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 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.

“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_*

*_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