Entwinings

Sarah Howe
Foretokens
96pp. Chatto and Windus. Paperback, £12.99.

A decade on from Sarah Howe's celebrated debut, *Loop of Jade*, *Foretokens* recasts questions of heritage, heredity and hybridity by the prismatic light of motherhood. Foretokens are premonitions, and the title points to a Möbius strip-like treatment of time, redolent of T. S. Eliot's in *Four Quartets* ("The end is sown / before the beginning"). After Howe charts the time of pregnancy in "Calendar" and "Waking", "Expect no logic from a pregnant woman" captures the exasperation of a new mother with another on the way. Such candour is indicative, as the poet abjures "[h]awking my ancestral pain / with dulcet, well-turned poise" ("World Service").

A sequence of dramatic monologues set "In the Chinese Ceramics Gallery" explores varieties of provenance, though it is the coda poem, "Forget Repair", set "backstage" in the "museum store" amid "pieces stillborn / from the kiln", that encapsulates something essential about the book: its focus is a "strangely surgical ... fault line / cicatrised across" a bulge of porcelain in a "shadow museum / of flukes and failures". Parturiency, the ultimate form of creativity, involves rupture and trauma. *Foretokens* loops back to *Loop* in its themes and family figures, yet the dominant note is aporetic. These poems are most interested in incongruity, disagreement and indeterminacy.

Foretokens is unique among collections that explore migrant ancestry for the way it extends its inquiry into deep genomic time. This is epitomized by two sequences that wind through the book like a double helix. The first, "Songs Spun of Us", is a vibrant meditation on genetics (whose double acrostic form draws on the organic base pairs of DNA). The second, "Undersong", renders the echoic, embryonic doppler song of the yet-to-be born foetus, its language seemingly gestating on the page. Both are characteristic of a formal restlessness increasingly prevalent in the book's second half.

Most memorable are the poems on mortality, "Eve's Dream", an elegy for a university friend that recalls John Milton's "Lycidas"; and "Sad Party", which moves from the difficulty of explaining death to children to the digitization of family photos on a "flatbed scanner's blinding window to nowhere". The poet's complex relationship with her mother is revealed to be the source of enduring tension in the final poem, "An Error, A Ghost". An essayistic memoir in twenty-three parts, the speaker's consideration of family photographs leads her - via Jorge Luis Borges, Cao Xueqin and an unnamed "legendary" English poet - to radically question the veracity of her migrant mother's life story. The "dream / of an archive / so complete nothing / could ever hurt again" must remain just that.
Jaya Savige