

## The Face of Water: New and Selected Poems

McCallum, Shara.  
Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2011.

### Reviewed by Karen Nelson Villanueva

In her most recent collection of poetry, Shara McCallum looks directly into the face of water to recognize her birth in this world. McCallum is a gifted poet who tests the waters of her life to measure its distance from the past and to gauge its depth in the present.

In section one, which comprises poems previously published in *The Water between Us*, the speaker assesses the distance between herself and her mother in “Jamaica, October 18, 1972:” once close as the amniotic fluid flowing down her mother’s legs; now “the water between us becoming a river” (32). In this selection of poems, the speaker probes her past through the eyes of a child—a *picknie*—in Jamaica.

In section two, the speaker in poems from *Songs of Thieves* seeks to understand herself in relation to the world. Here we encounter themes of an absent father, the othering of self as mulatta and octaroon, god as mother and father, and the longing of her mother. In “Tanglehair’s Mother Speaks,” the speaker’s mother laments, “All day, I watch you grow away from me: little one” (62). In “The Madwoman Dreams of the Beginning,” the speaker asserts “before I was, I was” (67), which begs the question: Do we know the we, we ought to be, the *we* we will become?

In section three, in poems from *This Strange Land*, the speaker again measures the distance between herself and where she comes from, where she is, and where she is going. Truth is revealed in “The Waves,” “when everything comes apart, is ripped so clean who you are is laid bare” (92). In “The Shore,” the speaker in love watches “the distance between us grow wider, feeling the thread that binds us loosen” (98). In “From the Book of Mother,” the mother feels the “water’s blind grace, the current’s whims (108) ... rowing away from the shore” (109). Fearing the inevitable distance between mother and child, she now knows “grief’s depths” (111). Differentiating herself from her own mother, she proclaims, “I am a mother like but also not like you” (111). From the depths she discovers, “Each woman is within herself mother and daughter, bound by the same spell” (112). She has been daughter to mother; daughter to father, home, and country; and daughter who becomes wife who becomes mother: “Our lives are an arc of flight: *away, toward, away*” (115). Coming in

waves of meaning, she now has full knowledge of what it is to fear the distance, what it is to dread the distance, what it is to accept the distance.

In the final section, *New Poems*, the speaker returns to her mother who is redefined through knowing. In “Fracture” she writes, “The mother knows her child’s story is one she cannot revise” (130). “Susquehanna” proffers final advice: each of must “decode the future assembling on the water” (140).