

More Than Allusion: Fiona Sze-Lorrain's *Rain in Plural*

All times are troubled, all worlds are full of both wounds and wonders. Poetry has always played a role in articulating these realities, and yet at the same time it provides insights that transcend the moment and speak to the larger human condition. Poetry notes the ebb and flow of tides, the flood surge or parching of rivers and streams. But it can also count each raindrop and, in a line or image, hold it up to the light, so that we can know both the rain and the ocean at the same time.

In this conversation, William C. Sharpe spoke with Fiona Sze-Lorrain about her new, fourth collection of poetry, *Rain in Plural*, just out from Princeton University Press this autumn. Both Sharpe and Sze-Lorrain have served as Fellows at the Columbia Institute for Ideas and Imagination in Paris, and before the Covid-19 struck, were exchanging ideas about the fundamental impulses of humans. In addition to requiring health, security, and love, do all people on some level feel a need to create, or a need to move through the world? Their conversation explores themes of mobility, perception, writing, and reading, and the interrelated, shared creativity of poet and critic.

William Sharpe: You begin with an epigraph from Basho. Is this book, which covers so much ground culturally and personally, a “journey to the deep north” for you?

Fiona Sze-Lorrain: Yes, it is—and the journey still in-progress and evolving. *Rain in Plural* has been a harder experience, though more cumulative, given its longer gestation than the earlier collections. In “To the Tune of One Valley,” I wrote:

Distance nailed,
I recall your sonnet—

 bell, pebble, a bouquet
 in our roof
 to unfurl few regrets,

part of mystery, O half this journey,

untamed by what we see, or where
questions have lived.

Basho's work and life have been my “poetic north.” He took a “narrow road to the deep

north.” I had to take whatever route I could find.

Sharpe: To get where?

Sze-Lorrain: To the alchemy of each poem. To the heart of each narrative and image. To the music. To the center of the earth.

Sharpe: “My origins and upbringing are a hybrid of East and West,” it says on your website. You have an unusually international background: Singapore, New York, Paris: does that give you a special relationship to the English language, one not available to those poets based in a single country, such as Britain or the United States? Is “rootedness” necessary to you at some level, or do you feel that your mobility is an advantage?

Sze-Lorrain: I don’t have a dominant mother tongue per se, and am not monocultural. This is both a blessing and a curse. Even though the mainstream media now celebrates the virtues of being “intercultural” or “transcultural,” this fashionable rhetoric does not match a “constructed reality” in which societies are determined to pigeonhole everyone by race, gender, passport. This is where humanity fails.

Sharpe: Yes, humanity often ignores its own capacity to exceed the categories it creates. We are better at creating boxes than thinking outside them, or even seeing how little those boxes can hold.

Sze-Lorrain: Would people in general consider think outside boxes if that comes at a cost? Not everyone believes in giving up comfort, or wants to do so. Back to your question about my relationship with languages . . .

Does not having a mother tongue affect one’s relationship to the English language, or any language for that matter? Probably . . . to tell the truth, I don’t know, and am unsure if I want to know. Each language leads me to its own channel of intuitive knowledge and experience. I downplay the truth of a “mobility,” in part because I am interested in the limitless and the unknown—not because I need answers about the unknown, but precisely to continue not knowing, and to keep myself on the move. But mobility can be associated with evasion: there are times when I must renounce the possibility or illusion of mobility in order to live through—and not avoid—the obstacles. Contrary to its literal sense, “on the move” is an existential paradox about sustaining a center and keeping one whole. American poet Mark Strand wrote a deceptively simple

poem about this:

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.

Sharpe: A critic called you “polycultural.” You are an accomplished musician on the *zheng* harp; you have Western classical piano training; you write and translate in Chinese, English, and French. Artistic works from many traditions are mentioned in your poems. Zen, haiku, Dostoevsky, Austen, Gershwin—all appear in the space of a page or two. How do you find room for yourself and your own experience, working as you do with such a vast poetic and musical legacy? Is it possible to separate a “you” from a “them”?

Sze-Lorrain: I have given up trying to locate a specific ‘me’ as I write, or find room for any specificity. I just go with the flow. Once in it, I focus on going inward for each thing or activity. I choose this way because I need to grow time. “You” lives with “them” and I reject the stereotypical American “me first” attitude. “E pluribus unum” is not my goal; the multiplicity of the individual needs to be recognized, not suppressed. This is why by metaphorical extension, the rain is plural in my title.

Sharpe: How much does a reader of your poetry have to know?

Sze-Lorrain: Non-knowledge strikes me as more erotic than argumentative knowledge or ego-based affirmation.

Sharpe: What you have just said is fascinating. I studied with the New York poet Kenneth Koch in the seventies, and he used to say that once he understood what “The Waste Land” meant, “it did not diminish the pleasure,” implying that understanding was not essential to the pleasure of the text.

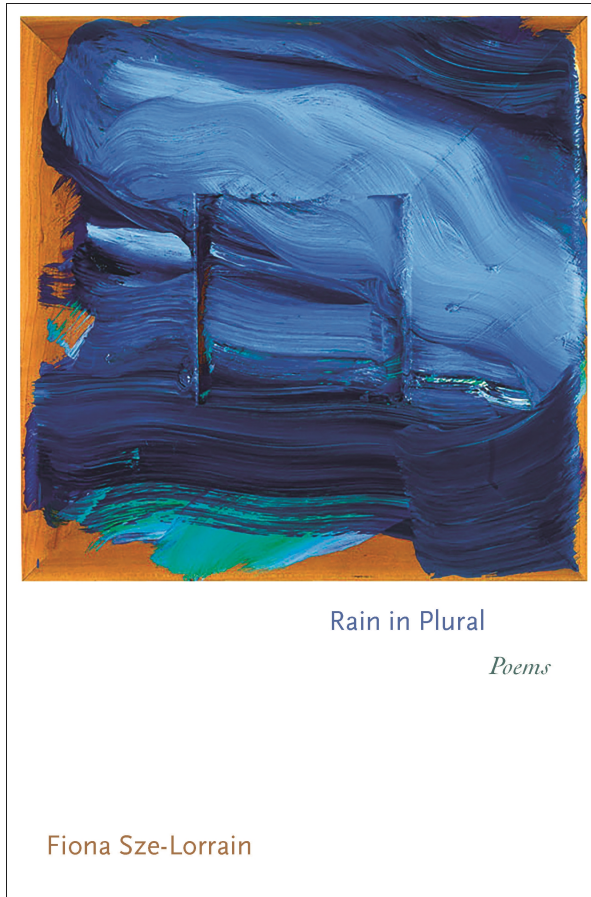
Sze-Lorrain: I agree.

Sharpe: A related question: where and how did you become a poet?

Sze-Lorrain: I started writing poems in English at twenty-four, in Paris, where most of the time I had few people to talk to in English. I didn’t plan to be a poet. I am an autodidact. I love life more than poetry. Occasionally, I make good sushis. At one point I wanted to open a small gallery, but was reluctant to take out a loan. I was working full-time as a musician, doing some freelance editorial projects and cultural journalism on the side, and struggling with my French dissertation on Beckett, which later converted into one about Gao Xingjian’s theatrical practice. I was so bad at making the dissertation work that even Gao had to encourage me. I did not realize how lucky I was then.

Sharpe: The poems here in *Rain in Plural*, some fifty of them, rarely repeat themselves in terms of format or subject matter. Each is taut, almost tense; there are no wasted words, easy outrage, fashionable political opinions. However, a poet’s vocabulary and subject matter are closely linked, and certain words do recur, including body, window, tree, husband, bed, hair, moon, and especially “I.” Is there a theme, an ambience, a nagging concern that you would like readers to carry with them as they leave and return to—as they most certainly will—this book?

Sze-Lorrain: Ambience yes: the cover image of the book is a clue—an oil painting on wood titled *Déjà vu, Déjà Blue* (2004) by contemporary British artist Howard Hodgkin (1932–2017). This painting embodies a gesture and is an act in itself, one act that leads to others. It says everything and nothing, the movement stilled so as to move, unique too because it arises from its own medium, its own use of materials.



Sharpe: One particularly striking line is: “I delete violence from words that fly too soon.” Given the controlled language throughout the collection, would it be correct to say that you delete *any* words that “fly too soon”?

Sze-Lorrain: Yes, so much so that nowadays, it is almost impossible for me to write or read anything. I subtract—until I can’t. On the harp, I edit sounds. On the page, I can’t stand “lovely” and “enjoy.” I don’t flatter. And I think understatement is always more elegant, but it needs to be emotionally honest and not hide things under the carpet.

Sharpe: For poets, almost as personal as subject matter is the question of the look of the poem on the page—the short or long lines, the use of white space, the compression or stretch of the phrasing, the overall length. Is that something you consciously work at, and are you aware of an ongoing development, or an East or a West, in what might be called the “pace and space” of your poems?

Sze-Lorrain: The “pace and space” is closely associated with my idea of a poem as a house and an architecture. I read Proust and Bachelard almost every summer, and

believe in a poem more as a space than a body or text. As you know well, the use—and creation—of white space is one of the most appealing aspects when one paints, yet its process of creation defies all commentary. The Japanese *ma* 間—a pregnant void, space, interval, pause, or emptiness—isn't merely an aesthetics; it is a manifestation of the spirit and the mind, and most broadly, a way of life. I see the same in poetry, and since it is “executed” with words, and will be read aloud, the music needs to be heard and sung—and even eventually danced.

Sharpe: Some poets will set up a clear dramatic space for the poem; the reader can see right away where the poet is located physically or psychologically; the poem is “about” x or y. Other poets will drop readers into the middle of a perception or emotion and let them figure out what’s happening. It’s like having the pieces of the puzzle without the picture on the box. You seem to favor this second approach. Is there a strategy you have in mind for how readers will go about exploring the poem and assembling the picture? Or is there a better analogy for the process of reading and understanding your work?

Sze-Lorrain: You are right to observe that I don’t privilege linear storytelling or *mythos* in its strictest sense. Even with paintings, I tend to prefer the abstract to the figurative. I have alluded to my mistrust of “a good story” in one of the poems “Ode to Disappointment”:

Mailed overnight,
sealed by nonspecific tears. I’m afraid
of your Aristotelian violence: is life

but a dream or sensory wisdom; are
we a unity of time, place, and action?

The middle section of this book, “Nine Solitudes,” contain nine prose pieces with variations on plot and more elements of the familiar construction of a *mythos*. I have also included more narrative pieces such as the sequence of six parts, “The Saying and the Said: Ventriloquistic Cloud Chronicles.” This said, most of my poems aren’t prescriptive, so readers have their right to explore them however they wish!

Sharpe: The intensity of your poems burns on the page. But does it matter whether the poem is perceived as something that *is* happening, or that *has* happened? The Norwegian painter Edvard Munch said, “I don’t paint what I see; I paint what I saw.” Could you comment on how time—memory, verb tense, the instant of feeling or seeing

versus the sensation of having seen or felt—features in the way you construct your poems?

Sze-Lorrain: I dream of my pen reducing the paper to ashes when I write. I prefer my poems to be perceived as something that is happening right there, in the moment of the reading, which is why I hope that a reader of my poems could feel being transported to the moment the poem was written. This is a challenge. I haven't figured out the magic yet.

Sharpe: By definition, poets are makers. Yeats in particular was concerned with how hard it can be to create something lasting, and how easy it is to fall short. Almost a century ago he admonished his contemporaries: "Irish poets, learn your trade / Sing whatever is well made." As a writer in many languages, you have many possible "trades" to consider. Do you think that "mastering poetic craft" is still a valid goal, or are there other priorities for the contemporary poet? When you write a poem, do you see yourself as "making" something? If so, what, and if not, is there a more accurate way of thinking about the words on the pages of your book?

Sze-Lorrain: Since I write longhand, I do see writing a poem as "making" something, although I wish were less fragile. A poem is to me an organic existence. Time and again, I return to Denise Levertov's essay "Some Notes on Organic Form" (1965): "For me, back of the idea of organic form is the concept that there is a form in all things (and in our experience) which the poet can discover and reveal. [...] On the one hand is the idea that content, reality, experience, is essentially fluid and must be given form; on the other, this sense of seeking out inherent, though not immediately apparent, form."

Before the virus outbreak, I used to go to libraries and museums to look at manuscripts, turning over the fragile pages with my cheap white gloves. Each handwritten page comes across to me as a map, an encounter. In *Rain in Plural*, I included a piece about graphology. I hope the words on the pages of my book may serve as a map to an imagination other than their own.

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After Being Loved

"Someone ought to come
more often than usual," says the concierge
who worships Monica Vitti
and leaves the mail on my doormat before

I answer her. If not for the door, light
 would be sentenced to life without parole.
 Judged and demented down each passage.
 I am pulling through a hard
 November, not breathing enough
 to sleep or work on kindness. From this balcony
 the piazza smells like a dying consort. She
 thinks of lovers in dynasties
 and battles, anywhere
 but here until their exile is over.
 A granddaughter of the Sinn Féin will visit
 tomorrow: she is bringing a ladle
 and sausage, and can advise me on a stanza
 by Blake, *And mutual fear brings peace, / Till
 the selfish loves increase: / Then Cruelty
 knits a snare, / And spreads his baits with care.*
 “Campaigners,” she quipped
 last year, “wait for the media
 and jump to conclusions.”
 Lunch to prepare after feeling stronger.
 An hour of moxibustion and Italian verbs:
essere, avere, potere, dovere . . .
 A chain novel from the postwar era.
 Old footage, never lack of impostors.
 Stillness like this to erase
 better: nothing has happened, the break flawless.
 Over a nightgown I put on my coat, leave the apartment
 and walk without focus. Reading statues
 or tourists, strangers in the middle of longing and speech.

—from Sze-Lorrain’s *Rain in Plural* (Princeton, 2020)

Sharpe: For me, “After Being Loved” has a sort of James-Merrill, “An Urban Convalescence” elegiac feel to it, a here-I-am-stuck-in-this-curious-life self-exploration that may—or may not—lead to action. It’s a motif that goes back to Eliot’s “Gerontion” and before that, perhaps, to Tennyson’s “Ulysses.” But “the feel” of a poem may be very different for a writer and reader. Do you think of your poems as relating to certain other poems, in dialog with them, much as a painter might say, “there’s a touch of Hopper in that scene, but I wanted to reshape it so that ...?” Or, since poetry is almost unavoidably full of echoes, is it a strategy of yours to make the sound come from many different directions so that no one (prior) voice dominates?

Sze-Lorrain: In terms of the overall composition and arc of the book, certain pieces are structured in dialogue with one another, though not all poems need to be read that way.

There are several sequence poems in this collection, for example. I sometimes think of them as each a long, horizontal scroll of ink-and-wash painting.

In general, I find it difficult to read the poems of others while writing my own. I have to set aside time for reading, and treat it as a separate task from writing. I don't write fast, but am not slow. Translation as a form of close reading and interpretation is another thing, in that I need to spend more time in finding the right pitch for a voice first heard in another language.

The supposed need for a voice in poetry places readers and writers on slippery ground, when or if it is imagined before being actually heard. In his famous essay "The Other Voice," Octavio Paz wrote, "Between revolution and religion, poetry is the *other* voice. Its voice is *other* because it is the voice of the passions and of visions. It is otherworldly and this-worldly, of days long gone and of this very day, an antiquity without dates." He continued, "All poets in the moments, long or short, of poetry, if they are really poets, hear the *other* voice. It is their own, someone else's, no one else's, no one's, and everyone's." When it comes to writing as a physical activity, I tend to reject any "meta-idea" of a poetic voice. This is where painting might happen. Often, it is the image that creates its own text, the sound and its music. Working on an image seems harder to me because the process ends faster and more brutally. It may stop suddenly or simply in pain, without resolution. How it begins can't be easily willed or planned. Once it stops, nothing else can be done. One, however, may labor on a sentence and finetune its music over a more sustained period of time, and with luck, as long as one relishes.

Sharpe: "After Being Loved" includes references to Italian cinema, William Blake, Irish politics, and—as is often the case in this collection—food. Do you use allusion to create your own version of stylistic unity?

Sze-Lorrain: Yes, but allusion alone doesn't suffice. It can't work too neatly or "perfectly," either. Once allusion "works," I need to do something to make it vulnerable and actual. That is, I consider allusion rewarding only when it comes close to a breaking point: on the edge between the allusion itself and what is alluded to. This gap is what I perceive as reality, or the tangible, a time-space palpable enough to attract and repel. What is being alluded to isn't necessarily the reality; it is only what we perceive or believe as the reality. Otherwise, allusion on the page ends up being a double illusion, or another clever poetic device.

Sharpe: The first poem in the book, "More Vulnerable than Others," steers clear of allusiveness, but nonetheless introduces a number of words and subjects that will recur: mud, tree, moon, dream, free, flower; the defiant vulnerability of the speaker; the organic interplay of human concerns and plant or animal life; the background bass

chord of political anxiety. Every moment seems to tremble between salvation and suffering.

As the collection unfolds, the poems overlap thematically, a sort of rippling *terza rima* of worry about love and relationships, music and words, the healing or destructive or indifferent forces of nature. Do you think of the poem's title as referring to you, or to your role as a poet in modern society? Or would you say that it is more ecological, in the sense of being more concerned with the larger biodynamics of how people relate to the world and each other?

Sze-Lorrain: All of the above! And to this, I wish I could add, *None of the above*.

More Vulnerable Than Others

So what if I break
I will continue to eat mud
unwind underground
 mask banned signs
chew holes in every tall grapevine
 breed my roots after a nap
spread fronds as free
 clothes free money
lay branches bare for the moon and its jaws
 while each flower falls
to its own bad dream

—from Sze-Lorrain's *Rain in Plural* (Princeton, 2020)