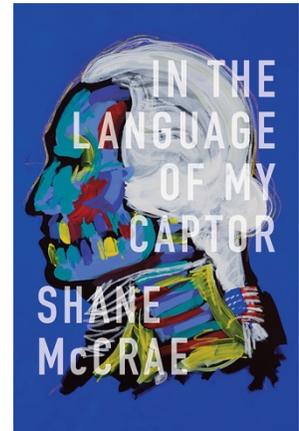


In the Language of My Captor Interviews



Which non-literary piece of culture—film, tv show, painting, song—could you not imagine your life without?

My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless*. I hardly ever listen to it these days, and haven't really for 20 years, maybe, but it's my favorite album of all time, and I honestly do think about it almost every day. I wouldn't be who I am without it.

What's the best writing advice you've ever received?

Try not to use the construction "there is." Lex Runciman, with whom I studied at Linfield College, taught me that. It sounds like a small thing, but it had an enormous impact on me. It was a way into thinking about what I wanted my writing to be.

How did you choose the personas that you inhabit in this book?

Yesterday, I was browsing in Unnameable Books, and I spotted a new biography of Vivian Meier. And instantly I knew I had to buy it, and I knew I had to write poems about Vivian Meier. I don't know why, exactly. But it was much the same with the personas in *In the Language of My Captor*—I didn't consciously choose to write about them so much as I felt like I couldn't choose not to write about them. I stumbled across each: Banjo Yes grew out of a conversation Melissa and I had about Stepin Fetchit, the speaker of the poems in the first section of the book was born when I happened to glance at the cover of a book about Ota Benga—almost instantly—and I first learned about Jim Limber on Twitter. In this way, discovering personas, for me, is much like writing poems: I have to be available for it to happen, and sometimes it does.

Do you set out to build certain forms and structures in your work or do they occur organically as you write?

A little of both, really. I tend to fall back on writing sonnets, and all the poems Jim Limber speaks in the book are sonnets, but with the first section I allowed the shape of each poem to be determined by its initial stanza—if that first stanza had, say, 17 feet, then every stanza after it would also have 17 feet. And the poems in the Banjo Yes section, while still iambic, were for the most part structurally free.

From *Lit Hub*, "Meet National Book Award Finalist Shane McCrae" [read more here](#).

Lithub.com

"The Sunday Rumpus Interview:
Shane McCrae"
The Rumpus

"Shane McCrae in Conversation
at *32Poems*"
Poetry Foundation

"Three Questions with Shane
McCrae"
PEN America, 02/14/13

"Episode 11: Shane McCrae"
*Commonplace: Conversations
with Poets (and Other People)*,
Rachel Zucker

"Shane McCrae"
PRAXIS WYBC Yale Radio

"An Interview with Shane
McCrae by Andrea Francis"
Tremolo/The Volta

Critical Reviews

Reviews of Shane McCrae's *In the Language of My Captor*

In the Language of My Captor by Shane McCrae"

Colorado Review

"Mother Tongue"

Salamander Magazine, Valerie Duff-Strautmann

"Shane McCrae, In the Language of my Captor"

Rob McLennan's Blog

"Five Poets Explore the Intersection of Self and Other"

New York Times Book Review, Steph Burt

"An Autobiography of Captivity"

Boston Review, Ryo Yamaguchi

"Some Notes on Literary Power and Shane McCrae's [In] *The Language of my Captor*"

Kenyon Review, Jonathan Farmer

Reviews of Shane McCrae's *Mule*

"'Stubborn as a': Shane McCrae's *Mule*"

Kenyon Review, 2012

"Shane McCrae's MULE"

The Iowa Review

"HIS NOSE STILL MINE"

The Rumpus

"*Mule* is Headphone Poetry"

The Lit Pub

"Microreview: Shane McCrae, *Mule*"

Boston Review

Author's note accompanying the poem "Jim Limber the Adopted Mulatto Son of Jefferson Davis Met his Adoptive Mother Varina Davis at a Crossroads"

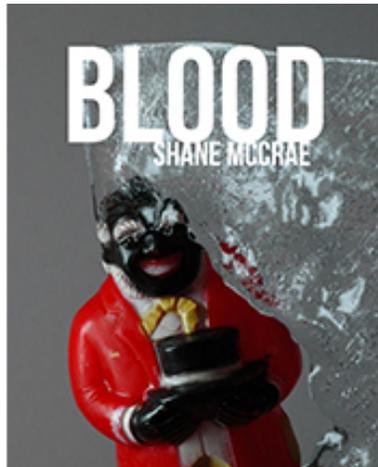
I wrote this poem in March of this year, after stumbling across the following tweet by Gregory Cowles, which was itself written in reply to a tweet by Kathryn Schulz about how somebody should write a novel about Jim Limber: "I nominate the poet Shane McCrae to write it." My first thought was, "There's no way I could write a novel." And my second thought was, "Hmm. Maybe I should Wikipedia Jim Limber" (except, you know, I didn't actually know his name at the time—it hadn't been mentioned in the Kathryn Schulz tweet).

So I looked Jim Limber up. And even though I already knew he had existed, still I was surprised to discover and read his story. And I wonder whether other countries that have perpetrated enormous atrocities know as little about said atrocities as the United States knows about its participation in the slave trade. Because the fact of Jim Limber would seem to be the sort of fact that would get mentioned in, say, high-school history class discussions of the Civil War. But it doesn't—at least, not commonly. The thing about the United States is that it could not withstand knowing about the United States.

This poem is from a sequence of poems I wrote for my fifth book, *In the Language of My Captor*, which Wesleyan University Press will publish in February 2017. While the very basic historical events recounted in these poems did happen, I made up everything the speakers say. I wanted to do my very small part to at least present the fact of Jim Limber.

from *Missouri Review* "Poem of the Week" 12/5/2016, read more here:

missourireview.com



Reviews of Shane McCrae's *Blood*

“Django Decapitated: On Shane McCrae’s *BLOOD*”

The Iowa Review

“*Blood* by Shane McCrae”

The Rumpus

“Shane McCrae’s *Blood* – The Unstoppable Epic”

University of Ottawa

Reviews of Shane McCrae’s *Forgiveness Forgiveness*

“*Forgiveness Forgiveness* by Shane McCrae”

American Microreviews & Interviews

“Review of *Forgiveness Forgiveness*”

Poetry Matters

“The New Testament, Citizen, and Forgiveness Forgivenesses: Contemporary Poetry on the Politics of Race”

Indiana Review

“*Forgiveness Forgiveness*”

Scout Poetry

“The Sharp White Background”

Salamander Magazine

“*Forgiveness Forgiveness*”

Colorado Review

Reviews of Shane McCrae's *The Animal Too Big to Kill*

"The Animal Too Big to Kill by Shane McCrae"

American Microreviews & Interviews

"The Animal Too Big to Kill by Shane McCrae"

Bookslut

"The Animal Too Big to Kill by Shane McCrae"

BookForum

"Shane McCrae's frantic poetry attempts to outrun racism"

Slate: Book Review

"The Animal Too Big to Kill by Shane McCrae"

The Rumpus



Influences

Amiri Baraka, Aimé Césaire, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath