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Embracing Queer Failure and Reaching for Queer Utopia within Chen Chen's Poetry

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I. Introduction

This thesis is about embracing being a loser, or at least a radical one with visions of social justice. In my thesis, I theorize how Chen Chen conceptualizes the aesthetics of queer failure and utopia in his poetry through Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and Jose Ésteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity*. The two poetry collections of Chen's that I analyze within this are *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* and *Your Emergency Contact Has Experienced an Emergency*. While the different collections are from different time periods and have adjacent focuses, both explore how a queer child of two worlds with generational trauma fails to live up to the expectations of the standards placed on him. I begin by discussing how Halberstam uses low theory as a way of cultivating knowledge outside a colonialist framework and the literary canon, creating liminal knowledge from below, and offering creative solutions. Alongside this, Halberstam names the archive of queer failure and how he found children's media to be valuable in conceptualizing eccentric queer desires, whereas Chen uses pop-culture as this medium. In order to conceptualize queer temporality and how we grow sideways through a haunting childhood into failure and then toward queer potentiality, I theorize alongside Elizabeth Freeman and Kathryn Stockton. I use Elizabeth Freeman's works to conceptualize the existence of queer temporality through asynchronous time and resisting chrononormativity to create alternate queer futurities. Then I conceptualize how Kathryn Stockton marks the birth of a gay child with the backwards birthing mechanism, the haunting of childhood, and the effects of growing sideways on how we fail and then grow toward utopia. Inevitably, there is a reckoning of grief at losing this potentially straight child and heteronormative future as well as grief at losing homeland, which I particularly talk about in regards to Chen and his mother with articles on queer racial melancholia and

assimilation. Chen also processes losing further ideal family relationships, and he questions how to accept some distance while still allowing himself to melancholically fail to fully get over his grief. In continually mourning his fracturing relationship with his mom, he repeatedly returns to their relationship in his poetry. Throughout, I contemplate how Chen uses temporality, through queer childhood and trauma, to reclaim a queer whole future, reimagine personal and family histories, and purge a formerly expected self through grief. Ultimately, I theorize how Chen cultivates glimpses of utopia through queer intimacy, domesticity, erotics, and found family. He finds proposed worlds not in queer pragmatism but in the home while looking toward a queer horizon. Chen humorously rejects a capitalist, heteronormative structure that no longer serves him and crafts queer aesthetics of failure, while reaching and assembling dreams of an intimate, radical queer utopia.

The two collections of Chen Chen's poetry are similar in their writing styles and humor, while also being two distinct works. Throughout his work, Chen references his complicated relationships with family, and how he negotiates his mental health and feelings of success in a capitalist society. He also delves into conversations around his family's journey as immigrants, the discrimination his family faces in the United States with racism and English not being a first language, and general white privilege and prejudice. Both collections also have a multitude of homages and references, from other queer and Asian poets to pop-culture and also remembrances of tragedies like the Pulse Nightclub shooting. *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* is a collection of origins, depicting coming out, his relationship with his mother, and the intersecting stories of his family's emigration from China. It also enlists future possibilities, in his relationship, home, and community. *Your Emergency Contact Has Experienced an Emergency,* the more recent of the two released in 2022, specifically references more the Covid-

19 pandemic and the racial and political issues happening in the midst of the pandemic, as well as his teaching at the university and experience of being in school but not a student. There is a recurring theme of his inability to call or connect to his mother, as opposed to his referencing her health and potential death in *When I Grow Up*. In his "small book of questions," which has multiple sections throughout the book, Chen tries to reckon with his mother's sadness about his life and how love and care manifest in his own life. He continues to express his mutual love for his partner, while the death of his partner's mother and his own complicated relationship with his mother strain their ability to empathize and connect with each other.

Chen Chen is a unique and innovative poet within the history of Asian American literature, especially in his humor, but still harkens to a long lineage within Asian American poetry. This kind of humor has arisen more recently in poets like Chen Chen and his contemporary, Ocean Vuong, who are both lyrical, unabashedly queer, and discuss the complications of their intersecting identities. They both use humor to process and connect with their past, positioning, and their readers. Chen and Vuong push against the traditional style and aesthetic within Asian poetry that is more somber and indirect. They both refuse a tradition of silence as well within Asian American poetry that withholds information about the family unit or blunt experiences or profanity that Chen and Vuong openly include in their collections. While silence can be repressive, especially in situations where a dominant group silences a marginalized group, it has also been generative within Asian American literature in conceptualizing and poetically alluding to things in a way that blunt acknowledgment cannot produce. While Chen steps away from this tradition and innovates through a humorous, direct voice, he also contributes to the historical theme of intergenerational conflict within Asian American poetry. In lines like "How to Have Deeply Sorrowful Exchanges / with Your Son

About Your Immigrant Hardships: / How to Make Him Understand He Must Become / a Neurosurgeon/At Least a Dentist" (*Your Emergency* 18), Chen speaks of the expectations that older generations have for the new generation. The older generation expects the new to hold onto their home countries as strongly as their parents, despite their lived reality in the US, and to succeed within the United States capitalist system. This success is expected in order to make the sacrifices of the parents worth it. To get there, the new generation has to learn to negotiate with model minority myth, assimilation, and language fluency. Despite his atypical path in many ways from the Asian American canon, Chen is navigating the persistent discussions within Asian American poetry while incorporating a queer anti-capitalist twist.

Chen Chen himself notes that it took him a while to find that literature and poetry can be more than just queer or Asian, and that those are not two separate and distinct entities. In one section of "What do you remember about the earth?", Chen remarks on the "exhausting beauty of trying to live / queer & Asian, among so few of either" in Lubbock, Texas where he lives (*Your Emergency* 63). He says that in a "tingly hairy gay sense, I'm from Whitman" but also writes a poem to Jennifer S. Chang (76). In "Winter," Chen lives in a world of strife and racist depictions of Covid-19 as "Kung Flu" and contemplates his own white partners over the years and yet still, at the end of the day, dreams of "Chinese & Chinese American. Some of them with / non-Chinese partners. Some of them queer. Some of them with my face" (*Your Emergency* 81). He clings to and forges connections, even in his dreamscape if need be, through poetry and collective memory. Chen Chen also writes "In the World's Italian Restaurant" in memory of Justin Chin, a queer Asian poet who died in 2015. Chen talks about how Justin Chin's last collection of poems showed up in the same article of Asian American poets as Chen's did. He writes this poem addressing Chin, connecting the two in experience and understanding, telling

him about how he began "in high school—sneaking [...] all the queer lit, every bit of this / aliveness I could find" (*Your Emergency* 83). He then confesses that it "took / until college to find books & writers both queer & Asian" (83). However, he cannot help but remark that to be a queer, Asian, "& hot" poet and person in this world is to not be able to help "but continue to make ourselves" – to evolve and transform and flourish (84).

II. The Art and Aesthetics of Queer Failure

In beginning this evolution and transformation toward making ourselves, we can look to Jack Halberstam, who in his book *The Queer Art of Failure* articulates how queer failure defies the heterofuturity (a term coined by Lee Edelman) of capitalism and family building. Alongside enthralling readings of *Finding Nemo* and *Fantastic Mr. Fox,* Halberstam embraces queer failure through being unafraid of and embracing the erotic, the messy, and the humor of it all in beautiful, thoughtful critical writing. He begins *The Queer Art of Failure* with an introduction on low theory: what it is, what it gives, and how it functions. He offers low theory as a way to escape binary formations and alternatively inhabit liminal spaces. The term "low theory" is adapted from the work of Stuart Hall, a well-known cultural studies theorist, and is a way to locate "in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony" (Halberstam 2). He also notes that low theory is often more accessible to readers outside more standard academic spaces and training. Low theory work becomes a "theoretical model that flows below the radar" and is "assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the high in high theory" (16). With being an "open" pedagogy in how it communicates, theorizes, and offers radical potentials, low theory lifts itself from more prescriptive methods and orients toward "problem-solving knowledge or social visions of radical justice" (16-17). Low theory attempts, as Foucault mentions in his book

The History of Sexuality Volume 1, to uncover productions of knowledge that have been “buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations" because they were deemed illegitimate or improperly written or structured by a colonialist literary framework (11). This creates, as Halberstam suggests, a “knowledge from below,” a knowledge that is built outside of canons of theory and literature (11). Low theory resists by investing in “counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity” by reconceptualizing these typically theorized negative attributes into a “refusal of mastery” (11) and a “critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit” (12). It resists shame and intentionally inhabits low structures of knowing that exist in the liminal, the sidelined, and the openly creative systems that exist outside of our current hegemony.

Jack Halberstam explores the art of failure in contrast to heteronormative expectations of success, which include “advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct,” through rejecting pragmatism and focusing on an archive of less recognized antisocial creators (89). He then marks the queer or counter-hegemonic modes of failure alongside “nonconformity, anti-capitalist practices, nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique” (89). Halberstam references Muñoz, the author of *Cruising Utopia,* heavily within his introduction. Muñoz connects queers and failure through rejecting pragmatism and a utopian refusing of social norms. Halberstam then delves into the archive of queer failure, pulling from a range of sources, largely influenced by Muñoz and Sandage, to include typically more privileged white men in one and more marginalized voices, often women and people of color, in the other. Where we get Alfred Hitchcock, Henry James, Tennessee Williams, and Oscar Wilde, we create themes of “fatigue, ennui, boredom, indifference, ironic distancing, indirectness” (110). But with less recognized antisocial creators like June Jordan, Toni Morrison, *Finding Nemo*, and Lesbians on Ecstasy, we

can identify “rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, over-investment, incivility, brutal honesty, and disappointment” (110). Halberstam suggests that there are two archives, one that runs alongside the mainstream narrative of failure and another that examines “what happens when failure is productively linked to racial awareness, anticolonial struggle, gender variance, and different formulations of the temporality of success” (92). When Halberstam then turns to “God Save the Queen” by the Sex Pistols and the theory work *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* by Lee Edelman, he argues for a lifestyle of failure by saying that “where futurity signifies the nation, the divisions of class and race upon which the notion of national belonging depends” (107). When futurity is linked to privileged patriotic nation-building, it “takes meaning away from the poor, the unemployed, the promiscuous, the noncitizen, the racialized immigrant, the queer” (107). Therefore, we should want to reject heteronormative capitalist markers of success and instead turn to focusing on how to live in and theorize failure within our own lives (107).

Chen Chen marks his experiences of living a life with failure in his poem “Self-Portrait With & Without,” wherein he outlines the heavy and mundane ways that he has historically and presently been situated within the United States as a Chinese-American and has disappointed his parents throughout the years. The poem also operates mostly without tense given the nature of “with” and “without” in the poem’s writing. He lists that he is “without a driver’s license,” a staple of American adult independence, but “with his mother’s worry” (*When I Grow Up, 25).* He remembers he is “with an A in English, a C in chemistry. With my mom saying, *You have to be three times better than the white kids, at everything*” (25). Children of immigrants are often pressured to make the sacrificing transition worthwhile as well as to enact the model minority myth of Asian assimilationist and intellectual success. Similarly, Chen is “with the youngest

brother who wants to go to art school. With his mother's multiplying worries" because of the weight she feels at having two realized or potentially 'failed' sons (25). Chen's brother going to art school and not a more standard capital-driven path like STEM or business adds to her worries at the way Chen has failed by excelling at English yet struggling in chemistry and math and having crushes on and relationships with queer men. He situates himself in US history by "thinking I've grown up now" because he discusses and regularly checks the news. Chen references the growing school shooting epidemic in the US through "the children, spared or missed by the child with a gun, / go back to school" and 9/11 in how "when the towers fell" his aunt would call from China urgently asking, "*How far are you from New York?*" and the "cities fueled by scars" that followed (25). He is also with the racism and without white Western beauty standards that lead to him being with "the white boy in ninth grade who called me / ugly" (25). This is the same boy who he reveals is the repeating figure of "with the white boy I liked. With him calling me ugly" (25). Intersecting erotics and racism, Chen is "with my knees on the floor" begging for "straighter teeth, lighter skin, blue eyes [...] any eyes brighter, other than mine" (25). The term "ugly" gets repeatedly used as a racialized weapon expecting to force conformity, racialized shame, and white racial dominance. By being repeatedly called ugly by the white boy he is expected to and initially does desire because of this failure to inhabit Western beauty standards, Chen embodies an aesthetic of failure in the Western world and establishes his place outside Western heteronormative expectations of success. In "School of a Few [..]" he wonders when he was finally able to embrace his hair and eyes, given how he had once desired the bluest eye, as somewhere in between his discontent and embracing of his features he stepped away from markers of success that do not serve him or make sense for his life as a queer Asian man.

Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* chooses to theorize alongside children's animated films and mainstream comedies because of how they illustrate "fantasies of otherness and difference, alternative embodiment, group affiliations, and eccentric desires" (119). He is drawn to these films and how they favor non-linear development and feature "forgotten histories" (119). He says that because these films are made and marketed for children, they have "acknowledgment of the unsentimental, amoral, and antiteleological narrative desires of children" (119). The films imagine connections to queerness, speak on themes like "monstrosity in Shrek, disability in Finding Nemo" as well as "the pernicious effects of exclusion, abjection, and displacement in the name of family, home, and nation" (120). Most importantly, Halberstam emphasizes that the beauty of these films is that they do not "fear failure, they do not favor success, and they picture children not as pre-adults figuring the future but as anarchic beings who partake in strange and inconsistent temporal logics" (120). These films create alternate queer imaginings of our collective futures (120). Ultimately, Halberstam says simply that by practicing failure we can embrace our inner selves, who may "be underachievers, to fall short, to get distracted, to take a detour, to find a limit, to lose our way, to forget, to avoid mastery" and to become losers who inherit from all those who lost before them (121).

Chen uses pop-culture references to express his own disconnect with society and experiences of failure in a similar way to how Halberstam uses animation and children's films. This is particularly pronounced in Chen's poem "Doctor's Note," wherein he explores the fragility of life and the reactions of his parents in his life and death through humor and mocked formal language. "Doctor's Note" begins "Please excuse Chen Chen from class. He is currently dead." as he was apparently "exhibiting clear signs of dying" (*Your Emergency* 15). Chen Chen mimics the doctor's note, required from lower school through college for various exemptions.

The poem is ripe with cultural references, using pop culture often reserved for low theory, which alternately give him the will to live or send him back to his death. Beyond the opening line "he is currently dead" mimicking Taylor Swift's response "cause she's dead" as to why she can't come to the phone, Chen Chen says he is "*nothing except the wish to listen to Coldplay*" but after too much of "their 2002 hit 'The Scientist,' he is dead" (15). He is prescribed long chicken stock baths and newer music, but it would be "unwise" to "force Chen Chen [...] back to life" with new Buffy episodes (15). The poem then turns from this personal experience of deadness, with Tai Chi and "medically speaking" being "very gross," to the experience of his parents (15). He says it would be "unwise & gross" to reach out to Chen Chen's parents as they are not his emergency contact and "*have exhibited clear signs of wishing he were dead"* through saying things such as *"You'd be better off dead. Better than whatever you are with other men*" (15). Chen slips their direct dialogue into the poem nonchalantly, as if it had no different an impact than an overdosing of "The Scientist." He also uses the formal language of the authority figure's note to contrast with informal words like "gross" and the devastation of pop music or, alternatively, to exaggerate his parents' responses while keeping some emotional distance from the true harm of their statements (15). He then notes that "after learning of Chen Chen's death, they fell to their knees, into a state commonly referred to as 'utter devastation'" (15). He marks the difference in their response: when he is alive they wish him to be dead and he remains a failure in their eyes, but when they find he is dead they become reattached to him in mourning and are devastated to no longer have him in their lives. This remembered Chen Chen is "sweet" and he predicts that within three months, if "he remains his remains," their devastation will ease, and they will become contented with "the memory of Chen Chen" before he "became so whatever he was" (15). He imagines he will remain this ideal former self in their minds, pure and separated from

queerness. In this imagining, they will think of him "sharing a bowl of strawberry ice cream, the last thing they remember him loving," as their idealized version of him was this split former self, before their relationship got tarnished by his coming out (15). Chen indicates that within their minds it would have been better to have died than remain a present failure. He also notes how difficult it is to pull out of life obligations, and how having a doctor's note can be the breaking point between being entrapped in difficult structures of life and a separate relief that can exist in the home, where Buffy and Coldplay exist. In this imagining, Chen Chen would have to die to get relief or a pass, but also the imagining becomes an experiment on how he cannot connect with his parents in his fullness while alive. Additionally, he uses his own name within the poem in part to self-proclaim his own experience as such but also to create distance through the third person. Chen can then exist in his death through the name on a tombstone and "Doctor's Note" but also as the narrator watching the reactions to his death. Through seeing his own death and experiencing a repeated rebirth, we begin to see how Chen navigates through different iterations of time. In processing various times that he has failed expectations of capitalist success, heterofuturity, and chrononormativity, Chen is able to cultivate his own path through a curated aesthetic of failure.

III. The Displacement of Childhood and the Queering of Temporarily

In their respective books *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories,* and *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century,* Elizabeth Freeman and Kathryn Bond Stockton theorize the inherent queerness of childhood, how society uses time to manipulate us, and how we can resist those efforts of control and conformity. Freeman starts *Time Binds* by talking about how Nguyen Tan Hoang, the cinematographer of the erotic experimental film tape *K.I.P.* (2002), in his notes describes how the tape he created his mixtape film from, ‘‘Kip Noll

Superstar, Part I'' (1981), broke because of how many times people, without a natural continuous experience as Freeman says, skipped through foreplay and "sexual choreographies" to watch the climax of the two white queer men (2). In the original tape being altered forever from being rewound, with entire films "blurred or erased," the people who watched it at different times, in different places, and with disparate relations to queerness within themselves and in their lives, are all bound together within this one object (2). Freeman describes how Nguyen would, have at the time of ''Kip Noll Superstar, Part I'' (1981) and the AIDS crisis, been "too young, too racialized, 'too foreign'" to be included within the body of this film that he pulls from to create *K.I.P.*, which features white men with a certain physique (13). In *K.I.P.,* Nguyen chooses to overlay or superimpose his own image as a spectator onto the blurred and skipping tape. He becomes a figure that flashes in and out of the film, sometimes seeming impassive, other times with his mouth open as if mimicking the scene or out of surprise. In this way, Nguyen joins the white urban scene of the AIDS crisis as a "diaphanous, lusting queer archivalist" who "gazes hungrily into a scene that excludes him, mouth agape to receive lineal bliss" (19). With this superimposing, Nguyen creates an experimental film that connects the viewers, Kip Noll and his co-star, and himself in their lust for sexual acts together throughout time. The object links everyone involved in a sexual experience outside monogamous couplehood but also in an experience of mourning the viewers and other queer people who lost their lives during that time to AIDS. In this way, Nguyen and Chen in their own ways assert their own beauty in mediums that often compliment Western standards of beauty and write themselves into a lineage of queer community through their art.

Freeman then notes how chrononormativity doesn't usually allow for this atypical or queer binding of individuals. Chrononormativity is the way that authorities within our society

control our movements, productivity, and social relations based on timing within our everyday and our lifetime. Needing to work forty hours a week to receive certain benefits and earn a living wage is just one example of how time is controlled within US society. Freeman notes that this capitalist structuring of time is unnatural to our bodies and requires a "violent retemporalization of bodies" in order to listen to our natural rhythms and shifts depending on the agricultural season (3). To not abide by chrononormative expectations is to defiantly fail to produce a timeline that leads to a life that relies on capitalism and heterofuturity, like Jack Halberstam advocates for. To defy or circumvent timelines of heteronormative family building or success could mean reconnecting with a more natural time for our body, minimizing burnout and fatigue, and realizing our own queer potentialities. However, Freeman says "time, then, not only 'binds' flesh into bodies and bodies into social but also appears to 'bind' history's wounds," describing how these timing regulations imposed by society are necessary for us in this society to be able to inhabit our bodies and provide for them (7). Our bodies are therefore written into a social contract with social obligations and social lifetime deadlines. Additionally, time binds historical wounds to our bodies in how we are all tied to and are impacted by historical events, like how I later explore through two of Chen's poems on the Pulse Nightclub shooting.

Much like how Freeman theorizes the ways time binds us to our bodies, Stockton says it's almost impossible to fully know and theorize what it's like to be a child although we are mentally bound to our earlier conceptions of ourselves, as once we are adults all we can try to grasp is what we once thought we were through memories. She argues that all children are queer and that there's no such thing as a fully innocent child. To Stockton, children are ghostly figures that haunt us; they live inside us as a "life inside this membrane" that is "largely available to adults as memory—what can I remember of what I thought I was? — and so takes us back in

circles to our fantasies (of our memories)" (5-6). In "The School of a Few or a Lot of My Favorite Things," Chen as a child also haunts him, though he remarks that he recently discovered that "ghosts prefer / to be called spooky babes," and that they arrive in December "like gasps" into a "surprise party [...] & it / is a ghost party. / Excuse me, a spooky babe party" (*Your Emergency* 69). His childhood spooky babe haunts him as he wonders when he stopped "hating my hair" and when he thinks repeatedly about the Swedish American boy who "smelled like the dictionary definition of blond" (69). Stockton suggests that restricted by their own waiting period to enter adulthood, "children grow sideways as well as up—or so I will say—in part because they cannot, according to our concepts, advance to adulthood until we say it's time." (6). In growing sideways, the conception of the blond boy travels to the present with his partner Jeffrey and his childhood trauma. Chen's growth sideways arises in glances and contemplations of where he was and how that relates and travels to who he is now. The experience of being a ghostly child and a general queer child is especially poignant to queer adults, whose childhoods were often marked by feelings of "pangs of despair or sharp unease. One can remember desperately feeling there was simply nowhere to grow" as well as a "throwback to a frightening, heightened sense of growing toward a question mark. Or growing up in a haze. Or hanging in suspense" (Stockton 3). Some would "even wish[ing] time would stop, or just twist sideways, so that one wouldn't have to advance to new or further scenes of trouble," as they fear the future could hold further trials and tribulations even as it holds new possibilities (3). Much of Chen's poetry that incorporates or centers on childhood memories of being queer is trying to work through and conceptualize these feelings of hanging in suspense, living in a haze, or simply feeling the despair at waiting for a more hopeful future he is told is in the air in front of him. In the air, it becomes a glimpse of a queer horizon or utopia, like Muñoz suggests. In trying to

conceptualize a future, Chen takes with him the specter of his childhood self, which haunts him in his present and is carried on into his future. Stockton exemplifies this intersection of timelines with the concept of the "backward birthing mechanism" of searching for where the first formative desires of queerness arose and where the death of the straight child birthed a gay one (7). More specifically, "the phrase 'gay child' is a gravestone marker for where or when one's straight life died. Straight person dead, gay child now born" (7). In a sense, in "Doctor's Note" Chen is also shifting back and forth across this birthing mechanism, imagining first the death of a queer child, then a child his parents can imagine is straight after death, and also the rebirth of that same child after consuming the right food or media. Chen marks his conception as a queer child distinctly in multiple poems in order to fathom where he is now, as a queer child turned adult, and where his growth sideways began.

Chen repeatedly tells of the birth of the "gay child" that Stockton conceptualizes, wherein the "backwards birthing mechanism" creates at once the death of the straight child and a fresh gay one to continue in its place. In "Race to the Tree," Chen tells of the night of his own conceptualization, or at least when he told his parents he was gay and it was socially cemented to his family. He says it was "night & without / having committed any crimes, / I was pursued, looked into / by the Amherst police" (*When I* 20). After he ran away from home, his mother had called the police, an established form of societal control and a source of brutality against people of color, to find her missing son. He climbs into an oak which he considered "safety," and as he sat there and hoped that "my parents would start to miss me," he thought of how it would "taste / to kiss, to be kissed, oh / moon, for a long time, for the first time" (20). He ruminates on how it would feel to kiss the "tough / core of a boy's throat," despite being afraid of his home and the existence of his relations with this boy only in his fantasies (21). As Stockton would say, his

thoughts represent the queerness in every child to want things that are considered deviant or erotic or inappropriate for childhood, despite there being risk in feeling so. And, still in the tree, Chen considers how his parents, when they immigrated, had to re-earn the same degrees by putting "on their best American accents / & smiles, to earn degrees" (21). On the fourth page of the poem, Chen finally reveals that he had "spent all night in a tree / because my mother slapped me / after I told her I might be gay" (23). He re-writes the narrative of the poem by telling it asynchronously. The yelling and the slapping and the bruise become the mark of a straight death at the end of the poem. The poem begins and ends with the queer birth and the resurrection of a boy who wants another so desperately. If he cannot have him, Chen would at least want the blond boy to masochistically "suffocate, breath-starved" by how hard he is running from the ghostly child that wants a reciprocal queer sexual connection to much avail (*When I* 23).

However, much of Chen Chen's poetry is more intersectional in how he conceptualizes his present and past self, the haunting of his childhood, and time within his body. In "Elegy While Listening to a Song I Can't Help But Start to Move to," a poem in tribute to the Pulse Nightclub shooting, he breaks the poem into 16 numbered stanzas with each attached to a thought, feeling, or memory. Yaeji, a Korean-American DJ and vocalist, sings "*This product is called Depression*" as Chen laments that "my body misses the way bodies become song / & light" in the midst of social isolation and the Covid-19 pandemic (*Your Emergency* 50). Similar to how Freeman describes time binding us through historical wounds, Chen wonders in the midst of hardship and discrimination, fear and strife, "4. / How does a body forget all danger & become song, swoon?" (50). Herein, Chen and the Pulse attendees dance together, forgetting the danger of being queer and transgender and a person of color in a world of school shootings, anti-transgender legislation, police brutality, and anti-Asian hate attacks. He asks, "6. / How does a

queer body –" and then cuts out to "I'm in my 7th grade bedroom again, quietly" dancing with his hands on the hips "of a tall / column of air" he sculpted into Jake B. from history (50). He is filled with feelings of being "giddy. Then, afraid," reliving the ecstasy of hearing Yaeji in the club and seeing his childhood crush at once alongside processing the fear of rejection and violence by Jake, his family, and the later-coming massacre in the club (51). The music within the poem becomes a soundtrack for the attendees, his ecstasy, and the forgetting of woes. Like with the *K.I.P* mixtape Freeman begins her analysis with, Yaeji's music is worn over and over again. The use of temporality becomes queered in how the rhythm of "her own satirical ritual, finding joy" cuts into and past memories of "college boys playing, touching / each other rough, bare" and legs "forgetting all danger" while the music plays (51). Chen asks "12. / How sings a body" (51) when absorbed in the music and remembering the "moonlit / collisions" of soccer players against each other and queer people clubbing together collectively (51-52). The body gets interwoven with this asynchronous time through phrases like "the body's truest thought is play, moon" (52). Time binds wounds, as Freeman says; time binds Chen and me and readers and the community with the Pulse victims. The music, as a vessel for asynchronous time, binds Chen with the Pulse dancers and them to each other. He lets the poem close with their "laughter, moments before," deciding to end with their queer joy and their reaching, instead of their endings. He allows the Pulse attendees to exist in this reaching and joy within the body and to continually hear and sway to Yaeji through time.

IV. Queer Grief and Mourning

Along with disappointing his parents, failing societal expectations, and growing sideways as a queer child, Chen Chen expresses grief for the relationship with his parents that he is incapable of having now. His parents grieve the death of the straight child they expected, the lost

heteronormative future this straight child could have had, and the birth of the queer child they did not want. Chen grieves what their relationship could have been and the support they could have given him and now his partnership. This grief at already having lost his parents is exacerbated by his mother's failing health within *When I Grow Up* and his partner's mother falling ill and then dying over the two collections. He tries to process what his death or his mother's death would mean to the other, while also understanding that part of their relationship will always be fragmented or unrepairable. In the second collection, he nods to his former poems and irrepressible habit of reconceptualizing her death, even though she is as well "already sick, chronically sick in three different ways" (*Your Emergency* 87). His partner is grieving his own mother's passing, and so he constantly pushes Chen to call his own mother while she's alive. Jeffrey's mother accepted Chen into her family upon her death in the hospital. However, Chen cannot bring himself to tell his partner, Jeffrey, that his mother can never bring herself to talk or ask about Jeffrey and will instead ask about their dog. It becomes too painful for Chen to reach out to her when she enacted so much of his childhood queer trauma and still cannot in many ways accept Chen's queerness, his partnership, or the failure he inhabits in her mind.

Part of the disconnect of loss and grief between Chen and his parents arises from his parents' experiences of emigrating from China into a society that would never fully allow them to integrate, as described in David Eng and Wen Liu's work on racial melancholia and assimilation. Wen Liu defines racial melancholia as "racialized queer grief" in protest against pressures for Asian Americans to give up connection to the object "Asia," white nationalistic urges for Asian Americans to "split" from Asian identities, and to cultivate a strategy of "subject-making" against colonizing and segregating histories (176). Eng, Liu, and Muñoz in his article "Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in Van Der Zee, Mapplethorpe, and

Looking for Langston," all mention Freud's theorizing of "Mourning and Melancholia" as the origin for their work on queer and Asian mourning. Muñoz laments that this "theory of mourning that is, like most Freud, implicitly heterosexist, tantalizingly thought-provoking, and ultimately un-satisfying" with "melancholia, which he marks as pathological" ("Photographies" 344). In response to this, both Muñoz and Eng explicitly chose to redefine melancholia outside pathologizing within a more understanding, uplifting reading of queer and racial melancholia. David L. Eng in his article "Melancholia/Postcoloniality: Loss in *The Floating Life*," conceptualizes the experience of loss and assimilation for a family emigrating from Hong Kong in the film *The Floating Life*. I found the way Eng described the family processing the loss of their home and their negotiations with a new society valuable in considering Chen and his mother's relationship. Without the "model of postcolonial subject formation to delineate the genesis of individual pathology," we can understand the loss of objects, values, and belonging that Chen's family felt upon emigrating and their grief at being unable to assimilate into a society that will always other them (Eng 143). Through discussing racial melancholia without pathologizing, we see how Chen's mother is trying to find societal belonging that she's not able to attain because she is not able to successfully assimilate as a "perpetual foreigner" (147). She is trying to "invest in new objects, places, and ideals" but is prevented from "full assimilation into mainstream society" (148). Because of this failure to fully incorporate and invest in American society, she further pressures her sons to do what she is incapable of doing. Yet in his queerness, presentation, mental health, and general distaste of capitalist society, Chen is incapable and unwilling to produce American markers of success. Despite both of them experiencing racial melancholia and only slightly diverged pressures to assimilate, this further divides Chen and his mother and their understanding of each other. Chen is happy to join the second archive of failure

and the generations of losers that Halberstam names, much to his mother's disappointment and distress.

However, Wen Liu in "Narrating Against Assimilation and the Empire: Diasporic Mourning and Queer Asian Melancholia" notes that even when manufacturing prestige and performing the model minority myth, Asian people still face discrimination and harassment. She remarks on an Asian American man who has a "prestigious job, which symbolizes literacy, intelligence, and the liberal values of multicultural America," is living in "one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the country," and yet still endured a "racialized assault" (Liu 177). She emphasizes that "forgetting one's history is the precondition of achieving the 'good Asian American life,'" which is synonymous with the American dream (177). Pulling from Muñoz and Eng, Liu explains that this is an "unattainable assimilation" for queers of color who "continue to be excluded from this whitewashed homonormative citizenship" (178). With detachment from a place of origin, Asian Americans are placed in a "perpetual ghostly emptiness of racial positionality" as well as being haunted by "violence and terror" from colonial trauma, despite veneers of assimilation (180). As Liu references from Halberstam, "queers of color are often excluded from homonormative citizenship and become the racialized remains of white queer futurity," and therefore have to develop their own utopia from melancholia through "alternative possibilities of belonging" (181). Liu suggests that perhaps queer racial melancholia is a refusal to be superficially happy and to remain rebelliously discontented with the systems of hegemony at hand. In naming and feeling loss and grief, Chen defies conformity and assimilationist pressures and embraces failure. He is able to hold his discontentment with how the US socio-economic systems and his relationship with his mother do not serve him while also allowing

himself to reach outside of these realities toward what does bring him queer contentment and joy.

Chen specifically conceptualizes the feeling of love/pain 疼 within their relationship in a poem entitled "I love you" but with Chinese characters. He expresses that he does love his parents, but it's a type of love that is painful "as in ache. pain. pang. your faces" or "as in our lives have hurt / each other – why?" (*Your Emergency* 116). This familial love/pain and suffering alongside care is important when considering Chen's distance from his parents while maintaining certain irreparable connections. He references a "family, tending/ to each other's history – is this tenderness" while also grieving the way that "you said you were worried / I'd get my brothers, your other (truer?) sons, sick. / More than once. The both of you. Said. This." (117). He emphasizes the irony of this right after reframing this idea of sickness or contamination in "Get out before you get them sick, too" with "& now the country we live in believes everyone with a face / like ours is sick" (117). He and his parents are all targets for Asian hate crimes and racism within the US Covid-19 landscape, and yet his parents cannot see how this language of infection occupies both their minds about his queerness and the country's mind about them being Chinese.

This love/pain is particularly poignant within "a small book of questions," a segment that is re-occurring within *Your Emergency Contact,* and how Chen continually reimagines "what are the consequences of silence?" and "who is responsible for the suffering of your mother?." Within these sections, he describes the pain and love he feels in their relationship and how he cares for her. At the same time, however, he is unable to keep many of his connections to her. Within the second response to "Who was responsible for the suffering of your mother?," Chen struggles

with his inability to call his mother, despite the pleading of his mother and the insistence of his partner. His boyfriend reminds him that if "his own mother was alive, he would talk to her every week," putting the recent death and grief of his mother on Chen, who has his own reasons, histories, and grieving periods about his own mother (*Your Emergency* 48). In many senses, Chen has dealt with the ongoing death of his mother and the continual realization that she cannot be the mother that he wants her to be, as much as he cannot help but painfully love her. The blame in his life for who is responsible for her suffering is placed on Chen for his distancing and for being affected by the way she has treated him and Jeffrey throughout his life, rather than on her for her inability to accept him and her abuse during his childhood after he came out. Both he and Jeffrey are grieving. So, when Chen gives in and calls her, and she "asks about the dog before she asks about his partner. In fact, she doesn't ask about him," it reopens this decade-long wound and increases the distance (48). They are at a standstill, with her incapable of asking about or acknowledging his boyfriend, and Chen, not wanting to hurt his boyfriend, doesn't tell him and grieves alone.

Despite the distance and ongoing grief that Chen continually grapples with, he also in some ways has a connection and care to his parents that still exist in this continuous love/pain 疼. In the sections "how will you live now?" and "who was responsible for the suffering of your mother?" within the first small book of questions, he talks about how, while he cannot answer her calls, he edits her work for her. He corrects her grammar and helps her in "inhabiting this bureaucratic language" (*Your Emergency* 42). His grief for their relationship is drawn out when he does go home or connect, hoping against hope for another conclusion, a change. When he goes home for a party, he feels like he's in *Home Alone*, "orchestrating every movement of a proper family" by sending a text to his mother telling her "you will ask him / about him" (111).

He then rewards her for her “Sitting with Her Son’s Boyfriend Who Is a Boy Smile” with a “Hurray for Doing a Little Better Smile” (111). And all of this work and anxiety ends with her saying “in Mandarin*, Is he coming with you /for Thanksgiving? My good friend is & she wouldn’t like*” (112). Their relationship is forever divided, but also she and his dad are the only people who always pronounce his name right and know what it is in Mandarin, something not even his boyfriend had done.

Chen writes about his mom being sick or dying in her incapability of recognizing him as queer, in wanting to conceptualize her leaving his life, and with her being a chronically ill person. He has written a “poem in which she is sick &, sick for a while, the doctors can’t / figure out why. I write a poem in which she has been dead for years. / Five poems in which she doesn’t die, she can’t, will never” (*Your Emergency* 55). He uses these themes to grieve his relationship with her and process how he feels about his partner’s relationship with his own mother and his grief over her passing. His mother then is “already sick, chronically sick in three different ways,” ambiguous as to exactly how and the circumstance (87). Yet, no matter how fatal or mental or physical or passing her illness is, it is still incorporated into this ongoing grief of letting go, of loving someone who also causes you pain. Chen notes that “if we could finish grieving there would be no need to live,” suggesting that learning to live with loss is part of a full human experience (54). He offers, “was it failure, / this fissure, / or are you happier to have the space /that opened up? / haven’t you been happier, not speaking with her for almost a year?” (56). In this he asks if their separation is a failure, and/or a product of exactly what he wanted and needed – distance. He questions if he ever expects her to change, or how she would have been if he had been with a different partner. Yet he remembers a time before she knew of his queerness that

there was a closeness, a joy, a mutual easy sharing of "the boy you let play the Green Ranger," even if he still feels that even if it was "before she knew, but didn't she / already?" (56).

The grief within these works not only speaks to Chen's relationship with his mother but also to losses within the larger queer and Asian communities. He writes "One Year Later: A Letter" in memory of Drew Leinonen, with Drew as a chosen name, a victim at the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando in 2016. In the poem, he talks about searching social media for glimpses of Drew, whose life was taken from him too soon. Chen keeps "reading, / rereading about you" hoping to get a greater understanding for who he was, about his love of Star Trek and Dance Dance Revolution (*Your Emergency* 57). In the way that Chen marks himself as a sipper at the beginning of *When I Grow Up*, Drew called his "red pick-up truck The Flamer," unabashedly declaring his own deviation and failure of the normative. Drew becomes an aspirational figure in how he cultivates a life of aesthetic failure and reaches for utopia. In his grief for Drew, Chen imagines the domestic life that Drew shared with his partner, who could "tease you for taking so long" picking a shirt but then put "his hand / on your shoulder. Your hand, / his beardy cheek. Then him saying, *Yes, / this shirt.* Before the two of you / step out" and face the world, the future, and ultimately that night together (58-59). This section of the poem very much conceptualizes a glimpse into the future utopia that Muñoz conceptualizes and a suspension before the aftermath of that night. Chen imagines Drew and Juan, both victims of the Pulse shooting, reaching together for their own queer utopia and horizon, through their mutual care, found family building, and personal domestic bliss. They are living their lives together and within community, building their own potentiality toward queer utopia just as Chen is in his own life. The only difference is that a hate crime cut their lives short and took from them the ability to continue reaching in the way that others are able to. The grief within this poem is a result of that

lost potentiality, and also of how, as Muñoz says, we focus on queer utopia because of how brutal and horrible it can be to live in the present for marginalized and queer people. Muñoz also offers that it is this collective queer and racial melancholia that is an "integral part of everyday lives" and "occupies the minds of the communities under siege" ("Photographies" 355). Through our grief, in films like *K.I.P.* and poems like this, we use melancholia as a "mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead to the various battles we must wage in their names – and in our names" (356). In grief, recognition, and mourning, we carry forward and advocate for people like Drew and ultimately for ourselves.

Chen also notes the grief of Drew's mother in contrast to how he envisions his own mother's reaction. Drew's mother "holds your shirt / with the largest missing," and Chen wonders "would my mother do that for me? / My mother who once said, *if only I never / had you*. My mother who still can't say, / *Your boyfriend*" (*Your Emergency* 59). He does think that she would hold up the shirt on the news because a "not-small part of her / would rather miss me" than to hear him say "*I love him*" once again (59-60). Like within "Doctor's Note," Chen says that it would be easier for her to deal with a deceased and once-gay son than to live with the lived reality of his queer life and love. At the end of "One Year Later," he asks Drew, who in many ways lived a life crafted by the art of failure, what "did you say / to the unlistening? To the heart that prefers / a shineless shirt?" (60). In asking Drew these questions, Chen ends with his own contemplations on how he moves forward through grief. Drew, queer and trans, who lived with his partner and embraced his life and community within Orlando and the Pulse Nightclub, what did he do with those who rejected him for failing to live up to society's expectations of heteronormativity and capitalist family-building success? Should Chen similarly let go of all

those who dislike his flamboyancy and artful failure? Should he totally let go of his mother like potentially Drew before him?

V. Queer Utopia: Domestic Bliss, Erotic Intimacy, and Found Family

In thinking about what one does while still living and building forward outside of our beleaguered present, José Ésteban Muñoz in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Futurity* conceptualizes queer futurity and queerness as a horizon. He explains that queerness is a thing that is not yet here and that to look beyond the "pragmatic sphere of the here and now, the hollow nature of the present" (Muñoz 21) and call on the "not-quite-conscious [...] realm of potentiality" (21) we come to see that "we are not quite queer yet, that queerness, what we will really know as queerness, does not yet exist" (22). We have to also understand queerness as a "rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (1). That is, if we look past what is politically strategic or heteronormative and conformist, like advocating for gay marriage and gay military access primarily, we lose the ability to conceptualize a future society that could hold the fullness of queerness. First, we have to understand that "the here and now is a prison house" of systematic oppression and then "we must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*" (1). Pragmatism accommodates the discriminatory and capitalist restrictions of the present and fails to be able to create and imagine, thus limiting us to a restrictive future without any inspiration or radical queer brilliant wholeness to reach toward. In feeling a then and there, we "must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (1). Muñoz offers that we can often "glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic," in the beautiful poetry we read (1). In this vein, we can conceptualize a new queer domesticity through Ocean Vuong's poetry or a new

reaching for queer utopia within Jack Smith's erotic films (1). Essentially, Muñoz argues that because of the hardship, survival, and accommodation that being queer means in the present, that not only should we want to look forward into a whole and brilliant queer future, but we should understand it is impossible to fully conceptualize or reach queerness with our current limitations under these societal restrictions. Instead, we can look to and reach toward a horizon of queer potentiality. This horizon and potentiality is an ideality, a utopia that is conceptualized and crafted by understanding the potentiality in queer erotics, domesticity, radicalism, rebellion, in even the awkward, and ultimately within hope. Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* looks back to look forward, as Stockton suggests in her theory of growing sideways. In this understanding of queer temporality, Muñoz includes his own personal experiences, stories, and connections to connect "historical queer sites with lived queer experience" (3). He says that in doing this "my approach to hope as a critical methodology can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision" (4).

Within "Summer Was Forever," Chen Chen expresses direct yearnings to convey aesthetics of failure to reach a personal queer utopia. "Summer Was Forever" narrates an imagined future with a local paper boy regardless of parental disappointment or a classically desired capitalist heteronormative future, as encouraged by Halberstam. He begins by marking time dripping as if "from the faucet like a magician's botched trick" (*When I* 19). He notes that he was reluctant to applaud this time progression, these insignificant and lingering drips, waiting for a garden or croissant factory. He cannot help but wonder "What kind / of work do I need to be doing?" with a capitalist productive urgency inspired by chrononormativity, as discussed in Freeman, directly encouraged by his parents (19). "My parents said: *Doctor, / married to lawyer*" still wishing for a future that can still mirror the future that a successful cis-heterosexual

son could have had (19). Throughout his works, Chen nods to a variety of careers that would have provided pride and honor for his parents, like doctor, or neurosurgeon, or lawyer. It is interesting to note that this status is not only connected to the occupation of their son, Chen himself, but also to his partner's occupation and positioning in greater society. Therefore, in being a doctor specifically paired in a monogamous homonormative relationship with a lawyer, Chen could prove to them he was still trying to parallel the life he might have had as a successful non-queer son. Chen marks that in contrast or commentary to his lack of a lawyer husband, the "faucet said: *Drip, drop, / your life sucks*" (19). I am particularly amused by the use of personification of the faucet to mock Chen Chen as he contemplates the slow-moving time, his lack of American dream success, and his wonderings about a more satisfying future.

Therein appears the local paper boy as "when sometimes no one said anything & I saw / him, the local paper boy on his route" (*When I* 19). The local paperboy is the opposite of this high-achieving high-powered life, who only appears when the voices insisting on traditional means of success or happiness desist. Chen therefore enters Halberstam's theorized aesthetics of failure, with his faucet companion and boy with a "beanstalk frame / & fragile bicycle" (19). Instantly, Chen remarks that "& I knew: we would be so terribly / happy" with their work "simple" and kisses "rhym[ing] / with cardiac arrest" (19). This simple, nonstandard, happy life becomes revolutionary, as the birds would be inspired to "overthrow the cathedral towers" (19). In this life, Chen 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" (19). The bizarre, surreal childishness of his utopia is classically Halberstam, as it envisions the eccentric desires of childhood carried into alternative futurity. He yearns to discard his life and the standards of success and proclaim his learned, crafted failure to the world with unabashed pride. In this moment, the magician is no

longer powerless, but rather Chen Chen himself and full of agency. Like Halberstam notes, especially in his chapter about low theory, failing creates the ability and space to innovate, experience the freedom to express yourself, and find creative ways to exist in the world. The faucet no longer becomes an adversary or deriding voice, but rather is the origin of their simple happiness. In this reaching for Muñoz's more perfect queer utopia, the two can fall "in love during jumps / on his tragic uncle's trampoline" (19). Suspended before a queer horizon, they "fell in love in midair," regardless of those who would wish them to be separate, different, or compensate for their queerness (19).

Of all the sections of this paper, I was most challenged in narrowing down what poems I wanted to use to talk about domestic bliss. So many poems within these two collections have elements of or end with the shelter and love between Chen and his partner through references to small moments. "Song of the Anti-Sisyphus" tells of how he wants to "baby, believe it's always possible / to love bigger & madder, even after [...] four decades" and wanting the journey of their relationship "to be long. & strange, like a map / drawn in snow by our shadows shivering," ending with the desire to see "your little dance, little booty shake / in big snow boots, as I sing your name" (*When I* 75-76). "Elegy to Be Exhaled at Dusk" ends with loving the "weight of someone's soft / hair-covered head in someone else's warm, welcoming lap" just as the poem "Kafka's Axe & Michael's Vest," after speaking about the silence as violence and speaking in the language of a colonizer that would kill his mother, concludes on the wishful thought of "if silence could always be / as quiet as Michael, sitting with his coffee & his book, rereading" (*When I* 51). At the end of these poems, Chen repeatedly returns to and ends by reaching toward this domestic bliss and shelter he has created with his partner, his poetic inspirations, and his queer friends and community. Much like how Muñoz conceptualizes utopia beyond a pragmatic

present because of how brutal it would be to only exist in the present, Chen continually reaches toward what silence, comfort, and love could be in a future queer world.

"For I Will Consider My Boyfriend Jeffrey" concisely conceptualizes this queer domestic bliss through a poem listing the many reasons "for I will consider" (*When I* 72). I have an added affection for this poem because of how it reworks Christopher Smart's wonderful poem "Jubilate Agno, Fragment B, [For I Will Consider my Cat Jeoffry]." Within the poem, Chen speaks to his love and careful attention to Jeffrey's quirks and habits like how he is a vegetarian but "makes room for half-off Mondays at the conveyor belt / sushi place" (72). Within the shelter of their home, Jeffrey wears "big headphones like little moons" and bounces to "rhythms & almost-meanings & just-discovered birds only he can hear" (73). Their love coalesces in the ten steps Jeffrey takes to shave, and how Chen eventually steps in to help. Their love, building of a queer utopia with the haunting of a ghostly traumatized child, and reaching for a queer horizon, exist alongside their flaws and quirks, just like it does for Muñoz. Jeffrey must "vacuum/mop/scrub" etc. the whole "apartment to deal with the stress of having received a traffic ticket" and "despises tarantulas, sharks, flying on planes, & flightless birds," (72) and yet will "fly to those he loves" (73). Their domestic bliss comes from a knowingness of each other and a fullness of mutual queer care, which lends us glimpses of an encapsulating queer future. The last line of the poem is that he will consider Jeffrey "for he looks happy & doesn't know I'm looking & that makes his happiness free" (73). The beautiful, the ideal, and the glimpses of utopian life exist here within the imperfect and within what failed. These imperfect failings can then be embraced and turned in a new direction.

In "Song with a Lyric from Allen Ginsberg" in homage to Allen Ginsberg, Chen conceptualizes how queer erotic poetics reach for a queer horizon. The poem begins the second

section of *When I Grow Up* and fittingly contains some of the collection's more explicit imagery (also, as a side note - the title with capitalizations forms the abbreviation "SLAG"). He begins with a contrasting of the trees as "a madness of white & wind" with we "a madness of sweat & rope" (33). This rope "of semen" winds around the two figures, "lassoing" them closer, competing with each other in their passion (33). They become an entanglement of body parts like in the Freeman tape, "tongues, nipples, armpits" including a side-mentioned inside joke "bowpits" which takes the reader briefly out of this scene and nods to the personal intellectual intimacy of the two wound together in sexual intimacy (33). During the kiss, his mind wanders to "Ginsberg's letters / to friends & lovers" (33). Chen's intimacy becomes linked to the academic, the intellectual, and the long line of queer theorists and poets writing a queer canon unashamed of explicit imagery and topics.

While "Song with a Lyric from Allen Ginsberg" is explicit and fitting for the white queer experience of Ginsberg, "Little Song" intertwines how Chen Chen conceptualizes his queer experience alongside his experience as a Chinese Asian American, as he initially believed that there could not be that same queer social culture within China. He notes that in response to asking about reproduction his father responded, "*you must have opposites*" and for years "I thought gay people didn't exist in China" (*When I* 82). That was until he went to a "nightclub / in Shanghai small & literally underground" which was packed with gorgeous "Chinese men / a winding techno garden of them" (82). One man passed by and "pinched my nipple" through his now see-through shirt, and Chen then finally understood how "China could be / & Nature could" be him sitting in the grass with the bees singing "little songs about gravity" (82). In this way, Chen combats both the narrative that queerness only has a place in or by default belongs to white Western culture and also that natural forces inherently belong to straightness. Herein he

transforms into and makes peace with being an Asian queer man, with intimacies as cosmic and transcending as gravity.

At the end of this journey, from the development of an aesthetic of failure to the queerness and specter-ship of childhood and temporalities defying chrononormativity, queer grief at losing connections to family and lost-too-soon community members, and finally queer utopia and potentiality caught in glimpses and suspensions, I find myself still thinking of mangos. Chen begins *When I Grow Up* with the poem, “Self-Portrait as So Much Potential,” wherein he is fresh and unfulfilled but reaching and looking for an ultimate queer potentiality. It is a self-portrait of potential where he begins by “Dreaming of one day being as fearless as a mango” and “as friendly as a tomato” (13). Perhaps his brothers will be “better than mangos," as his mother wants him to be as well, and she has given up hope on his gay sipping and “placed what’s left of her hope on my brothers” (13). Yet despite this, Chen looks to be fruity, friendly, and fearless as he looks forward into an unknown, unburdened by the pressure on his brothers to spit out “solid degrees, responsible / grandchildren ready to gobble” in the aftermath of his queer failure (13). He looks to a simplicity, a collective joy-filled connection, and a sometimes defiantly erotic and sometimes tenderly domestic intimacy. Ultimately, it is his reaching, his suspension whether in a tree at his “gay child” birth, trampoline, or in a dance at Pulse, that orients his queer potentiality towards a queer utopia.

VI. Conclusion

I find that through this thesis I have come that much closer to understanding how to look past the pragmatism of the present and glimpse what a better queer future could potentially contain. There is a value in stepping outside pragmatism and a bleak present and allowing

ourselves to envision the radical visions of social justice that Halberstam advocates for. I also took care to write about Chen Chen in a way that honors the intent of low theory to explore the value of texts and media not defaultly included in Western academia. With the theorists I worked alongside, I chose to support works outside a colonialist literary canon and high theory and search for meaning in anti-colonialist liminal spaces. Radical visions of social justice exist within theorists and philosophies that seek to not tweak but re-conceptualize systems of power and the oppressions that they wrought on marginalized people. In advocating for living a life of failure, I hope that this turn from embracing failure within systems that do not allow certain people to thrive to reaching for utopia is comforting and inspiring. This turn from failure to utopia could empower marginalized people and give them potentiality where there is often not thought to be valuable or happy futures. Chen's poetry also naturally provides a space for collective healing and the building of new communities. Chen's work, especially through his humor, reaches out to the reader through like and disparate experiences. He builds community through a solidarity of experience amongst communities of people who might be isolated in a capitalist heteronormative system and describes a resilient future through mutual care. If nothing else, Chen Chen in his poetry allows the reader to be consumed by the spooky babes from their past and the disappointments of losing familial connections, while at the same time reaching for human connection, care, love and joy through awkwardness, losing, and even a transcendent jump on a trampoline.

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