

PoetrySlabs @ FEAST

3 June 2018

JAMAICAN GEMS

THE POETRY OF CLAUDE McKAY, JEAN 'BINTA' BREEZE,
COLIN CHANNER & SHARA McCALLUM

INTRODUCTION

This afternoon we'll be reading the work of four poets from Jamaica, the West's original 'sugar fountain' and, for almost 200 years, the epicentre of British slavery. The island's history has frequently been tumultuous, and it continues, in some ways, to be so today as successive governments labour fully to free the country from the legacy of colonialism. All these tensions are evident in much of the poetry we're going to look at, and it's also worth noting that all the poets concerned belong to the Jamaican 'diaspora', something of particular relevance in light of the *Windrush* scandal. All of them were born in Jamaica but ended up somewhere else: the UK in one instance, the US in the other three. And what they took with them turned out to be something they ended up owning forever.

Claude McKay was born in Clarendon Parish, Jamaica, in 1889. His parents, Thomas and Hannah, were prosperous farmers and a study in contrasts, with Thomas's strictness (something of a trial for his children) being balanced by the warmth of his wife. (Thomas was of Ashanti descent; Hannah's forebears came from Madagascar.) Claude, who began writing poetry at the age 10, received his early education from his older brother, Uriah Theodore (known as 'UTheo'), and became an avid reader of classical and British literature, philosophy, science, and theology. While working for a local cabinetmaker and, later, as a member of the Jamaica Constabulary Force, he became increasingly well acquainted with a British folklorist named Walter Jekyll, who encouraged him to concentrate on writing, particularly in his native dialect. McKay published his first poetry collection, *Songs of Jamaica*, in 1912, and then departed for the United States, where he studied briefly at the Tuskegee Institute and then moved on to Kansas State University, where, while studying agronomy, he read American sociologist WEB Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, which was to become a foundation text in the African-American struggle for civil rights. In 1914, he moved to New York, became a committed communist, worked as executive co-editor of the radical magazine *The Liberator*, and eventually – in the wake of sojourns in England, France, and the Soviet Union – found himself back in New York and at the heart of the Harlem Renaissance. The audience for his poetry grew exponentially, and he also authored several well-received novels. In 1944, he left politics behind and converted to Catholicism. He died in Chicago at the age of 58 and

was buried in New York. In 1977, the Jamaican government awarded him the title of 'national poet', and posthumously awarded him the Order of Jamaica. McKay is generally regarded as 'the foremost left-wing black intellectual of his age', and his work greatly influenced many black authors, including James Baldwin and Richard Wright. **Jean 'Binta' Breeze**, born and raised in rural Jamaica, studied drama in Kingston and, at the invitation of Linton Kwesi Johnson, undertook her debut UK performance at the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books in 1985. Her first book of poetry, *Ryddim Ravings*, was published in that same year, and she went on to release several albums, including *Tracks*, recorded with Dennis Bovell's Dub Band. She has suffered from schizophrenia since her early 20s and regularly advocates increased attention to the needs of schizophrenics who do not have a talent like hers. She has been hugely popular for more than 40 years, and in 2012 she received an MBE for services to literature. The musicality of her writing is so irresistible that it's almost impossible to read a few lines without tapping one's feet – the rhythm communicates itself instantaneously. And its emotional content can be overwhelming. **Colin Channer**, born in Kingston in 1963, has been described as 'Bob Marley with a pen' and is better known as a novelist. He migrated to New York in 1982 and took a BA in media communications at the City University of New York's Hunter College. His debut poetry collection, *Providential*, was published in 2015, and mostly focuses on his relationship with his father, who, like Claude McKay, served with the Jamaica Constabulary Force. It manages to hold violence, humour, tenderness, and loss in a remarkably delicate – but never unstable – equilibrium. It's the kind of poetry that can bring the reader to a point where the completely unfamiliar gradually becomes perfectly comprehensible. **Shara McCallum** was born in Kingston and now lives and works in the United States, where she is director of the Stadler Center for Poetry and also teaches literature and creative writing at Bucknell University. Her most recent collection, *Madwoman* – from which we'll be reading four poems – was published last year. Her formal skills are in a class of their own, adding a startling measure of classicism to her dialect poetry. 'Her work,' says poet Terrance Hayes, 'steers us through the heart of troubled landscapes, as well as the landscapes of the troubled heart... There are no other poets writing with [her] beautiful intensities of form and feeling.'

MY NATIVE LAND, MY HOME

By Claude McKay

Dere is no land dat can compare
 Wid you where'er I roam;
In all de wul' none like you fair,
 My native land, my home.

Jamaica is de nigger's place,
 No mind whe' some declare;
Although dem call we "no-land race,"
 I know we home is here.

You give me life an' nourishment,
 No udder land I know;
My lub I neber can repent,
 For all to you I owe.

E'en ef you mek me beggar die,
 I'll trust you all de same,
An' none de less on you rely,
 Nor saddle you wid blame.

Though you may cas' me from your breas'
 An' trample me to deat',
My heart will trus' you none de less,
 My land I won't feget.

An' I hope none o' your sons would
 Refuse deir strengt' to lend,
An' drain de last drop o' deir blood
 Their country to defend.

You draw de t'ousan' from deir shore,
 An' all 'long keep dem please';
De invalid come here fe cure,
 You heal all deir disease.

Your fertile soil grow all o' t'ings
 To full de naygur's wants,
'Tis seamed wid never-failing springs
 To give dew to de plants.

You hab all t'ings fe mek life bles',
But buccra¹ 'poil de whole
Wid gove'mint an all de res',
Fe worry naygur soul.

Still all dem little chipidness
Caan' tek away me lub;
De time when I'll tu'n 'gains' you is
When you can't give me grub.

A SONG TO HEAL

By Jean 'Binta' Breeze

she walk
to de riddym
a de heartbeat
talk
like a rustling wind
touch
like cool spring water
distant
as de land of dreams
an no one knows

how she does
as she waits
an waits
as she does

watching de sky
for rain
heart strung
like a quiet scream
an no one knows

how night
grow into morning
out of a creeping dusk
an wake yuh
in a cruel moment
too naked
for an eye to throw a blind
on pain
for calm

¹ African-American and Black Caribbean term for a white person.

in de centre
a de hurricane
no one knows

an she prays
as she writes
an writes
as she prays
for de calm
of de touch of understanding
for a word for de eagle
an de dove

for a song so real
a song to heal
no one knows

how she waits
as she does
an does
as she waits
waits as she prays
an prays
an she writes
den she rise
an she sing
an sing
as she rise

chanting to de riddym a de heartbeat
talking like a rustling wind
touching like cool spring water
distant as de land of dreams
distant
as de land of dreams

CLARKEY AND ELMA

By Colin Channer

One chop and the back breaks, a pull-twist
and the sternum gone. It is a rampage,
a fête of blood in the small yard
where the big house chucks a lot of shade.

They watch him work the cutlass,²
murmur from the deepness of their rum,
observe the way he holds each chicken – soft,
rubs each one tender with pimento,
talcums it with thyme, spreads each leg
to take the stuffing they enjoy,
that mystery mash of cornmeal, Maggi packets,
and green herbs his granny still sends from Troja,³
the bottles wrapped in brown paper,
taped up tight-tight in plastic, like weed.

They, his squad mates⁴ of thirty years,
have come to help him with the work,
a job they've taken on in seriousness
since Elma withered on her bones.

They talk about what they talk about
when they congregate this time of year,
the time itself a place, a henge in a backyard
where the macho is remade into something
more feminine and forceful,
a chapel of easement where they honour
through labour what Elma did alone each year
to celebrate the night their brother broke the water,
mudslid into the world.

They pet the goats and piglets, gain their trust
before the ambush, string them from the almond limb
as Elma used to do in a house frock and water boots,
smoking with the lit end of a Rothman's in her mouth –
still the sidewalk higgler⁵ that Clarkekey took up.

They kill, they git, they skin, they scrape,
and then true butchering begins, the slow unmaking
of the puzzlements God fit together easy,
probing with knife point for surrender,
snapping tendons, uncoupling socket and bone.

² Caribbean term for a machete or any large knife.

³ A village about 30 miles from Kingston.

⁴ Fellow members of the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF), originally established in the 1860s to quell civil unrest; referred to as 'constabs' in Jamaican parlance. It has long had something of a reputation for administering rough justice.

⁵ market trader.

Tonight, two hundred will come in congregation
to this flat-roof house to dance and give praise –.
inside, on the new cream tiles bribed in from Tampa,⁶
outside, on what's left of the garden
since the last break wall add on.
The girlfriends will come but stay distant.
The wives and their sons will dance.
A televangelist will bless the cake,
and with eyes half-open, the men who know
Clarke best, who've seen him spatchcock a chicken
then rub it down tender and right
will think of Elma's phone calls at all hours,
crying, begging them to come,
trembling how the squaddie flung her to the rug
and pressed a knee between her shoulders
like he thought she might fly,
will remember how they'd rush there,
how she'd sway out as half-expected,
half slip hauled up past her nipples,
and Clarke would trudge out, grinning,
chest tattooed with bite marks.

Now, as they watch him with glazed intentions
on the drum pit, they intuit things are different,
so much loss. They approach, nonchalant, encircle.

Breathe.

WEST COAST

For Dora Sandybird & for my grandmother

By Shara McCallum

*...there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made
— Wallace Stevens⁷*

*Hello darling, she calls
leaning over a wooden railing,
in lilac dress, and grey knitted cap,
framed by morning light, an open*

⁶ The implication is that importing the tiles (in this instance from Tampa, Florida) entailed bribing customs officials.

⁷ Wallace Stevens, American poet (1879–1955).

door. Perched on her porch,
gaze absent, she seems waiting
for someone to enter her view.
Then eyes snap into focus,
an arm extends in greeting.
She descends cement blocks,
doubling as stairs, with speed
and grace belying her age.
Her body becomes
a taut line of longing.

*

Docked in her yard on empty oil drums,
a fifteen-foot fishing boat
almost eclipses her face,
her house, the whole of this scene.
Trellising the keel, weeds sprout
lavender flowers. A vine froths
white stars. Another, maybe pumpkin,
wraps and climbs, entering the hull.
The wood is rotting,
paint faded and chipped,
but *West Coast*, stencilled
on the starboard side, remains legible,
reminding all who pass this way
exactly where we are.

*

A mind adrift in memory,
she repeats phrases each time we meet:
My father was a fisherman, you know?
I had my swim already.
Mr. Stevens, on some matters
we can agree: there is no world
for her but this one she makes.
Yet about the sea, I fear
you were wrong: no one gets to sing
beyond its genius. Original mystery,
the sea closes itself to scrutiny
like pods my daughters collect

on its shores. They rattle, but when
split open no seeds spill into our hands.

*

This time of day the sun
is a mound of butter, arranged
on a bone china plate.
Past her house, a narrow path
leads down a hill of bougainvillea,
desert rose and frangipani, blooms
strewn across rocky ground.
Then soil turns to sand, a clearing
opens, delivering me
to the sea. Each morning
I run its shoreline, testing tides
and my body's limits – her voice
the chorus I cannot outdistance:
Alright darling. You go.

THE HEART OF A CONSTAB⁸

By Claude McKay

'Tis hatred without an' 'tis hatred within,
An' I am so weary an' sad;
For all t'rough de tempest o' terrible strife
Dere's not'in to make poor me glad.

Oh! where are de faces I loved in de past,
De frien's dat I used to hold dear?
Oh say, have dey all turned away from me now
Beausen de red seam⁹ I wear?

I foolishly wandered away from dem all
To dis life of anguish an' woe,
Where I mus' be hard on me own kith an' kin,
And even to frien' mus' prove foe.

Oh! what have I gained from my too too rash act
O' joinin' a hard Constab Force,
Save quenchin' me thirst from a vinegar cup,
De vinegar cup o' remorse?

⁸ Contraction of 'constable' (member of the JCF).

⁹ A reference to the red seam stitched onto the uniform trousers worn by the JCF.

I t'ought of a livin' o' pure honest toil,
To keep up dis slow-ebbin' breath;
But no, de life surely is bendin' me do'n,
Is bendin' me do'n to de death.

'Tis grievous to think dat, while toilin' on here,
My people won't love me again,
My people, my people, me owna black skin,—
De wretched t'ought gives me such pain.

But I'll leave it, my people, an' come back to you,
I'll flee from de grief an' turmoil;
I'll leave it, though flow'rs here should line my path yet,
An' come back to you an' de soil.

For 'tis hatred without an' 'tis hatred within,
An' how can I live, 'douten heart?
Then oh for de country, de love o' me soul,
From which I shall nevermore part!

JUST IN CASE

By Jean 'Binta' Breeze

and just in case
you ever wonder
if I am the summer's passing sun

and if a winter night of doubt
should wake you
and you think I am the snow
that's suddenly gone

and if on lonely mornings
you look up at the sky
and think I am a drifting cloud
that drops its rain
and mistlike
disappears

and if you ever think
some passing storm of frenzy
could wipe out all the pages
of our days

just give me time, my love
to come again

and touch you
with forever

BALLS

By Colin Channer

It's a Magnum¹⁰ in the memory.
Ivory handle. Body silver plate.
I didn't see it, but it's fact, I know.

The boy, though, I saw,
what remained at least,
broken on the hot piazza,
khaki shirt and pants glassy
from the starch pressed in at home.

It was a Wednesday at the stadium,
the only one we had those days,
Tivoli¹¹ versus Charlie Smith,¹²
Labourites¹³ competing with the Socialists,¹⁴
high school football as rally and picnic,
all those ball tricks known as
salads and *pies*.

Outside, in the oven air,
somewhere between the pink bowl
heaped with cheering
and the sprinter's statue looking like a faucet
you could tap for beer,
the remains of a boy, my age,
head open, brains in splatter,
did just deh-deh,¹⁵
undignified without the tape or chalking
that embrace a life,
just a broken line of boots
around it at slack angles,
tight pants with red striping,

¹⁰ The .44 Magnum, a particularly powerful handgun originally produced by Smith & Wesson.

¹¹ Tivoli Gardens High School, in Kingston, Jamaica.

¹² Charles Smith High School, in Kingston, Jamaica.

¹³ Supporters of the Jamaica Labour Party.

¹⁴ Supporters of Jamaica's democratic-socialist People's National Party.

¹⁵ Jamaican dialect for 'dead'.

pump-actions¹⁶ carried casual,
muzzles only inches from the waste.

By then the chaos of the killing
had simmered to the normal hustle
of bodies pressing round
the scarecrow turnstiles,
and soldiers in fatigues
taking note with their Stens,¹⁷
the reek of under-odour,
salty piss and cigarettes,
the hum of syrup drawing bees
to snowcone carts,
the sharp of pepper *swimps*¹⁸ tied in plastic,
baskets of aquariums floating on the head.

The boy was no gangster,
so I gathered from the man who sold me
Shirley biscuits¹⁹ in a pack
and a few loose sticks of gum.
Just a gun bag for an activist
nobody couldn't touch.

'Some o' them a get too bad,' he said.
'This one balls get cut.'

SHE

By Shara McCallum

She could sing the blue out of water
She could sing the meat off a bone
She could sing the fire out of burning
She could sing a body out of home

She could sing the eye out of a hurricane
She could sing the fox right out its hole
She could sing the devil from the details
She could sing the lonely from a soul

¹⁶ A pump-action or slide-action firearm (usually a shotgun) is one in which a fore-end can be moved forward and backward in order to eject a spent round of ammunition and to chamber a fresh one.

¹⁷ A submachine gun used by British and Commonwealth forces through World War II and the Korean War.

¹⁸ Jamaican term for crayfish.

¹⁹ A biscuit popular throughout the Caribbean.

She could sing a lesson in a yardstick
She could sing the duppy²⁰ out of night
She could sing the shoeless out of homesick
She could sing a wrong out of a right

She could sing the prickle from the nettle
She could sing the sorrow out of stone
She could sing the tender from the bitter
She could sing the never out of gone

TO W.G.G.

By Claude McKay

Come, come wid me, my tired soul,
'Way from de miserable wul';
Come from de noise, de wild alarm,
To heights o' mountain peace an' calm.

Do you not hear de battle's roar,
De tumult ragin' on de shore?
Do you not see de poisonous bait
Man sets for man t'rough deadly hate?

Come flee de envy an' de strife,
Before dey ruin our life:
Come to de hills; dey may be drear,
But we can shun de evil here.

De northers now are blowin' chill,
De fog hangs dismal on de hill,
An' sometimes fe long dreary days
De sun is wrapt up in-a haze.

De season rain is on te-day,
De flowers all are fadin' 'way ;
But dere'll be sun upon de heights
After de gloomy Christmas nights.

Soon shall we feel de heartening charm
Of country life, de sunshine warm;
An' see, wherever we may roam,
Wild flowers burstin' into bloom.

²⁰ West Indian term for a malevolent spirit or a ghost.

We'll hear de murmur o' de rills,
We'll clearly see de verdant hills
Wid here an' dere de peasant's field
So lovely in its fruitful yield.

De helpless playt'ing of a Will,
We'll spend our short days here; an' still,
Though prisoners, feel somehow free
To live our lives o' misery.

Dear comrade o' de constab life,
I've gone an' left you in de strife;
But whether skies are dark or blue,
Dis true true heart remembers you.

TRUTH

By Jean 'Binta' Breeze

some years after
when the laughter came again
she grew her hair in locks around her head
and lived
simply
without even a bed but she

she had stories that woman
she had stories to tell
and children who listened well
and she
she hid nothing
made no excuses for self

just let
truth give her voice to the wind

and she would sing sometimes sing and
ask a little more time
for memory to swell their heads

the children gathered around her
the more they asked
the more words she was sent
words that crossed all ages
served no laws
words that questioned all they had been taught

so they put her away
one day
she must be mad
the adults say
corrupting young minds
it's obvious depraved

she grew silent then
her laughter grew thin
then left with the wind

but the children grew up and remembered
one woman who didn't lie
one woman who didn't hide

now they count the hypocrites around them

TENTATIVE DEFINITIONS

By Colin Channer

On killing:

Is neither a art
or a science
is a job

On honesty:

A lie for a lie
and a truth for a truth.
Old Babylonian law.

On law:

Say it loud: 'Laaaa.'
The sound tell you
say it slack and stretchy.
Hear the punch in 'Shot'.
Clean.

On death:

From you join
the force is on your marks.
You must be set to go.

THE STORY OF MADWOMAN AND COCKROACH

By Shara McCallum

One day she woke to find a roach perched on her nose. Outside the house in which she slept the sun had been making itself felt for hours and had been creeping into her room through the left-open jalousies.²¹ But not until the creature flew through the window and landed on her face did she stir.

Perhaps this was the moment in her small life when she came closest to being undone by what she feared. Perhaps she saw the animal as herself, considered for the first time that it existed, as she did, without knowing why.

A child awakened with a start might lament the loss of her unfinished dreams, its fragments fading but lodging like shrapnel inside of her. Or she might regard herself as lucky, having been ferried safely from the world of the dead back to that of the waking.

Had she had the time or the wisdom to weight these choices, in the instant the roach alighted, she might have flicked it away, watched it scurry into a crevice in the wall or into the shadows under her bed. But startled, instead she grabbed the insect. And screaming a scream that continues to this day, she crushed it.

IN MEMORIAM: BOOKER T. WASHINGTON²²

By Claude McKay

I vividly recall the noonday hour
 You walked into the wide and well-filled hall:
 We rose and sang, at the conductor's call,
Dunbar's²³ Tuskegee hymn.²⁴ A splendid tower
Of strength, as would a gardener on the flower

²¹ A blind or shutter made from a row of angled slats.

²² Booker Taliaferro Washington, black American educator, author, orator, and adviser to US presidents. Born into slavery, he was the dominant leader in the African-American community between 1890 and 1915, the year of his death. His base was the Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University), a historically black college in Alabama where McKay studied briefly in 1912.

²³ Still widely read in the United States today, Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906), the son of former slaves, was an American poet, novelist, and playwright – and the most highly regarded and successful African-American writer of his generation.

²⁴ A reference to 'The Tuskegee Song', which Dunbar wrote – at the invitation of Booker T Washington – in 1906 to celebrate Tuskegee's 25th Anniversary. The song is still sung at Tuskegee, to a tune composed by Nathaniel Clark Smith, Tuskegee University Band Director from 1906 to 1913.

Nursed tenderly, you gazed upon us all
Assembled there, a serried, sable wall
Fast mortared by your subtle tact and power.

O how I loved, adored your furrowed face!
And fondly hoped, before your days were done,
You would look in mine too with paternal grace.
But vain are hopes and dreams! – gone: you are gone;
Death's hand has torn you from your trusting race,
And O! we feel so utterly alone.

ANTHEM FOR BLACK BRITAIN

By Jean 'Binta' Breeze

Great great grampa came by boat
from continent to island
great great granma, chain roun troat
sold from de market stand
dat ocean crossing in the hold
like animal dat dem brand
barely left them with a breath
or strength to raise a hand

yet we plant cane, weed cane, cut cane
whether tired, hungry or in pain
and the mouths we sweetened in northern lands
never saw our scarred black hands
till war broke out and man was man
and any force could join them

so the first of us came in uniform
and fought for all man's freedom
knowing well from our own past
that slavery was lost wisdom

yet when the victory was assured
our warriors were forgotten
to fight that battle gave no right
for blacks to live in Britain

but soon the locals scorned old jobs
their lords had promised better
and so the invitation came
to let some ex-slaves enter

we came, we blackened Britain's face
a tide they could not turn back
Empire's twist they could not erase
history makes its own tracks

Now
Brixton
Mosside
Chapelton
Handsworth
Toxteth
St. Paul's
there's not a single corner left
we've broken down the walls

and what a struggle from the start
the freezing coldness with no heart
the doors slammed in the face
the belief in a superior race

some of us turned the other cheek
but soon it was totally clear
this land was no place for the meek
the price of freedom was dear

and we cleaned in the dark and the cold
we built back the broken, the old
we slept all together in one single room
we brought our music to keep out the gloom
and we danced when we could
sang loud and ate good
wore bright colours to repel the grey doom

we sent for the children one by one
parents and cousins and sisters' sons
we would trow a likkle partner
and pay down on a house
ignoring the neighbours
if their hatred was aroused
we let our children play out on the street
and shout and laugh loud when they meet
we kept them clean and sent them to school
knowing only education could break the harsh rule
we trusted the teachers and believed in the law
and our children, how they suffered, before we saw
that those in charge didn't care

even worse, they were racists and aware
so the young ones paid the price
while we worked hard for a slice
of the apple

from the New Cross fire to the Stephen Lawrence case
we can tell you all the stories about race
that after fifty years it's still not sure
you'll return safely through your own front door
yet we celebrate! We're multicultural!
we turn out for the Notting Hill carnival
with our language the speech of all the young
and our hit songs fixed on every tongue
red gold and green hints of high fashion
all the colour we have added to the nation
and the taxes we have paid
all the bricks we have laid
the many years we have stayed
bringing forward the Black British generation

it's too late now to turn this tide
Britain is no longer white
we claim this land as the land of our birth
we claim our future and we know our worth
our treasures lie in your museums
while we get stopped by immigration
simply following our wealth to the north
watching Europe tighten up like a fort

Britain has a big part to play
it could show Europe the way
for the races to live in unity
to show that black and white does not mean enemy
there is a price to be paid for history
it's time to tell the other half of this story
in this land it should be told
working together, being bold
you're forgetting my grampa fought Mussolini

justice has no colour
freedom seeks no power
today must make a difference to tomorrow

KIK-KIK, PAK-PAK

By Colin Channer

The back porch is where
her father used to sit on Sundays
after church to clean his gun.
She would sit on the step below him
in her long skirt and beret
typing what he called her foolishness:
letters to the editor, plays about domestics
and dialectic, poems she imagined
Lennon²⁵ turning into songs.

One day there was a jamming
in her Smith Corona,
and in trying to fix it
she just made it worse.

Her father left his Smith & Wesson
on the grey Formica table
that they used to eat on in the years
before he got promoted.
He spread a sheet of newsprint
on the blue and orange tiles,
divided her tool into parts.

Like most things,
he did this operation in silence,
pointing every now and then
to teach by example.
She began to mimic.
Miming led to picking up:
cylinders, rods, hammers, gears.

He returned to his own assembly.
She resumed her vocation with words.
Kik-kik-kik, steel percussing.

Dirty words.

She took her smooth contraption
off her lap, looked across her shoulder,
watched him spin the barrel,
spin the barrel, lock it,

²⁵ John Lennon.

flash it open, look for bullets,
slap it, lock it, cock the hammer,
pull the trigger,
pak-pak-pak-pak-pak, and pak,
smiling at the pitch of it,
locksmith hearing tumblers sing in key.

MADWOMAN AS RASTA MEDUSA

By Shara McCallum

I-woman go turn all a Babylon to stone.
I-woman is the Deliverer and the Truth.
Look pon I and feel yu inside calcify.
Look pon I and witness the chasm,
the abyss of yuself rupture. Look pon I
and know what bring destruction.
Yu say I-woman is monstrosity
but is you gravalicious²⁶ ways
mek I come the way I come,
Is yu belief everyone exist fi satisfy
yu wanton wantonness.
Yu think, all these years gone,
I-woman a come here for revenge.
Wo-yo — but is wrong again yu wrong.
I-woman is Reckoning and Judgement Day.
This face, etch with wretchedness,
these dreads,²⁷ writhing and hissing
misery, is not the Terror.
I-woman is what birth from yu Terror.

²⁶ Jamaican patois for 'gluttonous' or 'greedy'.

²⁷ Dreadlocks.