

Shara McCallum

No Ruined Stone

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Shara McCallum's new poetic voyage takes us back to September 1786, the year the Scottish poet Robert Burns was supposed to sail to Jamaica, and work as a bookkeeper on a slave plantation, at Springbank, Ayr Mount. The owners of the plantation were two brothers, Charles Douglas, the "Master" of the plantation, and Patrick Douglas, who had remained in Scotland.

Burns never made the crossing, but in Shara McCallum's alternative narrative we follow him to Jamaica, where his destiny mirrors that of many Europeans who left the Continent for the colonies. This is the story of those men, recounted by different characters who give us their own version of their reality, as well as by Burns himself, as if he had actually followed that route. It is the story of Everyman, any ordinary man who faces events much harder than he had bargained for. It is a story that needed to be written and needs to be read; it is a heart-breaking conversation between abused and abusers that shows us the violence and brutality of colonialism.

Burns here becomes the voice of all unknown men who found themselves in an environment alien from what they were used to, an environment that was both terrifying, exciting and intoxicating, and which changed them forever and affected the lives of those they touched. Intertwining real history and alternative reality, Shara McCallum plunges the readers and her characters into a parallel existence, where time and space as we know them no longer exist, affect-



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ing who we are, who we become: in Scotland law-abiding citizens, loving fathers and husbands, in the Caribbean plantation Masters and their accomplices, who turn their eyes away in front of unutterable violence and crimes. Drawing from the language of 18th-century writers, McCallum borrows their styles, transforms Richardson's epistolary novel into an epistolary novel in verse, and finally gives new life to Robert Browning's dramatic monologue. The book is divided into two main sections, "The Bard" and "Isabella".

We learn of Burns's relationship with Nancy, a slave who would give him a daughter, and would later become a most feared obeah-woman, practicing sorcery and using magic rituals to cast spells on the planters or cure the slaves. The daughter, Agnes, of mixed race, would then become Douglas's mistress and mother to Isabella, a light-skinned "quadroon" (one-quarter black).

The fate of the planters was a descent into hell and darkness, the fate of the enslaved women was to be abused, disappear, die, or become obeah-women like Nancy.

McCallum's gorgeous language accompanies us along Robert Burns's path from the docks at Greenock, through a nightmarish voyage across the ocean ("what was it I knew then | have now forgotten entirely") where "life itself became disease | aboard the Bell" ("Voyage"), towards another life which "corrodes inside of this one" ("Another Life"), and where he would find himself "slave to ill-begotten Fate", unable to utter what he had witnessed and done.

[...] I am a wanderer,
sojourner in this strange land
[...]
I, who wished to be a decent fellow,
[...] have become
the detested Negro Driver I feared,
harrowed by the feeling of the damned.
("Landscape")

The only light in this dark and gruesome life was the presence of Nancy, the slave he loved.

In the space before dawn
something enters
wafting with wind
[...]
in silvered light her sweet
sonsie face graces
my sleeping and
on waking she is
the sun settling trees

back into their rightful
 selves on waking
 she is all
 that might obliterate
 for a moment
 the dark.
 ("The Hour of Dream")

His need for love, his guilt at descending into darkness, are laughed at by Douglas, for whom the slaves are "good for nothing but toiling and fucking" ("Douglas's Reply"). Douglas is the representation of the horrors Burns had sunk into on the "island, [where] distinction between | planter and bookkeeper wanes" ("Bard").

Throughout the first part of McCallum's work, the words of the fictional Burns echo those of James Joyce: "In time, | every man becomes the nightmare | from which he cannot wake" ("Crumbo-Jingle"); only Art, in the form of poems, the poems that Burns sends home, seems a way to restore order. But, of course, they are not enough.

The last few poems of the first section are devoted to Fate, Time, Space, the idea of circularity and of spiritual journeys, and of the work of the poet.

time is tethered to a fate unwavering
 [...]
 And from the beginning the end
 was visible, already written -
 ("Fate")

Every man's destiny is determined by Space and Time, and bound by Fate,

whose cruel twine is ordained
 not by any law of God or Nature,
 but of this world we have designed.
 This world, where profit is the first
 and last word. Violence, both rule and reason.
 ("Rising")

McCallum's interest in the role of memory, both personal and collective, in constructing History, has always been at the centre of her poetic search. Accordingly, the second section of this majestic new book, opens with a cry to memory, and it is Isabella telling us of her first memories, a sound, a fire, and blood. She recounts her voyage to Edinburgh, across the ocean, in the company of her grandmother Nancy, who passes for her slave, her mother having died giving birth. The whole section is harrowing and heart-breaking.

Isabella, the quadroon, cannot tell anybody who she really is, and she has to endure the horror of bearing her father's traits. She has to hide whose soul is hidden under her white skin even from her husband. To give voice to Isabella, McCallum resorts here to her most powerful language. She talks in a quiet but desperate voice, the voice of someone trapped inside a story she cannot tell, forced to conceal herself "in plain sight", because, as she recounts: "everyone sees only what they want".

But soon,
 it grew to be my second skin. I grew
 so comfortable in the lies, in the lying,
 I could believe the sound of my own voice,
 and memory began to give way
 bit by bit to fiction [...]
 ("Passing")

In what can be considered one of her most accomplished and complex works of poetry, "This Strange Land", McCallum wrote that History is a room she cannot enter.

To enter that room, I would need to bridge the distance between my
 door and what lies beyond
 [...]
 To enter that room, I would need to uncover the pattern of life
 [...]
 To enter that room, I would need to be armed with the **right question**.
 [Emphasis added]

Also in *No Ruined Stone* there is a door that needs to be opened, or closed behind oneself. It is again a door to History, a door that, in Isabella's words: "closed behind us, a door | I was never meant to open again".

Isabella, Robert Burns's fictional granddaughter, was "evidence" that "needed to be erased", and thus needed to be hidden. She would follow the destiny of many light-skinned girls born into slavery: she would be sent away, lest she should expose who her father and grandfather were. In Scotland she would 'pass' for white, and the story of her genealogy would be erased forever. But, as McCallum reminds us, historical evidence cannot be erased forever and History will always come back to haunt the perpetrators. It will always be revealed, even if only as a parallel memory.

The opening poem, "No Ruined Stone", is dedicated to *Robert Burns after Calum Colvin's "Portrait of Hugh Mac Diarmid"*. The Scottish poet Hugh Mac Diarmid was one of the most influential poetic and political voices of his time, and Shara McCallum's work takes its title from his most famous poem "On A Raised Beach":

We must be humble. We are so easily baffled by appearances
 And do not realise that these stones are one with the stars.
 It makes no difference to them whether they are high or low,
 Mountain peak or ocean floor, palace, or pigsty.
 There are plenty of ruined buildings in the world but **no ruined
 stones.**

[Emphasis added]

In her opening address to Robert Burns, the narrating voice closes with a burning question:

you more myth than man,
cannot unmake history.
 So why am I here
 resurrecting you to speak
 when your silence gulfs century?
 Why do I find myself
 on your doorstep, knocking,
 when I know the dead
 will never answer?

[Emphasis added]

The poet Burns cannot unmake history, and the dead would probably never answer, but the door that was never meant to be opened again is now, not just opened, but broken wide open with the force of McCallum's poetry.

The last poem of the collection, also titled "No Ruined Stone", is again addressed to Burns, and brings to centre stage the dead, Memory, Time, Place.

When the dead return
 they will come to you in dream
 and in waking, [...]
 the farther you journey
 from them the more
 distance will maw in you
 time and place gulching
 when the dead return to demand
 [...]
 everything you have to give and nothing
 will quench or unhunger them
 as they take all you make as offering.
 Then tell you to begin again.

At the end of her stunning new work, McCallum closes the circle, this time armed with the right question to enter the room of History:

“What would have happened had he gone?”. The answer is that Robert Burns’s alternative story would probably have become History.