

Why do you write?

Hannah Lowe

The first poem I wrote was called 'The Receipt' and retold a painful family story about my father. He grew up in rural Jamaica, born out of wedlock to a young Jamaican girl and a Chinese shopkeeper. My dad believed his mother, fallen on hard times, had 'sold' him to his father, so he could work as a lackey in his father's grocery. As a child, he'd found the receipt among his father's papers. This story – of rejection and abuse – haunted me for years, which is why, in the end, I wrote about it.

My father grew up in his father's shop, working long hours, missing school, rarely seeing his mother, and often a victim of his father's violence. Aged seventeen he migrated to America then England, married, had children, and earned his money playing cards and dice in London's East End. It wasn't a glamorous existence, although there was some glamour, but it was also dangerous and precarious, and over decades took a toll on his mental health.

I started writing some years after his death, having sat for a long time with a feeling that I had lost my connection to Jamaica and to China. I deeply regretted I hadn't asked my father more about his life when I'd had the chance. Most of what I now know I've found out through research and

writing, confirming the idea that writing is never an end-product, but always a process of enquiry and a way of knowing.

Unlike my father, I was born into a life of relative privilege, with a stable home life, education and opportunities. Although I didn't consciously start writing to give my father a voice, I hope I have borne witness to his life and experiences. He was a deeply marginalised man, who carried his personal traumas and the traumas of Empire – growing up with the painful legacy of slavery and under the exploitative and racist colonial rule of the British. Yet he struggled, survived, and surmounted many of the early obstacles of his life.

Writing about him has been like opening a door into a room of doors, taking me further back in time and in many directions. My first collection *Chick* explored our relationship, and my perceptions of this mysterious man who often disappeared after dinner 'to see a man about a dog'. Later, I found out the ship he arrived on came before the *Empire Windrush*, commonly cited as the first, and wrote my chapbook *Ormonde* in response. In *Chan*, I wrote about my father's cousin, the Jamaican-British saxophonist Joe Harriott. More recently, I've worked with a genealogist and historians to place my father's life in the broader context of colonialism, slavery and Chinese indentured labour. I have begun thinking of my own distance from and displaced relationship to China, and am exploring this in writing about Chinese wallpaper, a luxury good of empire. But my reasons for writing began with my father, and he remains the elusive character I search for, opening one door after another.

Hannah Lowe

Hannah Lowe was born in Essex in 1976 to a white English mother and Afro-Chinese Jamaican father. Broadly, Lowe's work is concerned with migration histories, multicultural London and the complex legacies of the British Empire. Her first poetry collection, *Chick* (Bloodaxe, 2013), blended these political concerns with a deeply personal and elegiac commemoration of her father, and won the Michael Murphy Memorial Award for Best First Collection. Her second collection, *Chan* (Bloodaxe, 2016) is about the life and untimely death of her father's cousin, the jazz saxophonist, Joe Harriott, and in *Ormonde* (Hercules Editions, 2014), she excavates the story of the SS *Ormonde*, on which her father migrated to Britain. *The Neighbourhood* (Outspoken Press, 2019) explores how communities respond to the pressures of austerity, gentrification and deportation. Her latest poetry collection is *The Kids* (Bloodaxe, 2021). Lowe's memoir, *Long Time, No See* (Periscope, 2015) was Radio 4's Book of the Week. She has also been Poet in Residence at Keats House, and a writer on the Colonial Countryside Project.

A recording of this talk can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](https://www.writersmosaic.org.uk)

© Hannah Lowe