Sarah Howe interviewed by Patricia McCarthy

Sarah Howe, 32, is a British poet, academic and editor. Her first book of poems, *Loop of Jade* (Chatto & Windus, 2015), won The Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award and the T.S. Eliot Prize. Born in Hong Kong to an English father and Chinese mother, she moved to England as a child. Her pamphlet, *A Certain Chinese Encyclopedia* (Tall-lighthouse, 2009), won an Eric Gregory Award. Her poems have appeared in journals including *Poetry Review*, *Poetry London*, *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, *Ploughshares* and *Poetry*, as well as anthologies such as *Ten: The New Wave* and four editions of *The Best British Poetry*. She is the founding editor of *Prac Crit*, an online journal of poetry and criticism. Formerly based at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, she is a fellow at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute in 2015-16.

P McC: Sarah, welcome to *Agenda*'s New Generation Poets' issue. You are very much a young 'New Generation Poet' who has had a meteoric rise to fame with your first collection, *Loop of Jade*, published by the major publishing house, Chatto and Windus and reviewed here on pages .. You have already won many prizes, and awards for this and have also given several interviews. Therefore, here, I am going to try to ask you questions that I hope, in the main, haven't been asked of you.

SH: Thank you Patricia, it's a pleasure to be asked.

P McC: How are you coping with all the attention and publicity?

SH: I'll confess it hasn't all been easy. Maybe I'll be able to talk about this one day, but right now my instinct is towards a self-protective quiet. I've been holding in mind this thought of Randal Jarrell's: 'Tomorrow morning some poet may, like Byron, wake up to find himself famous – for having written a novel, for having killed his wife; it will not be for having written a poem.' At the same time, I'm pleased and honoured that the book seems to be finding new readers as a result of the awards. The way poetry is often covered in the press suggests a sort of arm's-length incomprehension, even a secret rage, that a medium which asks time and effort of its readers should continue to exist. On the other hand, I've met some wonderful journalists

recently who really care and think hard about how to change that superficial narrative. And the way *Loop of Jade* has been embraced by readers – even by people who say they wouldn't normally pick up a book of poems – is something that continues to surprise and humble me.

I think I'm learning to make sense of prize culture as essentially an outward-facing exercise. For better or worse, it's a system designed to show off a very limited tranche – too much would overwhelm a press-release – cut from the bustling sphere of activity which is the writing and publishing of poems. Those of us who breathe in that world, by contrast, know how much extraordinary work is being done all the time which doesn't receive accolades or press, but is no less important because of it. I have to say, my own fascinations as a reader often lean in the direction of such under-the-radar work.

P McC: It seems to be typical of today that poets have to be PR people for themselves, even when much lesser known than you. Is there a contradiction in you, for example, between the shy, private, even hermetic person that writes the poetry and the public media peripatetic person that you have to become?

SH: I don't know that you have to become a public media peripatetic person exactly (though I do love the tongue-twisteryness of that phrase). I really don't feel all that 'known' myself, though I would be glad for the work to be known, which is a different thing. I agree it's important to guard one's inner reserves of silence. Where else are the poems going to come from? The natural impulse to privacy, I'm just beginning to understand, is particularly fraught for poets. So much of what makes lyric compelling is to do with its seeming to open a window onto a vivid inner life. There's an intimacy and a vulnerability involved, or the necessary impression of those things. People will assume the experiences conjured in the poems map directly onto the poet's life. I find the game of 'autobiographical' bait-and-switch played by the title poem of Frances Leviston's *Disinformation* both acute and instructive in this respect.

As for poets being their own PR people, I find social media interesting on that front. I've never felt native on Twitter, finding the idea of it quite frightening at times. But I do delight in following many poets, including some whose poems feel inevitably and excitingly bound up with the medium. What those writers do isn't self-promotion, but something altogether more interesting: it might better be described as curating fragments of a personhood. You'd be foolish to leap on those snippets as candid self-revelation, but they still have that frisson.

P McC: Your poetry is particularly topical at the moment (although of course a universal, timeless issue) concerned, as it is, with refugees, immigration, displacement, with being, as Derek Walcott puts it, 'divided in the vein' since you are half English and half Chinese. Do you feel that your own background has actually given you your poetry? For example you so articulately say in the poem, 'Crossing from Guangdong', 'My heart is bounded by a scallop shell'…

SH: I'm quite resistant to readings of that kind, since I fear they push in the direction of treating poems as a symptom of their maker's biographical origins, ultimately reducible to or explainable by them. I'm doubly wary when questions of race or culture are thrown into the mix, since I'd want instinctively to disavow that sort of determinism. At the same time, I know this wariness must sound perverse on my part, since *Loop of Jade* does circle obsessively around these very preoccupations. Undoubtedly there is a compulsion being worked out in the book, but I hope it's a knowing rather than a naive one.

I'm so glad you quote that wonderful line of Walcott's, whose work has been a huge influence on my thinking. If I remember right, 'A Far Cry from Africa' is one of the early poems that consider his place in the world as the descendant of two white and two black grandparents:

> I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
> Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
> I who have cursed
> The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
> Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

What chimes with me is how that idea, 'divided to the vein', quietly reveals itself as a paradox. Its literal impossibility underlines the slipperiness of 'race': how to separate out the 'white' capillaries from the 'black' ones? And yet our history is overshadowed by exactly such fragile projects of racial taxonomy and classification. Their influence is at once pervasive and barely visible today, like the onetime laws of hypodescent that mean we would never refer to Barack Obama as America's white president. My own poem, 'Others,' touches on these historical currents: 'Some words die out while others survive. *Crossbreed*. *Half-caste*. *Quadroon*.' I wasn't aware of it until the late stages of putting together the manuscript, but there is a pun running through *Loop of Jade* on the idea of the *crossbreed* (a word that sometimes turned up in my hearing during my later childhood in England) and the *crossing* of geographical boundaries, especially water – as in that poem you refer to, 'Crossing from Guangdong.'

The Chinese term for people like me, 混血 (*hùnxuě*), has its own tangled skein of past associations, meaning literally 'mixed blood,' but with just a hint of 'muddled' or 'confused blood.' In early twentieth-century colonial Hong Kong people like me were a taboo, vulnerable and even fetishized subgroup: an unpleasant reminder of what ensued when the Empire's implicit racial hierarchies were transgressed. They often survived by plumping for one side of their heritage (usually the Chinese, since the British were still more inhospitable) and doing everything they could to outwardly 'pass' in that identity. *Loop of Jade,* especially its central Borges sequence, is my way of exploring the extent to which identity is imaginary, fluid, historically determined, politically contested, up-for-grabs. That's a long way of saying we might need to flip round your interesting formula. Maybe it's less that my background has given me my poetry, than that I'm interested in how poetry might give me – or any of us – our backgrounds.

P McC: Your collection is such a tour de force, with wonderfully vivid, startlingly accurate images, often like those in Chinese paintings. Interesting that until you started to write poetry in earnest aged twenty one that, from childhood on, you painted mostly. Do you think that it was your new outsider's eyes in a Hong Kong that you did not know that helped you to conjure these images so freshly?

SH: Thank you, that's very kind. As you say, the fantasy of becoming a painter was one I'd kept up throughout my late teens and never really escaped. After university I spent a year doing nothing but paint, trying to get together enough work for an art school portfolio. I also travelled to mainland China for the first time, producing a lot of photographs and sketches, but no writing as yet. I even spent a while learning how to paint with Chinese brush and rice paper, though in pursuit of a Western rather than more traditional optic. I made many ink paintings of the same disappearing landscape around the Three Gorges Dam that features in my poem 'Yangtze,' though I'm glad none of them survive. At the end of that spell, I made a decision that felt like a huge turning-point: to give up on painting and embark instead on postgraduate work in English literature. I set myself on the path to a PhD, but also felt a sort of grief at letting go of that other part of my self. The poems started to come shortly after that choice, as a compensation I think: the same enquiry pursued by other means.

Interesting that you should ask about Hong Kong and 'image,' since a sort of surreally heightened sensory dimension was one of the dominant notes in my adult re-encounters with the place. The thing that bowls me over every time I travel there – and I remember this most vividly from my first trip back

aged sixteen – is the smell that greets me off the plane. Maybe I should say scent rather than smell, since I mean an inherently pleasant thing. I find its precise quality hard to describe, hemmed about by clichés of Hong Kong as 'Fragrant Harbour'. Yet it wasn't the smell's exoticism that hit me so much as its uncanny familiarity: the smell of my early childhood, and yet one entirely forgotten until I was delivered back into its presence, in that unaccountable, Proustian way. There's a line in one of my poems, 'Islands,' that gets some way towards it, albeit in the voice of a character much like my mother: 'sea-drizzle, diesel, damp, black hair.'

P McC: Perhaps most poets are outsiders of some sort. As you say, 'The poet is always in a foreign country'. Are there any other ways than being 'divided in the vein' in which you would consider yourself an outsider?

SH: It does resonate with me, that saying. It belongs to the French-Jewish-Egyptian poet Edmond Jabès, who knew something about borders and allegiances. Part of me worries that the notion of 'poet as outsider' might be an unhelpfully romantic obfuscation. But speaking for myself, I guess I was always the sort of child who would minutely watch the pavement as she walked; the sort of child who, after years of following the same route, would still have no clue which direction the school bus would take next on account of having such an intense imaginative life. During my first seven years in Hong Kong I learned one way of being in the world, then had to intuit a new set of social codes in the playground in Watford. If anything, I tried to learn how to mimic the behaviour of others so perfectly that I wouldn't be marked as an outsider.

P McC: This leads on to your treatment of 'memory'. Because your mother's own biographical details are incomplete, you have, in a sense, had the liberty to make up bits of her past, using your own experiences to patch up her life. Yet, do you think most of us use memory like this, as part-invention, maybe subconsciously, even when we have all the facts and details?

SH: That's an excellent description of how I feel memory works all the time. I tried to think about this phenomenon in the first of a series of essays I wrote for the *Best American Poetry* blog: the process by which I would write poems drawing on my early memories of life in Hong Kong, then go back to the island on a sort of fact-checking mission only to realise that certain, vivid details couldn't possibly be right. It became important to me to preserve those hiccups and fillers as an authentic element of recollection, a way of acknowledging the unreliability involved in accessing the past.

Those glitches – as small perhaps as that style of decorations hung at one of the local temples in a given year – might only be apparent to me, or to a native Hong-Konger, but they felt like an important component in the 'truth' of my relationship with the place. Poems like 'Crossing from Guangdong' explore precisely this overlaying of – and discrepancy between – the place I might visit in reality and the Hong Kong of my mind. As you say, so much of my orphaned mother's background is mysterious and most likely undiscoverable. What flooded in to fill that vacant gap in my family tree wasn't so much imaginative reconstruction as an engagement with Chinese myth and history at a macro-scale.

P McC: How far do you consider your studying of English Literature at University, followed by a Ph D in Renaissance Literature, and your career as a university teacher and literary critic stymied or held you back from your own creative writing? After all, you say you did not write poetry until you were twenty one. Or did your academic studies enhance your poetry?

SH: I'm not sure I would say that one stymied the other, since until I was twenty-one I didn't really have anything invested in the idea of writing poems, so there was no frustration there. One thing I did notice early on was that I found the business of editing poems, and of commenting on the poems of others, quite challenging at first. My training as a literary critic had been about developing an account of what a given combination of words on the page was doing, rather than seeing a way through to the best form they could take. I don't know about my academic research enhancing the poems. I tried for a long time to keep those parts of my life separate from each other. Thinking back, I can see how much my poetry was shaped not by the academic world I moved in, but by the lively London poetry scene that became a refuge during my PhD: all the friendships, writing groups, the crucial ties of artistic influence and mutual support I found there. At the same time, I acknowledge there is a more 'academic' strain in my work too, sometimes serious, sometimes half-parodic. For example, there's a scholarly, hyper-referential tone that I was conscious of letting some of the later poems inhabit, playfully licensed by their connection to the book's Borges epigraph, and channelling some of his fondness for linguistic curios, intellectual world-building and blind-alleys of thought. To leave out such a strain altogether, I felt, wouldn't offer a true portrait of how my mind works or the cultures that formed it, though I do realise that pushes me further from the poetic mainstream.

Tugging against that aspect of my work is how important it is for me, when sitting down to write, to find ways of ducking the rule of the conscious

intelligence. I need to get into something like a meditative state: among my habitual routes to that place, one is to jot down lists of disconnected words temporarily severed from sense. The painter Cy Twombly used to go through phases of drawing with his wrong hand in an attempt to bypass his own skill and training. For me the most productive writerly state of mind is one where I feel, at least for a time, I've delegated all thought and responsibility to the hand moving the pen.

P McC: Yes, I understand that kind of lightness: when you almost mustn't think lest what you write turns out too heavy. I can detect in your collection much play on words or metaphysical conceits reminiscent of Donne, and sometimes even a Hopkins' joining of words for full texture. Along with your literary and classical allusions, there is a mix, even, of surreal images, and use of familiar traditional nursery rhymes. Were all these used consciously, or dredged up unconsciously from your psyche?

SH: It crept up on me slowly, the realisation that several of my poems seem to hinge on something quite like a metaphysical 'conceit.' It wasn't until I'd already finished poems like 'Sucking Pigs' that I understood this, having always thought there was no trace of writers like Donne in my reflexes, despite spending so much time immersed in their world. That poem turns on a neat and somewhat amusing reversal that occurred to me in the lead-up to our wedding. One of the central Chinese wedding traditions involves the gift of a roasted piglet as an emblem of the bride-to-be's chastity, while in my husband's culture, Judaism, the pig represents the absolute opposite of purity. The poem structures itself around the poles of that cross-cultural irony, which in practice work a little like a joke – though not necessarily one that would make you laugh out loud.

I like your account of the raw materials of poems as relics dredged up from the depths of the psyche. I think that was very much the case with the Chinese myths I've mentioned, which crept into the poems cumulatively and by different routes. For example, the legend of *Chang'e* – the woman-turned-goddess who accidentally swallows her husband's pill of immortality and is punished by floating off into the sky to live forever on the moon – is one I heard retold every year at Mid-Autumn Festival, like all Chinese children. For reasons I didn't understand at the time of writing, that story seemed an essential ingredient in the poem called 'Islands' about my mother's childhood. Some time after finishing the poem, I was talking to my mum about researching different versions of the myth, and she told me something I'd entirely forgotten. Apparently every time I heard that story as a small girl it would make me cry. I suddenly remembered why: *Chang'e*, lonely on the moon, blurred always in my childish mind into the figure

of my own mother, growing up an orphan separated from her real family, utterly alone. Writing the poem reactivated that old association, yet without it impinging on my conscious mind.

P McC: Isn't there an equal danger in academics believing they can automatically be gifted poets, and Creative Writing graduates thinking they, too, can all get published to high acclaim?

SH: I don't know about the first scenario – though I suspect many of the experimental poets who find shelter in the academy would take issue with the ideological underpinnings to a phrase like 'gifted poets'. But there is certainly a tinge of sadness in the latter idea. I'm reminded of a brave and clear-eyed blog post Clare Pollard wrote a while back comparing – I might be misremembering – the dynamics of Creative Writing degrees to those of Ponzi schemes. That's obviously the most pessimistic view, and one I think Clare didn't wholly subscribe to herself. By and large I suspect most poets, including graduates of such programmes, would continue to do what they need to do as writers regardless of worldly recognition. We can all learn from that.

P McC: Do you think undergraduate Creative Writing degrees are a good thing? And the postgraduate ones? Would you like to have done these? And would they have benefitted your poetry? Or do you think it best to find your own voice in isolation?

SH: I'm not terribly knowledgeable about such degrees myself, but anecdotally I can say that a huge percentage of my peers, the new and upcoming poets I most admire, have been through that type of formal training in Creative Writing. Whether such degrees add value to talent that was already there isn't my place to judge, but I really don't see any signs of the deadening, homogenising influence that people sometimes attribute to such programmes. From what I've seen I suspect they do a deal of good. For a long time, I was part of the more informal equivalent – a trusted group of poets banding together round a table to ask for and offer insights on new work – and that was a huge part of forming me as a writer. Sometimes you simply can't understand how a line will come across (or not) to a reader who isn't you, which is where other eyes become so valuable. Eventually you learn how to trust your own instincts, but internalizing those querying voices is an important step on the way.

P McC: I notice you did enrol, while at Harvard, in a semester's workshop with Jorie Graham. Was this worthwhile for you and, if so, why?

SH: It was essential: the scales fell from my eyes. I casually enrolled for a ten or twelve week course with Graham as a new graduate student in America. I'm not sure why, given I'd never heard of her before that point, or ever written more than a handful of poems. What followed was the most revelatory training in how to 'close read' poetry, its minute rhythms and mechanics on the page, but from a viewpoint I'd never really glimpsed till then – the 'inside' perspective of the working practitioner. What we read together were overwhelmingly the masters of the American tradition – Stevens, Williams, Dickinson, Bishop – and further on to their inheritors in the present. Having never really encountered it till then, I fell in love with American poetry in a way that continues to shape my tastes and habits of thought.

P McC: I have observed how you fuse, like Jorie Graham, image and idea. In fact, you very successfully combine images with abstract philosophy, which is a difficult thing to do, especially as there is a danger, I would think, of leaving the world of images which poetry requires to make it alive, when delving into philosophy and intellectualising.

SH: Actually I've never had much truck with analytic philosophy myself – I'm much too blurry and unstructured a thinker to survive for more than a dip in such waters. I'm often fond of Wittgenstein, to pick one body of philosophical work I've made more of an effort to engage with. But it's very much a poet's fondness, seizing on felicitous local metaphors and ideas like truffles. So, for example, one of my recent poems riffs on the wonderful image of a jigsaw puzzle that crops up at one point in the *Philosophical Investigations* – 'sky is always the hardest part' – in the course of Wittgenstein's speculations about language and other minds. Or looking back to *Loop of Jade*, my little poem 'Earthward' could be described as a quarrel with Plato, not that I think that gloss particularly helps bring it into focus. I imagined that poem quietly taking up the mantle of one of my absolute favourites by Graham, 'Reading Plato,' from her early book, *Erosion* – the one about the fishing flies. But at the end of the day, I'm with Sir Philip Sidney in preferring the sensuous realm of the poet to the abstract one of philosophy. Sidney's argument is that poetry can in fact do both, offering 'to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul.' I don't think I would seek to defend poetry today in quite his terms, as an instrument of moral education, yet his *Defence of Poesy* has long been a touchstone for me.

P McC: I don't know if you are familiar with Gjertrud Schnackenberg's *Heavenly Questions* (which I reviewed in the Keenings issue of *Agenda*, Vol 46 No 2), but your work reminds me slightly of hers: full of erudition and music, though some readers would find both you and her quite inaccessible at times. What is your view of accessibility in poetry?

SH: I don't know Schnackenberg's work, but I'll have to seek it out on the basis of what you say here and below. On the more general question of accessibility, I don't think 'difficult' would be a particularly helpful label to apply to my work, even though it's the term we usually reach for to describe the end of the stylistic spectrum with the sorts of ambitions you describe: it makes reading sound like a chore, which is not what I'm after. I believe the poetry ecosystem needs to support a range of different types of work if it is to stay healthy. My own taste as a reader is broad – I find things to delight in Duffy and Hill, Agbabi and Prynne – and I'm conscious of trying to forge a style that might learn things from both sides of those longstanding stylistic and ideological oppositions, incoherent as that might seem to some. The aesthetic pluralism sometimes identified among my generation of poets has been called 'post-division' or 'hybrid.' Given how involved *Loop of Jade* is with the idea of racial or cultural hybridity, its range of styles bears a conceptual, even a political, force for me.

I value poetry that jolts you out of the usual run of language-habit, that invites you to dwell in mysteries – mysteries which over many visits might or might not resolve. On the subject of what it means to 'get' a poem, I love an essay called 'My Impasses: On Not Being Able to Read Poetry' by the American poet Maureen McLane, from her genre-bending essay collection, *My Poets*. McLane writes with delightful candour – and a refreshing lack of ego – about her student-days' panic and confusion in the face of poems she had no idea how to read. 'Many of the poets and poems now important to me,' she writes, 'were completely and maddeningly elusive when I first encountered them'.

I am fascinated by that threshold where one hovers, not getting it yet wanting to get it. Where a tentative desire contends with frustration. Where frustration may be converted into desire, and desire into some provisional illumination. As a poet, as a student, as a critic, as a teacher, as a citizen, I have found this vale of unknowing yet wanting-to-know to be a fruitful vale, a dwelling place worth sharing, pondering.

Not all of the poems in *Loop of Jade* work in the same way, or invite the same kinds of attention. Some I conceived as working more like abstract paintings, or even Buddhist *koans*, which walk through nonsense into another sort of 'unknowing'. This is where you'll see most clearly the mark

that poets like Ashbery or Stevens have left on my work. What I was aiming for with such poems was to sidestep, or at least hold at bay, the conceptual intellect with its drive to interpret and decode, opening up other sorts of felt experience as a result.

There are certainly poems in *Loop of Jade* that approach a state of complexity I feel is true to my experience of the world. For what it's worth, I suspect we encounter more intractable instances of moral and linguistic complexity in life every day; it would be wrong to hive off poetry into some separate plane of experience. At the same time, I hope there are enough episodes of plainspoken simplicity, of sensual immediacy, in *Loop of Jade* to reflect what it's like when the world crystallises to a sudden clarity. The relationship between those two qualities, simplicity and complexity, is important to me. They might inhabit the same poem, or even the same phrase, but their alternation at a larger scale was a guiding principle as I put together the collection. That architecture was key. I thought of it as creating a reading experience that would feel almost like shifting between different levels of focus. I wanted to write a book that would offer up certain pleasures on a first reading, but then shift and deepen on later encounters.

As for 'accessible' or 'inaccessible,' I often feel there's an uncomfortable snobbery at work in the way the media deploys such terms when discussing poetry. I think you can see this dynamic in something a journalist said to me in person recently, along the lines of 'I have a First in English from Christchurch, Oxford and I find your poems mostly baffling, so what chance does anyone else have?' I find that patronising, disingenuous concern for some sort of darkly alluded-to uneducated mass of people especially riling. I myself am endlessly grateful for the education I received: an enduring privilege and pleasure that I know remains a remote possibility for too many. But I've also always been conscious of coming from people who had nothing like that kind of educational advantage – and that this was something important to remember. I'm uncomfortable with a view of the arts that slips too easily from categorising poems ('This is an easy poem', 'This is an obscure poem') to categorising people: dividing up an imagined readership into a group who will appreciate and those who won't, on the basis of assumptions about education or class or race or whatever.

I was the first person in my family to go to university. My mum grew up in a degree of poverty that *Loop of Jade* barely dares to imagine, and yet she – my dad too, in a different way – is the most extraordinary autodidact: an unsystematic, chaotic, occasionally hilarious thinker whom I fiercely admire. She attributes her first steps in English to a university student who spent a summer doing volunteer work at her school in Macau, long enough to teach the children the rudiments of phonetic reading. Landing a job as a

typist in Hong Kong, she taught herself English to a level of mastery that goes beyond many university-level linguists – not that such a career option would ever have been on her horizon. Her bedside table has *Harry Potter* on it one week and Herodotus on it the next, because that's the way her natural curiosity works: it doesn't occur to her to limit it. For as long as I remember she has hoarded books to an almost pathological extent, a tendency she once attributed to the fact she didn't have access to any when growing up. In fact, the only volume I know she definitely owned in the early part of her life still sits on the shelf at home: an anthology of the Tang dynasty poets.

This is why I've been so delighted by the warmth of response to *Loop of Jade*, coming from an audience wider than I imagined possible. If you don't constantly tell people poetry is too difficult and not for them, maybe they won't think it's something they have to shy away from. Whenever I felt it would offer a helpful hand to the reader – a piece of information or a translation I thought it might be useful to know – I added a note at the back of the book. Yet it seems to me the question of accessibility can no longer work quite the same way in an age when so many of the traditional trappings of poetic difficulty, whether of vocabulary or reference, can be illuminated in thirty seconds on Google. That's not to say there's no such thing as a dense or intimidating poem any more. I remember what it felt like to be put on the spot at school with the dreaded 'What does that line mean?' (Exam boards don't like dwelling in mysteries.) But I care about creating conditions that might allow such work to be enjoyed beyond a narrow sphere.

P McC: Interestingly, Gjertrud's collection, like yours involves an odyssey through different cultures and religions, mythologies, sciences, physics; mixes old and new worlds, and also highlights, among myriad themes, the theme of writing that she links to the ancient banished Chinese poet, Qu Yuan. Ancient Chinese poets are important sources of reference and energy in your collection too, as well as names and even Chinese characters – and the poems involving these divert from the more prosaic autobiographical sections. Is the inclusion of these an attempt at universality, at invoking a whole cosmos to heal the split 'in the vein' and to 'sing beyond sense'?

SH: That's very kind, and the theme of ancient Chinese poets in exile – fittingly, the emperor would always banish them to the far West for their transgressions – has been a big part of my thinking too. I can see how it might feel like *Loop of Jade* is reaching for a sort of 'universality' at moments like the ones you describe. But for my part, I feel that sort of aspiration to universal (cross-cultural, trans-historical) truths is mostly

undercut in the poems, albeit sometimes quite slyly. For example, the poem called 'Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush' might look at first like a fable about the awesome perfection of Chinese characters and their ability to capture reality, but it's one with a sting in its tail. The poem begins with the speculations and projections of European thinkers, including the early Jesuit Missionaries, who from the seventeenth-century started to wonder if the ideographic basis of Chinese might make it a candidate for the true 'universal language,' believed lost since Eden and Babel. Readers familiar with Ezra Pound's edited version of Ernest Fenollosa's essay, 'The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,' will know that this fantasy of Chinese's 'visual' immediacy persisted well into the twentieth century, despite being founded on a basic misprision about how the writing system actually works. I don't want to give away the punch-line, but the scholar-poet navigating the river of linguistic meaning in that particular poem ends up losing his boat.

P McC: Presumably Pound (who actually founded *Agenda* with William Cookson in 1959) is a major influence and even a mentor for you. Can you comment on this? I think he would preside very proudly over *Loop of Jade*.

SH: Yes, Pound is definitely one of the tutelary figures who sit behind *Loop of Jade*, via both *Cathay* and the *Cantos*. The Chinese characters you mentioned, which hover in the right-hand margin of several of my poems, allude to the visual presentation of the *Cantos*, preoccupied as Pound was with Chinese etymology. I first became fascinated by Pound as the inventor of Imagism, though I subsequently came to see how right Eliot was when he called him 'the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time.' I don't think any Chinese poet writing in English even today can get round that legacy without confronting it in some way. In practical terms, I found *Cathay*'s intuitively brilliant but sometimes linguistically ill-founded moves as a 'translation' from the Chinese oddly enabling, not least as a way of navigating what sort of cultural space I might inhabit as a half-Chinese person who grew up not speaking Chinese: is it possible to recuperate a Chinoiserie-like 'inauthenticity' – that being the way I sometimes think of myself and my Western reference-points – at the same time as critiquing it? Those were the sorts of questions Pound as poet-translator opened up for me, as well as demonstrating the power and flexibility of the poetic 'persona,' which became such a vital strategy in *Loop of Jade*. It's funny, but I don't think of my poems as straightforwardly autobiographical at all, but more like a series of masks I might let slip to varying degrees. Finally, Pound's troubling politics, particularly of race, became an explicit theme in a poem like 'Stray Dogs.' There the historical Pound, awaiting trial for treason

in his DTC cage near Pisa, becomes a figure for thinking through the limits of free speech on the one hand, and the limits of empathy on the other.

P McC: Eliot, too, seems to be there somewhere, particularly in the *Four Quartets'* theme of journeys and never arriving.

SH: I hadn't thought of that, how interesting… It's certainly true that after first falling in love with *Prufrock* in my late teens after a chance encounter in the school library, it was *Four Quartets* I next pulled off the shelf. I photocopied several pages from it – I forget which ones – which sat blue-tacked above my desk throughout my A-levels. I recently stumbled again across Eliot's 'Chinese jar' in 'Burnt Norton' for the first time in ages…

> Only by the form, the pattern,
> Can words or music reach
> The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
> Moves perpetually in its stillness.

…and realised that it must lie behind the poem of mine I talked about just now, 'Drawn with a very fine camelhair brush,' where the slender wings of dragonflies are 'a marriage of stillness and furious motion.'

P McC: Are there any other major influences on your work?

SH: I usually end up answering this question with reference to poets, but it occurs to me that other genres and art forms are at least as influential on the texture of my work. For example, among the many visual artists who are important to me, the work of Chinese conceptual artists like Song Dong and Xu Bing has helped shape the way my poems deal with understanding across languages, silence, erasure and historical trauma. Fiction, too, often provokes new poems for me, sometimes more so than reading other poets. I was first drawn to the novels of David Mitchell because of their frequent Far Eastern settings, and resulting exploration of cross-cultural communication and sympathy. But other features of his work, including the books' intricate, interlocking architectures, their underlying metaphorical currents, their exploration of causality on a dizzying historical scale, became if anything even more influential on the poems that went into *Loop of Jade*.

P McC: I read somewhere that your next book will be a long poem responding to the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong that enshrines the principle of 'One Country, Two Systems' and runs out thirty years from 1997. I think you said you would be looking at this from human, legal and

political angles. Does this mean there will be less autobiography here, and less of your own persona in the next lot of poems?

SH: *Two Systems*, as it's called, ventures into more conceptual territory than I've explored in print before, though I've always been interested in that sort of avant-garde, procedure-driven work. It's an erasure poem that, as you say, takes as its source text the 'Basic Law' or mini-constitution of Hong Kong. The poem is made up of whatever words remain behind when I've finished blanking out the majority of each page with the Photoshop eraser tool. That formal conceit has become an anarchic, unpredictable, but potent way for me to explore the idea of disappearing words, disappearing freedoms, disappearing booksellers. I no longer think *Two Systems* would make much sense as a book, or at least not one published in the UK: it might work better as a piece installed in a gallery or (somehow) on the street in Hong Kong, or as a freely distributed chapbook. I'm due to visit Hong Kong in November 2016 for the literary festival there, and it will be the first time I've read in the place of my birth. My mother is much too worried about my going – she thinks I'm going to be bundled into the back of a van – despite my frequent attempts to reassure her of the many reasons why that won't happen, one which is that no one in authority knows or cares about my existence. If that sounds uncomfortably flippant, it's the humour of grim desperation. The more I work on this new poem, the more I find myself grappling with what it means to write in solidarity with the people of my native place, in sympathy with their fears and disappointments, yet without having to undergo the same risks or political consequences. Then again, perhaps those who can speak have a responsibility to do so.

P McC: Seamus Heaney warned about the dangers of confronting politics head on in poems; unless you take politics from a subtle angle, he said, the poem runs the danger of turning into a political slogan. What do you think about this?

SH: The political poems in *Loop of Jade* work, I fancy, a little like that cognitive science experiment where the subject is so intent on counting the number of times the ball passes between players that he or she doesn't see the man in the gorilla suit walking clean across the basketball court.

P McC: Do you always write in sequences i.e. get on a kind of roll and make a whole fabric of individual poems which all relate to each other in diverse ways? You must write random poems sometimes which come out of the blue. What happens to these?

SH: In fact, I think I mostly write random, miscellaneous poems whose place in the order of my obsessions becomes apparent only later. The Borges sequence in *Loop of Jade* was an exception to my usual working habits, but one that was thrilling to pursue as a result. A good two-thirds of those poems emerged thick and fast over the course of one month – then the final remaining pieces took several years to write and slot into place. It was as if the nearer I got to the end, the more remote a prospect it became, like the 'impossible heap' of sand in Beckett's *Endgame*.

P McC: Do you feel nervous about your new collection: that it might not match up to *Loop of Jade*'s resounding success? Again, referring to Heaney, I know he considered he had been awarded the Laureateship too early, and that, in a way, it limited him as a poet since normal ordinary life then became a rarity and he had to go round being 'a poet'.

SH: If I ever want to write or publish another poem, I think I'm going to have to try to block out anxieties of that sort. It might feel hard right now, but I suspect the sheer pleasure and necessity of writing will carry me once more. Plus, I don't think I quite have Heaney's problems of name-and face-recognition to contend with!

P McC: Have you had acting lessons, or studied Drama, as you read your poems beautifully, even speak them by heart? This is rare in a poet, for you have a real professional presence in your delivery on stage and in recordings for the BBC radios 3 and 4.

SH: Performance is increasingly important to me, partly spurred by seeing incredible readers of the calibre of Kei Miller, Kayo Chingonyi, Inua Ellams, Warsan Shire, all of whom have in different ways changed my understanding of what poetry can do. I've always been terrible at acting, but the memorising and speaking aloud of poems was a constant presence in my childhood from quite young. For a few years from about eleven my mum enrolled me in something called 'speech and drama lessons,' taught by a woman I adored, whose original Irish accent I was somehow aware had been transformed by her time at RADA into the cut-glass RP I learned to imitate. We spent half-an-hour together every week or two in term-time, as she offered directions in how best to perform, with understanding and feeling, the poem I'd learnt by heart that week – everything from James Fenton's 'Tiananmen,' which I still have mostly by heart, to long speeches from Shakespeare. I don't often have occasion to recall those sessions, but doing so now, I'm startled to see a sort of blueprint for my future life –

as both poet and Renaissance scholar – laid out in miniature across those half-hour lessons. It was only as I got a bit older that I started to realise how it was basically just me and children from nearby South Asian families that attended them. I can now see how it was partly a project of immigrant assimilation-anxiety and social aspiration, driven on some level by those parents' need for their children not to be marked out by accent as their generation had been. Funnily enough, I discovered while chatting one day to my co-editor at *Prac Crit*, Vidyan Ravinthiran, that he went through much the same experience during his childhood in Leeds: he wrote a brilliant poem about it in his first collection, *Grun-tu-molani*.

P McC: Now to the obvious question: what advice would you give to young poets? Would you tell them to chant them to themselves, as you do, when writing them, and also to pen them in the small silent hours?

SH: Chanting is helpful, as is going through a distinct drafting stage where you think about tweaking the poem for nothing but sound. I'm sadly getting too old for my small-hours writing these days – all-nighters now tend to wipe me out for forty eight hours after – so I'm not sure I can recommend that strategy to anyone.

P McC: Sadly for *Agenda*, your new poems are 'all under wraps'. Does this mean you send out every poem you write and judge them all to be of an equal standard? Can you even write to order?

SH: I like how 'top-secret' that sounds! The truth is that beyond the erasure sequence I talked about before, I'm not writing many poems at the moment, being too distracted by prose side-lines. It feels like a long time since I've had a big sheaf of poems ready to sort into piles and send off to magazines. On the question of quality control, I've always found that quite hard to judge myself, so I rely on the help of trusted friends and the wonderful editors I've worked with in recent years. I enjoy writing to order – the last poem I wrote for a commission involved spending a couple of months reading about nothing but theoretical physics. That was a happy time.

P McC: Well, thank you so very much for this enlightening interview and let us hope that that jade bracelet, that 'loop of jade', so hauntingly given to you by your mother's adoptive mother, will continue to be a protective talisman. Let us wait for it, when touched by you, to put you in communication with the past and past generations as well as with the present and future for your next keenly awaited book, and all that follows thereafter.