

Sarah Howe interviewed by former Scottish Poetry Library Programme Manager, Jennifer Williams.

1. Opening Words

[Sarah Howe reads an excerpt from '(k) Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush']

[Relaxing guitar music – Will Campbell]

You're listening to a Scottish Poetry Library Podcast.

2. Introducing Sarah Howe

Jennifer Williams: Hello, my name is Jennifer Williams, I'm Programme Manager at the Scottish Poetry Library. Today is the first day of the Edinburgh International Book Festival 2016, and I have just whisked away an amazing poet from the festival who I just got to see reading – I think it was actually the first event of the Book Festival, wasn't it?

Sarah Howe: It's amazing there were people there that early in the morning!

Jennifer Williams: In the beautiful, glittering, Spiegeltent this morning we had the poet Billy Letford *and* we had the wonderful Sarah Howe, who I'm sitting with – I'm delighted that she could make some time for us to do this interview.

Sarah Howe: Oh, thank *you*, Jennifer, it's lovely to be here.

Jennifer Williams: Sarah was actually here a couple of years ago before the Library was refurbished, so you've just got to see the new and improved Poetry Library. We're just going to talk a bit about her book *Loop of Jade*, that came out in 2015, and won the T. S. Eliot Prize and the *Sunday Times* Peter Fraser + Dunlop (PFD) Young Writer of the Year Award. It's really been a very important book and it has won many different awards because it is so wonderful – it was also shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Centre Poetry Prize and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection.

Sarah was born in Hong Kong to an English father and Chinese mother and moved to England as a child. I was interested listening to you speaking at your event earlier with Jenny Niven from Creative Scotland about your experience of learning Chinese, because I wasn't quite sure whether you had learned Chinese as a child or later on, but it sounded like something you did more as an adult?

Sarah Howe: Oh, definitely, not until my late twenties.

Jennifer Williams: You also have a pamphlet called *A Certain Chinese Encyclopaedia* which won an Eric Gregory poetry award, and your poems have been featured in many journals and anthologies. You've been on the radio, and we saw you just last night on television, which is very exciting. [Sarah giggles] You're also an academic, so you've had various fellowships – you are Leverhulme Fellow at University College London at the moment?

3. Teaching and the Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship

Sarah Howe: I just started a couple of months ago, so I haven't actually really met any students yet because it's the summer holidays.

Jennifer Williams: So will you actually be teaching as part of that?

Sarah Howe: The nice thing about the Leverhulme early career fellowships that I'm part of is that you do a mix of research and teaching, so I'll be let loose on the students with lectures and seminars.

Jennifer Williams: [laughs] And will you have time to do some writing as well?

Sarah Howe: I hope so, but that's not actually part of the official brief! My day job is to teach Renaissance English literature, so it's much more about the Shakespeare and so on.

Jennifer Williams: I have all sorts of questions already, but before we get started we're going to kick off with a poem and then we'll get to chatting, so I'll hand over to you.

4. Discussion of 'Start with Weather' and Subconscious Creativity

Sarah Howe: Well Jennifer, you mentioned that there was a special request for this poem, which I was happy about.

Jennifer Williams: [emphatically] YES!

There was a time when I was quite fond of this one, shortly after I'd written it. I used to kick off readings with it, but [then] it dropped out the repertoire of poems that I often read, so it feels strange to come back to it! I suppose I should say that there's a pun from the very offing which you can't *hear*,

because the title is 'Start With Weather' – W-E-A-T-H-E-R, as in what you have and is very rainy and sunny alternately in Edinburgh in August. But then, the 'whether' that comes back elsewhere in the poem is the W-H-E-T-H-E-R.

[Sarah reads 'Start With Weather']

Jennifer Williams: [quietly] You've got such a beautiful reading voice. So, I feel like it's very naughty to ask a poet what the poem [is] about!

Sarah Howe: [mock gasps]

Jennifer Williams: [laughs] Our wonderful Marjorie Lotfi Gill [former poet in residence at Jupiter Artland, Edinburgh] started a group called Open Book here at the [Scottish Poetry Library]. [The group are] reading your book over a course of weeks, and this was one of the first poems that they started with. Apparently they were all demanding to know 'what is *all* about?', so I said I'd ask you!

Laughter

Sarah Howe: Well, I find it very hard to say what it's about, because it's almost one of the poems in the book that works in a slightly different mode to some of the others. In a sense, I suppose it's not really about anything, though it does have snippets that come out of my everyday life.

It's more a poem that I think of as being a left-handed poem.

Jennifer Williams: [laughs].

Sarah Howe: By that I mean I studied life drawing for a long time because I had delusions that I might be a painter when I grew up [laughs]. I had this fantastic art teacher who used to make us put our pencil or piece of charcoal into our wrong hand, and do drawings that involved hobbling skill somehow. So I think of this poem as being a little bit like those life drawings, where, because you couldn't control the charcoal very well anymore, all these accidents and felicitous things would emerge, that weren't in your control.

I think of this as being one of several poems in the book that for me are more about trying to access the unconscious, the subconscious, some part of our minds and being as poets which isn't to do with the conceptual intellect. Though I suppose it came out of a procedure, which is quite similar to automatic writing, which as all your listeners probably will know is one of these avant-garde procedures that experimental poets and artists through the 20th

century would use as a way of talking to the unconscious mind. It does give rise to these slightly surreal moments and conjunctions.

There are themes that you can pass here, the fact that I lost a pearl bracelet which was very precious to me shortly before writing this poem obviously was playing on my mind, so little things like that came out. I'm not sure where the parakeets came from.

Jennifer Williams: [laughs]

I think I must have had a conversation just before that about those parakeets that people release as pets that they can't keep anymore in London, which have formed these colonies in various parks. So there are funny things like that, just floating around, and I think of poems like this as being almost a lightning rod for whatever is playing on the mind.

Jennifer Williams: It's interesting when poems like this come up in reading groups and that instinct [to understand the meaning of the poem] comes out of people. They want to be able to pin something down. I think it's one of the magnificent things about poetry, which actually we do with other kinds of writing as well. The connection between our own interpretation and the intended or assumed intended interpretation of the writer makes us not feel as empowered to make our own interpretation. But it's one of the things that poetry gives us often – saying to the reader what do *you* think it's about? What does it mean to *you*? So you've given us this combination of words on the page, this combination of sounds actually, that pun between the title and those first words of each line really gets you started right away on thinking of what *do* words mean? What is the connection between the sound of word and the meaning of word? It's like [the poem is] saying you can play! You can open your imagination up and think about Orlando for instance, especially you having just mentioned that you teach Shakespeare, it brings up a Shakespeare connection, and put to someone else that might be a Virginia Woolf connection...

Sarah Howe: Absolutely, and in fact [this] Orlando I think is before either of those Orlandos. The one that I had in mind is the Orlando of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. Orlando Furioso means 'Orlando Mad'. [In the poem] Orlando loses his wits at one point, and they fly off to the dark side of the moon which is where Ariosto imagines that all the lost things on Earth congregate. So one of his friends flies to the moon on a hippogriff and finds [Orlando's] wits [in a bottle]

amongst all the lost pairs of glasses, and shipwrecks and all the stuff that has ever been lost on the earth. So his friend pulls the stopper out and his wits float back into his friend's head.

Jennifer Williams: I think I've got some stuff up there as well that I need to get back...

[Laughter]

5. The Theme of 'Chinese Whispers' in *Loop of Jade*

Sarah Howe: [Laughs] But that's really interesting what you were saying just now, because I guess one word I haven't used yet is 'nonsense', and that *is* something [that] runs through this book as a theme. So I think that, on some level, the poems I've just described, the ones that don't really make conventional sense in the way that we might expect from a lyric poem, participate for me in this sort of Chinese Whispers-ish mode, which is about miscommunication, and accident, and sound and separating sound from sense.

I do wonder whether the experience I had when I was younger of growing up listening to my mum and everyone else in Hong Kong speaking Cantonese as a language that I didn't actually understand did affect me as the poet I would become. Cantonese is inherently with its three tone levels, quite a musical language. So I've always been interested in this point at which – repetition does it, but poetry does it in all sorts of different ways, where sound and sense seem to tug apart from each other. That's something that I'm interested in in Eastern tradition more generally, with something like the Buddhist *koan* – that's the Japanese rather than the Chinese word for it. The idea that Buddhism creates this form which is about taking us into an alternate type of consciousness, that is about disrupting the normal lines of our thinking, because those lines can trap us. I suppose the most famous one would be the sound of – that's right! Jennifer has just raised one hand in a silent clap.

Jennifer Williams: [laughs]

Sarah Howe: I guess these are Chinese whispers-one hand clapping poems.

Jennifer Williams: Is there a reference to Ashbery in one of these poems?

Sarah Howe: Yes, and Ashbery is very much my guiding star in this, I think, and I'm very fascinated by the way in which he and other poets in that emergent in the sixties milieu were interested in Eastern models and *koans*, and Buddhism and so on.

6. The Influence of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*

Jennifer Williams: You mentioned earlier today Pound as well, who I think is interesting too in that every time I read the *Cantos* or look at the *Cantos* I have that feeling of – I love them, but I don't understand them and that's what I love about it in a way. It's just not accessible to me for so many reasons, but the music of the words I *can* read and the images of the words I *can't* read. All that mingles together [and] taps into that part of the brain that art is a good thing to bring in.

I think it's interesting again when you talked about the pictogram languages, that there is something about the part of the brain that maybe in the Western world we tend to think of *using* more for art rather than language because we make this slightly weird separation between those two things. We might be more accustomed to looking at a painting and not having to think about it in a literal, logical, 'what does it mean' kind of way?

Sarah Howe: Yes you don't look at a Kandinsky and think 'what does this mean?'

Jennifer Williams: [laughs]

Sarah Howe: Ashbery is important to me for that very reason. I am interested in abstraction and to what extent you might be able to create a mood, or a colour, or an atmosphere in a poem. Funnily enough, I had the odd experience of a friend saying that she had been reading my book on the Tube and that she was terribly moved, to the point of crying, by this poem, and I thought, *why?* And she said, 'it was really sad, because of the way that it describes a person with dementia', and I suddenly realised that this was because her own father was suffering with dementia. For her, this poem was about a mind disintegrating, so that was the way she made sense of it. That was really fascinating to me because it was not something I ever intended. That isn't something that I would want to say – 'no, I never meant that' as a poet. 'No, that's not an 'authorisable meaning'. The whole point of these poems is that people should bring to them their Rorschach interpretation from their own frameworks, and frames of reference.

7. Discussion of Cantonese Heritage and the Role of Family in *Loop of Jade*

In terms of the way that people might relate to these poems, I've been very fascinated to hear all the different sorts of experiences and backgrounds that

readers come from, [what they] bring to the poems and [that they] see themselves reflected in the poems. Even if you're not literally an immigrant, or bi-cultural, or a mixed race person, there are all sorts of different experiences of division and relocation that seem to chime. That's been really lovely for me, actually, to understand that the specificity of the settings, the locality, is not necessarily a bar to things resonating more widely. I was always aware that I wanted this book to tell a sort of story, but I wanted it to be hard won as it were, because the way that this story came to me and that I made sense of it *was* in a very fragmented, broken, difficult, hard to interpret way.

So I guess the story begins with my own experience of relocating across the world as a child from Hong Kong to England when I was 7, but also then goes further back into the story of my mum, and her growing up in Hong Kong after she was given up as a baby in China in '48. And then further back, beyond that I can't go, there's just this blank, an impossibility of knowing my Chinese inheritance and ancestors and family beyond that point. The title poem is where this comes through most strongly, because it re-enacts this encounter that I had with my mum in more recent years, when late in the evening, when everyone else had gone to bed she would just start to talk about her childhood, and about things that I had never known about her, which I think were quite difficult for her to tell. So all the hesitations, and contradictions – she would occasionally say 'this is what my adoptive mother told me, but I don't know if this can be right'. All the snags in that story I wanted to bring into the poem itself. The book is quite resistant in some ways to telling a straightforward narrative. In fact, you wouldn't even realise until the penultimate poem where you have – spoiler alert – this reveal that this is my mum's story being told. I think that for me was why this needed to be poems, rather than say, a novel, or a non-fiction memoir or something like that, because [of] the white space, the gaps, the dislocations that are naturally a part of poems when they're put together in a book was something I was very very interested in. That structure and that chronology I played around with for a long time in ordering the book.

Jennifer Williams: If you don't have this book yet, go out and buy it and read it because it's wonderful – immerse yourself in it. But there are all sorts of formal experiments and ways in which the words in the poems are sometimes set out literally with spaces and gaps in a block of text, which really give you that sense of the absences or blanks that the words are working with.

Sarah Howe: And mistranslations, I suppose. This is what I meant when I was talking about how ‘Start With Weather’ relates, for me, to a poem like ‘Loop of Jade’, because ‘Loop of Jade’ has these moments where either with a blank space or a dash represents my mum’s voice breaking off, not being able to talk any more or pausing. This is something I noticed when she was talking, she would always say ‘my — mother’, and there would be that pause there because she was looking for the word, and neither Chinese nor English can supply the right word. But that is what that woman was, but for various reasons she wasn’t a mother to her either, and so it’s the wrong word.

Also, the way that poem deals with the word ‘boarding school’. My mum always talks about this ‘boarding school’ she was sent to, but that word in English is entirely the wrong word, because for us it has all these associations with privilege and eliteness, whereas I don’t know how to describe the place that she was sent when she was five or so. [It was] a place where families would send girls that they were too poor to look after, so they would go off to this institution to be collected and cared for. So these poems are very interested in the idea that you might supply a word that is just about adequate for the moment, but as a reader it’s your job to look *behind* the meaning and see the resonance standing just to one side.

8. Chinese Etymology and Language

Jennifer Williams: Fantastic. Shall we have another poem?

Sarah Howe: Yes, in fact the next poem I’m going to read is one that relates to exactly the Pound and Chinese ideogram/pictogram question you mentioned before. Pound had this method called the ‘idiomatic method’ of teasing out the origin and etymology of Chinese characters and using this as a spur to his own writing, and things like the *Cantos*, he put the characters in the right hand margin, and that happens in this poem too, there are various Chinese characters that appear along the right hand side of the book, which of course you can’t see now but will have to imagine while I read.

[Sarah reads: ‘(k) Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush’]

Jennifer Williams: Thank you very much. I love that the final line ‘has disappeared down the stream’ is actually set a little bit down from that last stanza and off to the side as if it is [laughing] *actually* slipping away!

Sarah Howe: [Laughing] Yes, it’s drifted off.

Jennifer Williams: I think it's interesting because there are a few of the actual symbols as you mentioned, on the side of the text, and yet it's a wonderful kind of vibration going on between the English words being used to describe and those words – is it actually Chinese? Are they specific to a particular [language]...?

Sarah Howe: Well this is the traditional script, so the word for dragonfly, 'qīngtíng' [蜻蜓], in Mandarin – this is the characters for them, which is in the margin here.

Jennifer Williams: So you can see them right there, and it's even interesting just seeing the snake then insect, green, go, stop, scholar are italicised in the English text, and then – there's a wonderful energetic vibration between those. And I think this came up in the conversation this morning.

[The poet] Billy Letford was talking about dialect languages and many different languages and the idea that actually sometimes we forget that they're all just sounds, and there is a kind of Babelesque cacophony of sound, which is all these different sounds we all make trying to express ourselves and communicate, and there's something in written language too that comes up when you see the text presented like this.

But it's such a beautiful poem, I think there's a wonderful *pace* to it, that you really take your time to tell the kind of story of the poem that's actually quite meditative and relaxing to experience it read, and wonderful to hear you read it. And there's an amazing moment I think, when the scholar in the poem at the end is talking about how I must write a poem about dragonflies. Somehow it circles the poem in a way because you've managed to write a poem about dragonflies in the process of writing about this person thinking about writing about dragonflies, and there's wonderful loop in that.

Sarah Howe: I guess there is a certain mischievous circularity to this poem in exactly that way. I think of it as being a bit of a shaggy dog story. I noticed this about a few of the poems when I was putting together the manuscript actually, that a lot of them have structures a little bit like jokes, with punchlines or reveals. And I guess the meditative quality that you mention in this poem was for me very much about lulling the reader into a false sense of security [laughs] and [then] you sort of tug the rug out from underneath.

I guess this stanza just before the end, the one with the character's dragonfly that you mentioned, is quite naughty in this respect, inasmuch as all these

elements; the green, the go and stop, the fragment that means scholar within this character – all of those things aren't actually part of the meaning of the Chinese character dragonfly at all. They're the elements that indicate the *sound* of those words, which I guess is the punchline of this poem; the notion that this European idealisation of the Chinese language that has gone on from the Jesuits down to Pound was about thinking that Chinese has this perfect connection between word and thing, when actually Chinese equally has phonetic elements too. So all of this poem, with the scholar and the journey down the river, this is all a figment of imagination, of wild imagination that isn't actually authorised by the etymology of those characters at all.

9. Discussion of Censorship in China and Learning Cantonese

Jennifer Williams: And interestingly, because that poem, as you've referred to, [has] this aspect of the Chinese language which it sounds like often has the capacity for a lot of punning, there's something in all that which I think [has] a notion of Chinese whispers, which from a Western perspective, and certainly for instance, patronising colonial perspective, that maybe is to some extent the negative side of that romanticisation of some of these foreign languages and alphabets. It actually leaves the scholar in a very silly position sometimes, because through their own romantic or controlling, and not true understanding of what's going on, they're missing a whole – they're kind of missing the point.

And I think also you refer in another wonderful poem to this idea of the way people within a controlled system such as the Chinese firewall that controls free expression on the internet can then make use of those punning capacities within the language to find a free expression that the censors don't get. I remember hearing about – I think it was maybe Iran or somewhere [else] – that a lot of what had come up in the festival (I think it was theatre and film) about how metaphor in the writing of the scripts was used so much more than maybe in Western scripts because it was a way of escaping censorship that actually made for very rich texts. That it was a kind of force of special creativity as well.

Sarah Howe: It's hard to pin down when you're questioned, I suppose, because the censor comes up to you and says "oh, in this line you've insulted the president", and you say "no I haven't, it's about birds singing in the forest!" [Laughter] I'm very interested in that game of cat and mouse in the

contemporary Chinese context. So I guess there are a couple of poems that work in the way you've just mentioned.

One of them is a poem about my recollections as a five year old of the events that would turn into the Tiananmen massacre in Beijing. I was in Hong Kong, so many hundreds of miles from Beijing, but even so was aware of these events unfolding on the television screen in Hong Kong itself. That poem has the subtitle 'Poem on the Eve of May 35th'. And May 35th is this imaginary, invented date that Chinese bloggers and writers came up with so that they would be able to post it on the internet as a way of referring to Tiananmen, which is known not by the place name as it is in English, but by the date 6/4, June 4th. And you're just not allowed to post the combination of numbers 6, 4, June 4th, anything on the Chinese internet because that's an immediate signal that you're up to something the government doesn't want you to be up to. So May 35th – for a while – was a way of getting round that. Of course the authorities catch up with you quite quickly, but I loved that moment of this sort of Swiftian imagination of some date that would let you get round these blocks.

Jennifer Williams: [Laughs] Was that experience of learning the Chinese language as an adult – you didn't really, you knew a little of it when you were little, or you really had no access [to it]?

Sarah Howe: Well, I didn't feel like I really spoke any Cantonese, but I was confused when my mum said to me more recently that maybe I used to speak and understand more than I now remember myself doing. She said that I would come up with sentences and phrases in Cantonese when I was quite small, but I still have a few snippets of baby Cantonese but nothing meaningful – I can't follow a conversation. So it was quite strange for me learning Mandarin as an adult, because of course it's not my mum's dialect, it's the official literary language, but it's not what my mum speaks. Cantonese is much more like something like Scots in that respect; it is a dialect but verging on being a whole different language in the sense that it's not really mutually comprehensible for Mandarin speakers.

10. Poetic Identity

Jennifer Williams: You go back [to visit Hong Kong], don't you? I think you mentioned that you've done a reading tour recently. Do you – I guess that

made me curious as to how people there take in your work, and has it been translated into Chinese?

Sarah Howe: That was quite an interesting experience for me, I was very nervous about going to Hong Kong. It was last month that I went there for a trip with the British Council and it was the first time I'd ever read my poems in Hong Kong. I think there was a lot of interest, which astonished me, I'd never thought there would be – partly because why do you need someone who's effectively a tourist writing about the place you're walking around every day? You can see it for yourself, why is it interesting to see it through these somewhat alienated eyes? But it turned out that that did seem to be quite interesting to Hong Kong readers and I found that quite moving. I also found quite moving the notion that they would want to claim me as a Hong Kong poet, because I don't think I would ever have used that title 'Hong Kong poet' of myself, I don't quite know how to describe myself ever. I suppose British/Chinese is maybe the label [I would choose] if I had to reach for one.

Jennifer Williams: When you have to tick the box on the form! [Laughter]

Sarah Howe: Yes that is maybe the one I'd go for, maybe British-Chinese with a hyphen between the two? [Laughter] I don't know. But Hong Kong poet was not something that I felt that I had earned or deserved because I'm not sufficiently connected with the place in terms of citizenship or living there anymore, but it was sort of lovely having my sense of what that might mean expanded for me, by going there, that they would want to embrace me.

11.Chinese Translation of Howe's Writing

On the question of whether my poems have been translated into Chinese, I sometimes worry about the translators who get in touch with me, whether they wholly know what they would be getting themselves into [Laughter]. There was a Cantonese shock jock, you know, on the radio, he's the sort of disc jockey that Cantonese speaking taxi drivers would listen to on an evening in their cabs, pontificating about political things, and I happened to meet him on this recent trip and he said "don't let them translate that poem 'Innumerable'", about May 35th, "because you don't know if they're going to do it right". He actually said, "oh it's so much about what's behind the words, you have to watch very carefully", because I'd mentioned that I had people working on a translation of that poem, and so he was like you need to be careful that it goes into Chinese together. Because I guess translators always

face this problem, but where there's so much of a burden of implication of what's going on in the white space, what's going on behind the words there, to make sure that *that* all comes in to it.

12. Closing Words

Jennifer Williams: Poetry is often said to be one of the hardest types of language to translate anyway, often because there's those moments of metaphor and pun and double and triple meanings in words. [Laughs] Those translators!

I have to let you go off – I know you've got a lunch date and the festival to go on with – thank you so much for giving us this little bit of time, it's really so wonderful to get to talk to you and hear your beautiful poems. I'd love to hear one last little one if that would be possible?

[Sarah reads 'A Night in Arizona']

[Outro music]