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Shara McCallum's *Madwoman*

In *Madwoman*, poet Shara McCallum examines themes of identity and womanhood, but what strikes me the most is the way she ties it all together with a particular music. “Here, a woman is always \ singing, each note tethering\ sound to meaning,” croons the poem “Exile,” cunningly exhibiting how Shara McCallum’s *Madwoman* is composed, in both a musical sense and in a mild deportment. The collection is comprised of a range of human sound interwoven with the language of identity and consequence. The first stanza of “Exile,” “Say *morning*, \ and a bird trills on a doorstep \ outside a kitchen,” is both a picturesque and startling reflection of the human association between harmony and control, the lines leveled on the page like descending notes on a piece of sheet music. At the end of the piece, our take-away is that “time is a fish \ swimming through dark water,” a distinctive type of lyric, in which the euphonious and simple song of woman and bird becomes something murky and boundless, a depiction of what humanity sounds like when faced with its sad impermanence.

McCallum’s sonic eminence traverses the collection, beginning with one of the debut poems, “Memory,” in which the speaker asserts, “Wherever you go, know I’m the wind \ accosting the trees, the howling night \ of your sea.” Where we had a bird and woman singing in “Exile,” we now have the rhythmic howling of wind and trees, a new occurrence of lamentation. The song becomes barbed and brazen, a disquieting threat, when the speaker avows, “No, my love: I’m bone. Rather: the sound \ bone makes when it snaps. That ditty \ lingering in you, like ruin.”

Above all, the ditties that resonate and linger longest are those in which McCallum's Jamaican *patois* takes center stage, mingling an abundance of sharp voices across many pieces, engaging the essence of nationality, identity, history, and womanhood. In "Lot's Wife to Madwoman," one of the most historic, one-dimensional feminine emblems of the consequence of man's insubordination is transformed into a cheeky and petulant speaker. "As happen to all a we, \ my life been reduce \ to one sad, tawdry cliché. Gal, just \ lef mi in peace where yu find mi," spits McCallum's reconstruction of Lot's wife, a request that is representative of many notable women in history—the burden of another's actions becomes the face of the victim; in this case, "never look back" becomes a timeworn lesson that Lot's anonymous wife was never given the choice to teach. McCallum's refurbishment of unacknowledged and underrepresented female characters into women with a distinct attitude and *patois* is a noble effort, one that embodies what any celebrated poet with a platform should aim to do: give the disenfranchised a space to proclaim what they would if their mouths were unbridled. In company with Lot's wife is Claudette Colvin, an uncelebrated young black woman who made strides in the fight for American civil rights, and Madwoman herself, who can arguably represent anyone from Shara McCallum to every woman in history, whether she is faceless or famous.

The namesake of the book, Madwoman, is perhaps the most indispensable manifestation in the collection. Though she is present in most every piece in the collection, we get to know her best in "Ten Things You Might Like to Know about Madwoman," a list poem that is both disdainfully candid and irrefutably comical. We learn a bit about her familial background, love for poppies, and penchant for Abba's "Chiquitita." More importantly, however, we learn that "she's confused about many things," a theme that seems to originate with and speak to the questions of identity that arise throughout the collection. The poem "Race" heralds it most clearly with the concept of being white-passing: "*She's the whitest black girl you ever saw, \ lighter than flesh*" in the Crayola box. \ But, man, look at that ass and look at her shake it." Though it is unclear who is speaking here, it is clear that Madwoman is "so everywhere and so nowhere," a looming construction formed from the very incongruities of self that McCallum masterfully sets to rich music in this poem and elsewhere.

In the concluding poem of the collection, "Madwoman Apocrypha," an endearing question-and-answer session with Madwoman, the interviewer asks, "What created you?" to which Madwoman replies, "A breach in the self." The symbolic character of Madwoman herself is a perplexity, a sloped topography of uneasy landscapes. She is poised, one foot planted in a brave mythology and one in a cluttered identity. She is a docent in the reader's own troubled mind; within the collection, Madwoman both is and isn't a personi-

fiction of the poet's own woe and reminiscence. She is a presence that never abandons our consciousness. She is consciousness itself. By the conclusion of the book, the reader has no choice but to confront whether or not they are, in fact, Madwoman, who, as mentioned in "Ten Things You Might Like to Know about Madwoman," "has problems distinguishing fact from fiction."