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SHARA MCCALLUM'S "THE WATER BETWEEN US"



## The Unbridled Sea

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FOREIGN BUT FAMILIAR, NEW YET LOADED WITH OLD MYTHS, Ms. McCallum's words burst into your mind and don't let go. They make you see, they make you hear, they thrust you into Calypso land and they make you dance.

This is the first thing a reader would experience, the Caribbean rhythm; the conscious awareness of the strong images, the dazzling colors and the overall structure would come later. Words are connected to one another both through assonance and associations, leading to a sudden but not unexpected epiphany.

Perfectly built, McCallum's poems are sung in what T.S. Eliot would call "next year's words" (*Little Gidding*, ll. 120-121). The collection represents a journey into the consciousness of a speaking *I*. Fragments of scenes, of sounds, of dreams are brought to the surface in a seemingly easy manner that makes you forget the virtuoso craft that makes it happen.

The great tradition of past poets and artists is revived by the sensual language which is never banal nor too conceptual. In her most ambitious experiment, *jack mandoora me no choose none*, McCallum brings together her many tongues, her many cultures, switching back and forth in a masterful controlled effort that leaves the reader breathless.

It would be too easy to compare Ms. McCallum to the poets of what might be called the "Great Tradition," since she carries that tradition across new frontiers, taking advantage of what might have appeared at first a disadvantage: her belonging to many cultures at the same time. Being the daughter of a multicultural, multiracial family, she is the enriched synthesis of what the different cultures have to offer. Overcoming the wound of not belonging to either culture, conveying the pain of her search through a language that is new yet traditional, she escapes any easy definition to become a writer who can be acclaimed internationally without losing her true identity.

The collection can be read on different levels: the reader is enticed by the images and the sounds, by the music of the Caribbean, then by the story of a daughter forced to come to terms with abandonment or abuse. The journey within the soul of the narrator is a journey to the Underworld and back, in an effort to save the memories of things past and to redeem an absent father, a deceitful mother. And the personal journey soon becomes one with the journey of a whole people, forced to

come to terms with their differences, with their many skins.

McCallum accomplishes this manifold structure through the use of fairytales and folktales, both from the European and the Afro-Caribbean traditions. The figure of Anancy the spider, the most famous trickster – whose story originated in West Africa and was brought to the Caribbean and South America by the slaves – is behind all evil, all desertions. In a way it is a comforting self-deception to think of Anancy as the sole cause for Rapunzel's destiny, "then it is not / the mother / the father", but "it is anancy / who started it" (*jack mondoora me no choose none*). Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, Cinderella, all of them abandoned and deserted, and the cause "if is not anancy is who?"

Many are the recurrent themes that are revealed through the use of tales. At the core of McCallum's experiments there is always the tearful separation of a child from her mother, or the inexplicable desertion by her father. This idea of abandonment and displacement is brought to the fore by the figure of Heidi, the little shepherdess who is forced to leave her beloved grandfather, her land, her heaven. Like Heidi, upon coming back home the narrator will find "No note, no / explanation. The gate swinging / on its hinges" (*8 Hope Road*). The same desolation of "the house / of broken windows, / thorn-covered walls, / the empty porch swing / creaking in the wind" awaits the return of the narrator and her sisters in *Poem Where My Mother and Father are Absent*. The return is never to a happy home: most often it is to a "house / weathering: paint / chipping in places, / shingles loose, / shutters disheveled- / hanging at odd angles / like broken limbs." (*The Evolution of Useful Things*)

Mothers are seldom there to console or sooth, and the binding water of the womb becomes instead the river of separation. Fathers are like Gods, distant and unable to show compassion while sitting in the garden of Eden "eating the white meat / with the serpent" (*Apple*).

Her method and style may be defined as "magic realism", linking her work to those of such Latin American authors as José Luis Borges or Gabriel García Márquez, or – especially in the rewriting of fairy tales into nightmares – to that of Angela Carter. Realistic images are superimposed by the indescribable mystery of ghastly figures and supernatural elements drawn from a child's fears and dreams.

McCallum makes also good use of the postmodernist idea of intertextuality. Echoes of other poets and artists are distant yet present in her poems, becoming integral part of her story, blending into a Caribbean *calabash*.

[One example that comes quickly to mind is the hag with a "soured breath," feasting all night on the narrator's flesh in McCallum's *The Spell*, which vaguely recalls Sylvia Plath's *Lady Lazarus* with her "sour breath." And Plath is again sensed in *Darkling I listen*, though here there's more compassion.]

The water of the book's title is both life-giving and life-taking. Images of birth and of drowning intermix throughout the narrative, and lead to the final section of the book which is devoted to

“the sirens.” Once again the realistic images, the mythological figures and a child’s nightmare come together on the page. The turmoil of conflicting emotions – the feeling of guilt on the one hand and defiance on the other, felt by the sirens, the abandoned children of our story – all at once, unexpectedly and powerfully, hits the astonished reader, who is now made to feel it too.

The journey is over, sides are taken, belonging can be a tearing choice. There will be no return once the siren has chosen to lose her scales and “cast off her flesh” (*The tragedy of the mermaid*). There will be no redemption. The price will be a lifetime spent “chipping away layers / of flesh” (*What the Oracle Said*) and the only words echoing in her ears will be the Oracle’s prophecy: “The sea will never take you back”. 🐚