Darius Phelps: In *Diss Track Sonnet*, the speaker calls the sonnet both *the container and a blowtorch.* I love that image of form as both a vessel and a weapon. How do you see that tension between discipline and chaos—between structure and emotion—at work in your writing? And where in your own life do you feel the same pull: to wreck damage in a space meant to be orderly?

Christian Yeo Xuan : I think the tension between form and the interior—what you're calling chaos—is deeply generative. Form is substance and creates the conditions for something unexpected to happen. In thinking about this, Diane Seuss's *frank: sonnets* is a touchstone for me—how she stretches and distorts the sonnet until traditional form, the Shakespearean or Petrarchan sonnet, say, or even the contemporary sonnet, is almost unrecognizable. Yet it still carries that ghost of order. In her poems, there's this wildness beneath the scaffolding, in the long lines and polyphony of the lyric and colloquial. In my own writing, I move between genres—playwriting, fiction, poetry—all of which have their own defaults, their own inherited expectations. I'm most drawn to work that inverts those expectations, that distorts the frame so that something truer can emerge. I think distortion tells the truth in a way fidelity to recount sometimes can't. The lyric *I*, for instance, is never entirely "me," but it isn't entirely not me either.. It's a performance of the self to the self, yes—but one that feels necessary, a space where the autobiographical and the imagined blend into something that reveals more than either could alone. We're all narrating ourselves to survival, and the poem becomes another layer of that narration—a way to say something I might not dare to say in conversation. When I read the poems of my friends, I often realize I'm meeting them again—more deeply, more tenderly—through the page. That feels like one of the gifts of poetry, that you're in a vertical conversation, with poets who've come before and who are coming after you, but also in a horizontal one, with poets who are moving, playing, inventing alongside, many of whom I have the honour of calling close friends.

Diss Track Sonnet

lord, let the blues poison my body or let me inherit
my mother's generous eyes. the oeuvre of personable
people is made up of toes. softness lies between them
the toes. I've always known there was something rabid
about me, her calculation and his rage live inside me like
a blowtorch. who said the sonnet is a good form for a
psycho. who said you can't wreak that much damage in
fourteen lines. fuck, what have i done. fourteen lines all
it takes, keeps taking. implicate the self. am afraid. am
honest. okay. i'll add the "i". *i* keep taking. *i* blowtorch.
i shit the blues. yeah last year i sat in a lecture, your face
printing my pocket. lecture said, get in there and change
your mind. i couldn't even change my spit. now we're here
at last. no volta, no curtain, animal.

DP: I completely understand that. Reading a friend's work feels like a form of intimacy—you see what they've excavated, what they've chosen to share in language, and it reveals a side of them the world rarely gets to see.

CYX: Exactly. Poetry makes legible that hidden interior. Sort of, anyway.

DP: In *Grace*, the watermelon, the bus, and the tigers all become touchstones of inheritance—but also forgiveness. How does the poem move between the mundane and the mythic to explore the mother–child relationship? And in your own life, what everyday object unexpectedly carries a story about survival or belonging?

CYX: That poem began, literally, with me holding a watermelon on a bus. I thought about my mother's constant refrain: *I carried you for nine months—you are my flesh and blood.* Flesh and blood, like my body comes from her body, and her body came from her mother's body, and so on and so forth. That phrase—half myth, half guilt—became the poem's backbone. She mythologizes her motherhood, and I resist it, but I also know it's true. That tension—between resentment and love—is where the poem lives.

For me, the mundane and mythic blur constantly. The mother is not just a person, but a symbol, a mythic figure tied to devotion, debt, and atonement—especially within East Asian family dynamics. There's this ingrained expectation that children have to apologize for even existing, for not living up to the sacrifice. At some level, I truly think parents in this culture view their children as extensions of themselves, that there is not just a relational element to it but one invoking property rights, which is maybe why you see so much entitlement to dictating what jobs their children do, how they marry, what they do or do not put on or into their bodies. I resent that, but I'm also shaped by it. Ending that entitlement can be a difficult process. I had to break my parents' hearts to get this far, but I also have a loyalty to them that feels ancient. I come from their bodies. My body also just happens to be mine and mine alone.

As for an everyday object: when I lived in Europe, it was *bak chor mee*—a Singaporean minced-meat noodle dish. Cooking it abroad felt like remembering. I'd marinate the meat overnight, and something about that repetition, even the waiting, that tract of time, made me think of home. It tethered me to my family even as I drifted further from their world.

DP: I love that—how cooking becomes its own archive of memory. You're making something that feeds you and haunts you at once.

CYX: Exactly. The kitchen becomes a place of re-memory, a rehearsal of old things.

Grace

On the day my mother forgives me, the watermelons in NTUC are on offer. I remember to drum the green bodies and listen for echoes, choose one that seems better only because he is mine. We stare at each other in silence on the way home, my belonging sitting upright in my lap. His black stripes remind me of a tiger, but then so does everything else. In the dream where it happens, the tigers are lying on their sides in the sun; when we stop in front of them, one gets up and paces in front like a tensile bodyguard. It might have been a zoo, or a forest, or a documentary, I am no longer sure if this is a memory from my youth or a story that I had read. When the jam-break happens, there is surprise like it comes from outside of me. All of a sudden the bus uncle is shouting and there is pink flesh flooding the floor of the bus; all of a sudden, my heart is filled with a brutal loving.

DP: In *Ars Poetica (When I Keep Learning You, Something Breaks)*, finalist for the Washington Review's New Voices Award in Poetry 2025, the poem moves between Cameroon, France, and Singapore—between geography and grief. Grandmothers, birds, bees, and exile recur. How do you see geography as a way to hold both history and personal rupture at once?

CYX: That poem came out of an exercise at the Kenyon Review Writers' Workshop with Gabrielle Calvocoressi. We wrote nonstop while they read out prompts— no editing, no lifting the pen. What emerged was a kind of archive—a spilling of memory that circled back to birds, bees, and grandmothers.

Birds, to me, signify longing and freedom. Bees—something simultaneously beautiful and destructive—the sting that kills the bee.

My grandmothers, meanwhile, feel opaque. I know them only through secondhand stories and through a language that isn't their first or even second. I speak to them in Mandarin, but their native tongues are dialects I can't access. That linguistic distance mirrors the emotional one.

Geography enters because displacement forces self-invention. In Europe, I became "a person of color," yet I didn't fully belong to, say, Asian American or British Asian narratives either. There's a difference between Asian-ness in Singapore, in Britain, and in America. The poem tries to locate selfhood amid those fractures—to hold the personal alongside the colonial, the intimate alongside the historical.

DP: Yes, the way you talk about belonging—both as rupture and as inheritance—feels like its own geography.

CYX: That's beautiful. Maybe some poems are a map we draw to survive displacement.

Ars Poetica (When I keep learning you, something breaks)
After Cindy Juyoung Ok

I saw an antelope in my mind when talking to Aissatou about Cameroon. I was trying to not say anything ignorant. I said, I did my thesis on the law of territory concerning the British and French Cameroons. I said, they carved up Africa with a straight line. Aissatou said, *let's eat some fucking poulet yassa*. The effigy was summoned, it appeared in my mind.

Association has its roots in mechanical movement. At least, this is what I heard somewhere. Once, Kion writes to me, *or actually I don't know if Nabokov said it, but the point still stands*. What is the etymology of the word "mechanic"? I walk into the quarry of the past so that I can say in circles where this sort of language operates like currency, *I walk into the quarry of the past*. My nice grandmother went to school till she was sixteen. Then she left because she had no money. She taught herself English, then taught herself to teach. I know so little about her despite giving legal advice to leave my grandfather. He stopped abusing her after the heart surgery. She says, *I am too old to not have a husband*. Jaan says, *I am the first woman in my lineage to live alone*.

Yesterday I saw Xiang standing in the corner of the room. That's not true, it was this morning. *Where are my poems?* she asked again. I said*, I am searching for the entire capacity for love*. Here is where it finds me—here where I am not there. I kept looking and she kept asking. We lay on lines of ruined bees. Everywhere we looked, it was the exogenous march of bodies.

At music festivals it's always about the acoustics of the friend group. The presence lingers long after the body leaves. The body, or movement. The body, as in every DJ moves like Peggy Gou now—skeptically. The room calls out to the sea. When I do a close quarter combat exercise with night vision goggles, the bodies look like we are in a techno club. It's not a place if you haven't place-made. It's not a homeland if it's not a home.

Aissatou and I went to a Masego concert and she nearly fainted. *I am Masego's wife,* she said, and I said, *me too*. I talked to her white friend all evening. When I look at Aissatou, I am convinced of her sheer belief. If I squint, I can make out the bees. When I write "these days I keep returning to my dishonesty", I cross out the word "my". At my high school graduation, everyone cried. Three hundred boys crying, the rugby boys crying the hardest, is a kind of minor miracle. I loved those boys with joy. When she moved to Geneva, I told Aissatou to look for Leo. Leo is a white friend. Kion says, *collective cultures operate in nuclear silos, that's why no one invites you to their home in Singapore, or Seoul.*

I was always a cold child. I feel awkward looking my grandmothers in the eyes. Even the nice one. I am unable to connect to those I love aphoristically. My uncle wanted to give me his motorcycle and I didn't get my license for three years. Then I moved to France. *Go to the gym with me next week,* he asked. I said I wasn't free. I was afraid of birds. I understood he was forgiving me, and I was not ready to be forgiven.

When I look at Xiang, she is always running her hands through her hair pre-emptively. Every time I reference her mother, Xiang tightens her eyebrows like a bow. *I thought you'd be over it by now*, I said once. *I thought you had sense*, Xiang said.

We are in a car and the car is lurching. My mother is saying, *how can we not see my mother?* (This is the nice grandmother. We are back at the nice grandmother.) We were coming back from a run and my father kicked my mother out of the house. Every time I think of birds, I think of candles. I have become a person of wandering eyes. I am tired of prose poems. No prose poem saved my mother. My mother says, *I didn't need saving*. One version is, she gave herself up. Another version is, we tell ourselves stories to keep us off the ledge.

When I thought I couldn't find pleasure, I found pleasure in detaching from my emotions. Abstraction is so safe. It doesn't demand anything of you. Everything I scrutinise is a distraction from unsayable things. Kion and Iris came to visit me in France. When Kion left five years ago I cried for many days. I didn't speak to Iris for a year. I told her a year later, *I felt like I lost you both*. She said, *don't be mad at me, I couldn't have you and not him*. I think about this all the time. How we rather lose the forest than the tree. How being together is tough sanctuary, or not sanctuary at all.

My brother sends me a video of my nice grandmother dancing with a parrot. It sets my body on fire. Cursing my clichés, I ask her for a recipe because I don't know how. She texts me, *don't overcook the cabbage, remember to add meatballs*. She sends two emojis.

In an email, Jaan writes, *it doesn't need to be good, just true*. The email is two thousand words long. I think of the French Cameroons.

I understand this is a poem that lacks focus. I understand poetry has no focus. I understand the poem is a container. No one in my family has ever had a container. No one in my family has ever heard of Nabokov. I am the first person in my family to dream in bees. I am the mouthpiece of the chorus. In collective cultures, I. In tough sanctuary. In love.

Everyone who loves me is in the room. The room has no shape. The room has a key to my shame. Everyone I love is not effigy. Everyone I love I ask to run towards me. I do.

DP: In *Road Trip Sonnet*, the rhythm of brothers jostling in a car becomes its own kind of music—a boyhood soundtrack. How does the poem break down sound—Kendrick, folk songs, raindrops—into memory? And what sound or song instantly carries you back to a person or moment?

CYX: The further you get from a memory, maybe you still get a quick visual flash—but what lingers, what feels locked into the body, is smell and sound. Especially sound. I'll be wandering through a store or sharing music with someone, and a song will come on that I've heard before, in a different place, with a different person—and suddenly I'm transported back. Sound has this way of collapsing time, returning you to who you were and who you're trying not to forget.

Sound is the closest thing I know to time travel. Sight fades, but sound stays lodged in the body. I can hear a song and be instantly returned to a different version of myself. In *Road Trip Sonnet*, the car becomes a capsule of sound and memory—Kendrick and the Eagles, our teenage selves trying to muscle in alongside our parents' music. I think it was the moment my brothers and I found the AUX that we started to claim space in the soundtrack, that it might even become our own.

When I think of my father, I hear the Eagles; when I think of my mother, I hear *xinyao*, Singaporean-Chinese pop music from the 80s. Their music keeps them young in my mind, untouched by time. The song that always brings me back is "No Role Modelz" by J. Cole. I listened to it many mornings in high school with a Korean friend I've since lost touch with. He moved to Berlin or something, and one day he suddenly cut all of us off. No one knows what he's up to. The boys I ran with back then were troubled, and plagued by the usual minor miscreancies, but they were, at their core, fundamentally good. Any one of them would have come to bat for me. That song is a portal—to a time I think of very fondly, of restlessness and becoming.

DP: Same here. J. Cole has always brings me back to mornings before work, to that space where reflection and rhythm meet.

CYX: Yes, exactly. His music gives permission to feel deeply, without apology.

Road Trip Sonnet
Tooth-drop car on the highway. One brother
each side jostling the way only brothers
do—without care. Boyhood elbows. The car
running till it forgets the path of rain

drops. I am ten switching the radio
from folk song to Kendrick. Past the raindrops.
Boyhood sound track. Eating my father's for
mine. Pa met Ma in the club and now they

dance a country. Bucktooth country. Raintooth
country. Brothers and I eating pears in
the backseat. Someone crying faster than
raindrops. Fastest raindrop wins. This one called

Kendrick. That one boyhood. Last one country.
So rain. All we are is each other.

DP: In *I Think I Call It Dreaming But*, you blur barbershops, bedrooms, baptisms—where the sacred and the sensual meet. There's tenderness, but also ache. Have you ever loved someone so deeply that the line between dream and waking blurred—that their touch felt like both haunting and prayer?

CYX: Yeah, absolutely, just once. Love like that collapses time and space. It feels continuous, relentless, like you're in multiple time frames at the same time. You become tethered to another person through what I call a "spiritual acoustics"—an invisible frequency that lives even in their absence. That blurring happens not just in romantic love but in friendship, too. The kind where someone knows you better than you know yourself, where they're the least surprised by your becoming. It's terrifying and sacred. I mean, this is life or death stuff.

DP: That's so beautifully put—a tether made of sound, of knowing.

i think i call it dreaming but

in the barbershop michael jackson
plays on the tv / a man shears my
syllables near the windpipe / you
moon walk into the chair coming
out like an accident & eyes glint
like a lake sheen / barber playing
with clouds are silver / ing all day
now / the bathroom floor hosts
lost finches flying in circles / search
ing for / what cannot be searched
for / some days it's september & i'm
still here / in the shower / my cheek
on your neck / your mouth in my
ear / the car boot / a garden
gentling / if i'm dreaming just let me
dream / your head under my chin /
nose on my collarbone / o oblong
god / is that you / come at last / to
wipe it all away / when will my want
ing be rid of me / kiss you on the
forehead / wide and thin / as a flat
palm on the chest / box breathing

by the reservoir we were really married

DP: So much of your work treats love as an act of surrender—both physical and spiritual. How do you write about love without romanticizing it? Do you see your use of fragmentation and musicality as ways to hold intimacy's contradictions?

CYX: I often wonder if it's even possible to write about love without lying a little. Every poem is an approximation, an act of framing what can't be contained. Fragmentation feels honest because love itself is discontinuous—it's interruption, rupture, the moment before and after language. I think of Anne Carson, Maggie Nelson, Carl Phillips—their syntax never overstays an image. There's a refusal of closure I admire deeply.

Love, in its largeness and music and violence, often exceeds narrative. Fragmentation allows me to honor that reality. Toni Morrison does this in *Sula*—the friendship between Sula and Nel isn't linear; it's jagged, cyclical, tender, and cruel. That's what intimacy feels like to me. Disrupted. Continuous. Holy. It's physical, tactile manifestations, but also it's spiritual acoustics. It's also that the act of, like, essentially giving yourself up to someone else's entire knowledge is something that I think can only be disrupted.

DP: I love that—intimacy as disruption, as a refusal to settle. It's that same impulse you mentioned earlier: to tell the truth through distortion.

CYX: Exactly. Maybe telling it sideways *is* the truest way to love on the page.