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Sarah Howe, *Foretokens* (Chatto & Windus) £12.99

For an undergraduate feeling his way into the UK poetry scene, the contrasting reactions to Sarah Howe's first collection in 2015 had the effect of flares marking safe passage through a murky bog. Who was likely to welcome and champion voices like hers – erudite, sensitive, and unapologetically inflected by an upbringing in Hong Kong – and who, on the other hand, was to be avoided at a reading. When Howe's name was called the following year at the T.S. Eliot Prize ceremony, *Loop of Jade* became a signal in its own right, for me and other young writers with odd accents, of the sort of poetics our voices could inhabit to be heard in the plush halls of the V&A.

All this bears remembering with the release of Howe's follow-up collection, which strikes the reader as more adventurous and certainly angrier, though no less astute than her accomplished debut. In the intervening decade it is not only her poetics that has changed, but the contours of the publishing landscape and of society at large, especially in terms of our appetite for difference. There have been changes, too, on the personal front. Howe writes unflinchingly about the death of her father (a central figure in *Loop of Jade*), and tenderly about everyday milestones in her young children's lives. With a new keenness to the possibilities of form, *Foretokens* is an apposite reply to the umbrage and upheavals Howe has weathered, in the same clear voice that first emerged ten years ago.

Running through the book is an extended sequence, 'Songs Spun of Us', accompanied whenever it appears by a corresponding 'Undersong' (each, like a meteor briefly glimpsed, is given a number and a cryptic name – 'I. Ovum's Moon', 'II. Babel's Drift', 'III. Unknown Language', and so on). Laid out in a snaking ladder, 'Songs Spun of Us' barely disguises its central conceit, with the first and last letters of every line capitalised and set apart from the text to spell out a genetic sequence: *A, T, G, C, G, C,* et cetera. The 'Undersongs' extend Howe's experiment in concrete poetry with subtler moves to scramble sounds and meanings across the space of the page. In 'Undersong II (Babel's Drift)', for instance, two jagged columns of words lean towards each other and come apart again like a zipper. Where they meet, paired words point to a darker history of deterministic narratives spun from genetic babble, with destructive consequences: 'goebbels – cliff // hells – cleft // fables – shrift'.

Howe's determination to tackle a shameful inheritance of pseudo-scientific race theory head-on has the force of personal vendetta. Her standalone poem 'Epic' provides a counterpoint to 'Songs Spun of Us', its title staking a claim to the right to tell her own story of race and its echoes within her mixed family. From a husband's teasing (*'is she really mine?'*) to a relative's clumsy comment (*'looks more / Chinese than her / brother'*; italics from the original), Howe documents each instance of race's long shadow on daily speech with the intensity of a bailiff repossessing a looted mansion. It is, after all, an overdue reckoning. As another sequence ('In the Chinese Ceramics Gallery') suggests, no relic remains truly untouched by the violence of racial or imperial conquest, least of all the bodies of those now looking back at the past. 'I, too, am a survivor', begins the poem – and though we learn that each part of the sequence is narrated by a different artefact in its titular museum, that initial slippage of perspective coming to define the investigative edge of the poet's voice throughout the collection.

The finest moments among these pages can be found where Howe's anger at history's injustices whittles her research and experimentation to a fluent, glittering point. Readers will hardly detect what a reviewer once chided as a tendency to be 'either elegantly graceful, or decorative and over-designed'; the older Howe is more than prepared to ditch poise and polish for a choice expletive. One recurring flashpoint is the memory – which Howe has spoken about elsewhere – of being bullied as a child, an incident that taught her 'to press a lid / *tell it slant* / on anything // like rage' ('Tell all the truth but'). Other times, she seethes beneath the surface at inherited strictures that taint even a parent's best intentions – say, her own mother's decision to send her for elocution classes as a child. 'Don't get me wrong', she warns, her fury shattering the fourth wall. 'This is an angry poem, however Zen I seem' ('World Service'). History may evidently have tamed her tongue, but hardly her voice.

'I've been putting this off', writes Howe in the book's final poem, and indeed the revelations she has saved up to this point threaten to upend much of what she has told the reader ('An Error, A Ghost'). They come fast and loose: a photograph rewrites the little she knows about her family history (also the premise of her first book), a chance conversation with a colleague reminds her of a stained institutional legacy. As the poem's numbered fragments approach their conclusion, they gesture towards the impossibility of ever truly knowing *everything*, while urging us to re-read the collection in a new light. Its title, like its hurried unfolding style, feels apt. The thing about ghosts – they remind us of what's still unfinished.

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