Written in the Residue

Davina Bacon on three books that navigate loss through lingering and inherited memories

SARAH HOWE
Foretokens
Chatto £12.99

BILLY-RAY BELCOURT
The Idea of an Entire Life
Carcanet £12.99

SOPHIE DUMONT
Sculling
Corsair £12.99

FORETOKENS BY SARAH HOWE explores what is passed down, generation to generation. Interrogating genetics, rituals, and artefacts, the poet ponders: how do we make sense of ourselves through our understanding of the past?

In particular, the collection focuses on the speaker's inheritance of her mother's complex relationship with her own history, an inheritance she is passing down to her children too. She unravels everyday moments, like in the poem 'A History of my Relationship with My Mother in Twenty-three Arguments about the Laundry', where every stanza ends with the word 'laundry' to emphasise the absurdity of her mother's particular obsession. Eventually, 'amazed by the soul's opacity towards itself', she recognises the source: as a child, her mother was forced to do laundry to earn her keep. However, she notes that, 'Things you'd rather not know, children show you / in yourself' ('Parallax'), the inverted clauses suggesting a slow realisation. She eventually admits she is 'not immune / to this mania this malaise / this inherited dream' ('An Error, A Ghost'). Perhaps the collection is a manifestation of her own obsessive attempts to work through the many histories shaping her.

Five poems titled 'Songs Spun of Us' punctuate the collection, spiralling down the pages to form a helix shape. Each line begins and ends with the letters A, T, G, or C, letters given to the genetic alphabet in DNA sequencing. For example: 'G leaning sense means tuning our ears to another musi C // A rchived deep in our being, filtering out from ancient rus T' ('Songs Spun of Us [... A lphabet of us, cipher deciding the exact momen T]'). Here, the speaker

highlights the beauty and precision of this biological code that, although present in every living thing, science is just beginning to understand. By repeating these titles (across what is perhaps one extended poem), Howe returns to the truth that bodies hold knowledge from generations past, which we might begin to make sense of by paying attention to the rhythms and cycles underpinning our collective experiences.

'Undersongs' – another recurring set of poems – require the reader to attune themselves to these more abstract rhythms below the surface. 'Undersong I (Ovum's Moon)' reads as a mumbled chant: 'ovum s moon / o mums v mo on'. And then: 'ov ums mor n / o mums mo urn'. Generations of mothers have wrestled with cycles of birth and loss, not necessarily of their children, but of how their own sense of self fluctuates with these cycles. The slurring consonance lends an unshakeable exhaustion to the words, a sense that this tension is as intrinsic to motherhood as DNA to bodies. The final line's 'o u no urn' grieves the lack of ritual for this loss of self.

Much of the book considers colonialism's role in shaping histories, both personal and global. For example, in 'In the Chinese Ceramics Gallery', the speaker considers how porcelain artefacts that journeyed from China to Britain become vessels passing down stories that have survived the test of time. Each personified item tells its own history. A porcelain tea caddy remarks, 'It's not just wares / like me trussed as cargo. Human beings are, // were always, things', and urges the reader to, 'Ask the sugar // bowl here what it sweetens' ('Porcelain Tea Caddy Painted in Underglaze Blue'). Its conversational tone reminds us these painful histories are quotidian, only overlooked. It is up to the reader to ask the questions that reveal uncomfortable truths.

In the second half of the book, we begin to understand the stakes. The turn comes with 'Epic' as childhood memories resurface when someone says the speaker's daughter '*looks more // Chinese than her / brother*' due to her:

> epic-
> anthic folds
> more marked
> than mine [...]

The enjambment suggests a fragmented, slow realisation: as in an epic, the speaker recognises that navigating her Chinese-British heritage will be the journey of her lifetime, and her daughter's too – though there are gaps in her history that she calls the 'ancestral dark' making it difficult for her to fully grasp a particular identity. She knows there will always be implications of this heritage being part of her DNA, recalling a racist childhood incident and her own internalised European beauty standards. The poem ends with the speaker

'asking the mirror / for the difference', trying to find herself. Ultimately, this is what the book offers to the reader – an invitation to ask the reflective questions that might lead to a fuller understanding of oneself. Through tracing a family's history, the tensions within relationships and global migration, *Foretokens* is both vast and intimate.

IN *THE IDEA OF AN ENTIRE LIFE*, Billy-Ray Belcourt seeks to write a story of himself, drawing on a heritage irrevocably shaped by colonialism's violence. The grief in this collection is cut with a determined celebration of the present, embodied desire, and nature. Belcourt writes: 'the past makes me / *painfully available* to the world', but through writing he finds, 'A new way of living, a new way to talk / about the trees that doesn't endanger them' ('Endnotes').

Belcourt situates himself within his Driftpile Cree Nation heritage. He writes about lost language, saying:

> A mouth without
> a mother tongue
> speaks in echoes.
> My words ricochet.
> I chase after them [...]
>
> ('The Past Tense')

The cavernous imagery and short lines create a claustrophobic disorientation, like being trapped in a dark cave. Perhaps the speaker is in the same 'ancestral dark' of forgotten heritage Howe speaks of in 'Epic': their only form of verbal expression is a language never intended to dignify them.

Feeling trapped is not only metaphorical, but physical. The first section of 'The Past Tense' describes how 'reserves were, in effect, / open-air prisons.' The speaker says that in his first childhood home on the reserve, his father would gaze at the forest through a window 'to escape himself', before ending, devastatingly: 'my childhood / is an image of a forest someone else / was supposed to know by heart' ('Childhood Triptych'). Both the speaker and his father are trapped within structures that deny them a sense of belonging to a place, and are thus separated from their physical and cultural heritage. And yet, he claims, '*In another reality, a reserve / could be a minor utopia*' ('The Past Tense').

The collection returns again and again to utopia. The speaker declares it 'an impossible demand' ('Utopia') and 'what happens when no-one is looking', but remains interested in desiring it, something 'the opposite of the world', which he finds in lovers, even if they are violent. The longest poem, consisting of fourteen meandering stanzas, is called 'The Cruising Utopia Sonnets',

named for José Esteban Muñoz's queer seminal text. Muñoz suggests that embodying queer desire can be a way to realise utopia in the present, rather than pursuing a future utopia where queerness fits into cis-heteronormative structures. Embracing possibility in the present is even more vital for those who are Native and queer. In 'The Cruising Utopia Sonnets', the speaker recalls a Native man who 'some- / times drove as long as four hours, for a single, brief hookup', and an encounter with another man: 'Kissing, he felt the small knife / in my pocket, but didn't care'. Being familiar with escaping an ongoing colonial reality means that any moment of pleasure and connection can become utopic. Not because anything is perfect, or even safe, but because it creates the 'possibility of an existing gay lifeworld', and of a future where, 'queer people are still / dying and dancing and feeling other people in dark rooms.'

A particular strength of this work is its self-referential tendencies, with multiple poems named 'Autofiction', 'Fieldnotes', and '20th-Century Cree History', and recurring motifs. The line 'The horizon is a line of continuity between me and my / ancestors – not unlike a line break' ('Fieldnotes') returns as 'I didn't yet know that a native / person could be a poet, so I often went / to the water, its long edge a line breaking' ('Future Thinking'). The idea that 'We are not citizens of a country. // We are citizens of a century' ('Fieldnotes') reappears as 'All our parents are emigrants from a wounded century' ('20th-Century Cree History'). Motifs situate the speaker in a long collective history that still infuses the present. Belcourt isn't looking for a linear, coherent conclusion, nor seeking utopia as a destination or time period. Rather his ultimate desire is to carry on,

> to spend enough time
> with a man that
> our days become
> something like a long,
> meandering sentence.
> All we would need
> is a single comma
> to continue living.
>
> ('Sincerity')

Despite any painful separation from his heritage and a reality that rejects queerness, the speaker dedicates his life to seeking out connection – to continuing a legacy of survival in the face of colonialism's violence.