chen Chen, Jericho Brown (Foreword)

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In this ferocious and tender debut, Chen Chen investigates inherited forms of love and family—the strained relationship between a mother and son, the cost of necessary goodbyes—all from Asian American, immigrant, and queer perspectives. Holding all accountable, this collection fully embraces the loss, grief, and abundant joy that come with charting one's own path in identity, life, and love.

In the Hospital

My mother was in the hospital & everyone wanted to be my friend.

But I was busy making a list: good dog, bad citizen, short skeleton, tall mocha. Typical Tuesday.

My mother was in the hospital & no one wanted to be her friend.

Everyone wanted to be soft cooing sympathies. Very reasonable pigeons. No one had the time & our solution to it was to buy shinier watches. We were enamored with what our wrists could declare. My mother was in the hospital & I didn't want to be her friend. Typical son. Tall latte, short tale, bad plot, great wifi in the atypical café. My mother was in the hospital & she didn't want to be her friend. She wanted to be the family grocery list. Low-fat yogurt, firm tofu. She didn't trust my father to be it. *You always forget something*, she said, *even when I do the list for you. Even then.*

When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities Details

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From Reader Review When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities for online ebook

Lauren says

I've read a lot of poetry this year - well, a lot for me - and Chen Chen's debut collection easily rises to the top. It is hip, it is millennial, and it shouldn't be dismissed because of this. Chen's playfulness, his free associations will amuse readers, but the themes of family, losing faith, and identity makes this even more memorable.

Dear Jenny reads a poem from this book and discusses a few more thoughts on the book in episode 097 of her Reading Envy podcast here!

Nadine Jones says

These poems are sneaky. They might start with a simple metaphor that's straight out of second grade English class, "Night falls like a button..." and they go somewhere else quite unexpected, "... from your grandmother's coat. You worry with your thumb the strangers page." The poems are quirky, fun, surprising, emotional, intimate, and intelligent. I want to meet Chen and hang out with him, but I'm afraid I wouldn't be nearly interesting enough to hold his attention, because he's obviously a genius, and I'm just a mundane person.

three of my favorites (and it was hard to choose just three):

Night Falls Like a Button

from your grandmother's coat. You worry with your thumb the stranger's page. Aging spine of the black sky, night-burps of the sleeping computer. Don't listen to the judgment of your scraped knees. Night anchors in your belly button, your pubic hair. Stars snore safely, for years. Your smile in the early dark is a paraphrase of Mars. Your smile in the deep dark is an anagram of Jupiter. My worst simile is that I'm fancy like a piece of salami wearing a tuxedo. Waiting with a cone of gelato. Your smile in the dreaming dark is an umbrella for all the going, gone, & yet to come. Orioles come for the oranges you've placed in the arms of the architect. Which birds will you pull into orbit tomorrow? You try to sew the night onto your own coat, but it won't stay. Too much memory weather, werewolf migration. You itch for the window's shore. You row, the growing light rearranging your voice, the rain your lunatic photographer.

Summer Was Forever

Time dripped from the faucet like a magician's botched trick.
I did not want to applaud it. I stood to one side & thought,
What it's time for is a garden. Or a croissant factory. What kind
of work do I need to be doing? My parents said: *Doctor,*
married to lawyer. The faucet said: *Drip, drop,*
your life sucks. But sometimes no one said anything & I saw
him, the local paper boy on his route. His beanstalk frame
& fragile bicycle. & I knew: we would be so terribly

happy. Our work would be simple. Our kissing would rhyme with cardiac arrest. Birds would overthrow the cathedral towers. I would have a magician's hair, full of sleeves & saws, unashamed to tell the whole town our first date was in a leaky faucet factory. How we fell in love during jumps on his tragic uncle's trampoline. We fell in love in midair.

Ode to My Envy

I'm envious of my neighbors who live in a cooler house. I'm envious of Neruda for having written better poems & for having lived in a cooler house. I'm envious of poetry

for being more & better than I could ever be. I'm envious of the redwood who never has to say *I am* & who will outlive me. I'm envious of those who can consistently resist pseudo-Buddhist romanticizations of nonhuman entities.

I'm envious of the clouds who can from time to time fall completely apart & everyone just says, *It's raining*, & someone might even bring cats & dogs into it,

no one says, *Stop being so dramatic or You should see a professional*. My envy despises your more dramatic & photogenic envy. My envy desires Olympic gymnast Danell Leyva's abs. My envy wants to have & be most

Olympic athletes. My envy would be willing to settle for those who did not make it to the podium. Every day I get increasingly envious of my friend who dresses so smartly.

Of my friend who's more political. Of my friend who says, *Oh, that's good enough, why am I stressing out?* & means it & stops stressing & is happy. I'm envious of my friend who's envious of me because he actually wants something I have.

I'm envious of those who learn Life Lessons from their envy. I'm envious of jealous God & those who always know the difference between envy & jealousy.

I'm envious of jealous God because although he's been dead for ages, everyone keeps caring about him, or at least saying his name, & God knows who'll do that for me, ten, twenty years after I go.

Abigail Munson says

"I want to be the anti-Sisyphus, in love"

really good collection.

Chen Chen weaves Frank O'Hara, Sarte, Ginsberg, revolution, religion, sweethearts, sadness, death, Optimus Prime, e.e. cummings, Buddhism, Kafka, Audre Lorde, love, confusion, sofas, blue vests and the entire ocean into wonderful poetry. My favorite poems were: I Am Not a Religious Person But, Summer Was Forever, How I Became Sagacious, Song With a Lyric from Allen Ginsberg, Elegy for my Sadness, The Cuckoo Cry, Didier et Zizon, Poem, Babel & Juice and Talking to God About Heaven from the Bed of a Heathen.

Natassa says

Wowowowowow

Kenny says

"Aren't all great love stories, at their core, great mistakes?"

? Chen Chen

This is a brilliant debut for Chen Chen. It is one of my favorite poetry books of all time. Never have I felt that a poet has written his poems based upon my life like I have with Chen. These poems are smart, funny, and heartbreaking. Chen has faced so much pain and rejection in his life, most of it caused by his parents. That his spirit has survived, and thrived, is a testament to his inner strength, and ability to forgive.

Rather than my babbling on, read this poem by Chen Chen, & then, buy this book. It is an amazing debut.

Self-Portrait as So Much Potential

BY CHEN CHEN

Dreaming of one day being as fearless as a mango.

As friendly as a tomato. Merciless to chin & shirtfront.

Realizing I hate the word "sip."

But that's all I do.

I drink. So slowly.

& say I'm tasting it. When I'm just bad at taking in liquid.

I'm no mango or tomato. I'm a rusty yawn in a rumored year. I'm an arctic attic.

Come able & ampersand in the slippery polar clutter.

I am not the heterosexual neat freak my mother raised me to be.

I am a gay sipper, & my mother has placed what's left of her hope on my brothers.

She wants them to gulp up the world, spit out solid degrees, responsible grandchildren ready to gobble.

They will be better than mangoes, my brothers.

Though I have trouble imagining what that could be.

Flying mangoes, perhaps. Flying mango-tomato hybrids. Beautiful sons.

Roxane says

Excellent poetry collection. The third section is the strongest and the title poem is unforgettable. Lots to admire here in terms of imagery, energy, really, the whole poetic package.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I read this the day it was named to the National Book Award for Poetry longlist for 2017. In one of the poems, Chen Chen mentions that a friend told him that all his friends are about being gay and Chinese (which has also made that poem about being gay and Chinese!) I loved the playful language, exploration of identity, and had fun reading some of these out loud.

My favorites:

Race to the Tree

Talented Human Beings

"Every day I am asked to care about white people especially if they've been kidnapped overseas...."

In the City - this starts with declarations about engineering and dumplings and becomes a very deeply felt about his parents and their disappointments, wow, so good

Kafka's Axe & Michael's Vest

"...Think of peace & how the Buddhists say it is found through silence

Think of silence & how Audre Lorde says it will not protect you...."

In This Economy

"People person seeks paid internship in liking you as a friend...."

Ellie says

Exciting collection of poems that are both touching and funny, in a poignant sort of way. Chen Chen quotes a friend as telling him that he only writes about two things: being gay and Chinese people immigrating. If this is true--and I'm not sure it is--he certainly writes about those two things wonderfully.

Colin Hardy says

Crammed full of similes, metaphor and phrases you would like to quote, these are the thoughts of a young man who questions his life and his place within the lives of others. There is humour and sadness mixed throughout a rolling series of vignettes.

The first part is a tale of angst and personal growth, of hope and failure to live up to the ideals of others. Mixed in with all this is a young man placed out of his element in a new culture, with emotions that do not match the norm and having to grow up and make his own mark.

Some of these snatches of memory are clear and fluid, easy to grasp and yet slip through the fingers. Others are obscure and tantalising and yet out of reach. They are at times very clearly poignant to the author and the emotion boils through at other times they are personal and relevant to the individual and as such hard to grasp without the context.

Funny thing about poetry; read it and you wax poetic.

Back to the poems. The man has parent issues though! They cry between the lines and morph out of the seemingly innocuous.

The second part is a dynamic of transition from child to adult, from home to independence. The poems vary in style and meter rarely settling in one form. They also form gifts to others, like he is reaching out and trying to make sense of his world through aspects of their experience.

The final part is about relationships and loss and then it ends, abruptly and without warning. The reader is left with Notes, scans it to see if it is a poem and looks beyond, but that is it.

Breslin White says

This is a poetry book which reads agreeably like an autobiography.

Because of its explorations of what happened to Chen Chen when his parents first discovered he was gay, I identified with the subject immediately. It was like being caught wearing women's clothing. (Although that's never happened to me; I've never been caught! I've just done it, and gone outside like that. I can walk really

great in five inch heels, as long as the heel is steady. One time I was outside wearing a skirt and the cops pulled me over, though not for that reason. They were patrolling a dead end which I was walking in and searched my license to find something, anything on me. I had to get some exercise that day, that was all. Unlike Chen Chen, I have no use for this story...)

If queer kids like Chen Chen and me can eat candy corn and like it, that's a sign of family that extends itself over the boundaries of mothers and fathers, and into DNA.

John Madera says

Knowingly and comically upending millennial oversharing and other false confessionals, Chen Chen's *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* is a series of meditations on family, identity, and sex, and especially exile, as horror-show and possibility space, externally forced or self-imposed exile toward, within, and away from "this country of burning," offering a "metaphysics of madness," but also a grammar of grief, an ontology of loss, and an epistemology of unknowing.

Thomas says

3.5 stars

I dislike the glorification of straight, white, male poets, and I feel so grateful to Chen Chen for sharing his queer, Asian American, immigrant perspective with us. His poems hit me hardest when he shared sometimes painful, sometimes joyful moments surrounding these underrepresented identities. Poems like "Race to the Tree," "Self-Portrait With & Without," and "Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls" all struck me with their curiosity, novelty of language, and emotional richness. When Chen writes about nuanced personal experiences like his strained relationship with his mother due in part to his sexuality, or his unfulfilled desire for a boy to notice him, my heart moves right into these moments with him. I am awed that he can transport us with such ease.

Two constructive criticisms: I wish that there had been more of an analysis or unpacking of the emotions raised in these poems. For example, Chen writes about romantic desire quite a bit. I wanted to know what underlies this desire to the point that it consumes so much space in this collection (e.g., amatonormativity?) Perhaps it is unfair for me to ask for this type of unpacking, such that this type of analysis may not be the point of poetry, or of Chen's poetry, which I accept. I also just did not understand the significance of some of the poems that strayed away from issues of identity (e.g., "Night Falls Like a Button," "Elegy to be Exhaled at Dust"). Overall, though, I would highly recommend *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* to poetry fans, especially to those who want to diversify their reading lists.

Jerrie (redwritinghood) says

Good debut poetry collection about love, being an immigrant in the US, and his relationship with his mother. Much of this centers around him being gay and the struggle for acceptance by his mother. While many of the poems are relatable and wise, I often felt that he didn't go deep enough with emotion or use of language.
3.5??

Jennifer says

I don't really know how to review poetry, so I'm just going to share some of my favorite lines.

"headache of beauty."

"I want this winter inside my lungs. Inside my brain & dreams."

"I'm trying out this thing where questions about love & forgiveness

are a form of work I'd rather not do alone. I'm trying to say,
Let's put our briefcase on our heads, in the sudden rain,

& continue meeting as if we've just been given our names."

Reading Chen talk about his experience of coming out to his parents was so subtly powerful. And the Starbucks part: "Why can't you see me? Why can't I stop needing you to see me?"

I'm only sharing the more intense parts. But there were some funny lines here and there. My favorite was the Pike Place fishmongers portion. Also, geez. What a title! I love it.

Yordanos says

I'm glad I finally got to read this collection!

Parts 1 and 3 are more resonant in general but all of the poems had a line or an image or a word that lingered, and required a pause. From Part 2, *Kafka's Axe & Michael's Vest* stuck with me most:

"Think of peace & how the Buddhists say it is found through silence.

Think of silence & how Audre Lorde says it will not protect you.

.

.

"What does it mean, to sing in the language of those
who have killed your mother,
would kill her again?"

Powerful!

Overall, this is — thankfully at last — one of the best poetry collections I've read from a young and contemporary poet. It doesn't try to conform to popular formats or waste time with cliched affectations that have become mainstream. The entire collection felt introspective and honest, and I'm grateful for that.
