

Bold and Beautiful: A Review of Tanya Shirley's *The Merchant of Feathers*

By Stephanie McKenzie

The Merchant of Feathers, by Tanya Shirley. Peepal Tree Press, Leeds (Great Britain). 74 pages.

Bold. Beautiful. Empowering. Mercurial. These words describe Tanya Shirley's second poetry collection, *The Merchant of Feathers*. They also define the muse - or perhaps the spirit of indomitable women - that presides at the centre of this book - she who bears women's heavy weights and leaves them floating and free.

Tanya Shirley was born and lives in Jamaica. Shirley's first collection of poems, *She Who Sleeps with Bones*, was named a 2009 Jamaican bestseller by *The Gleaner*. Her work has appeared in *Small Axe*, *The Caribbean Review of Books* and in *New Caribbean Poetry: An Anthology*.

A rich new offering, Shirley's latest collection begins with a section entitled "The Alphabet of Shame," which reveals hard lessons learned by a girl and introduces readers to those things that can break spirits. Behind a narrator and her past looms the havoc that a haunting patriarch has wreaked on a family ironically defined by its unrelenting female strength. Shirley exposes patriarchal damage and its inheritance through stories of a child crushed by her father:

In September, you told my mother I was too fat to be a ballerina.
You, of faux British accent and hollowed collar bones I imagined were tea cups.
(from "How Dreams Grow Fat and Die" 12)

Many of the narrator's musings and memories in this section are violent or disturbing. The opening poem, which gives this section its title, depicts a father grown from a "country boy" to a big man with a "satellite dish". He banishes his ten-year-old to her room for embarrassing him:

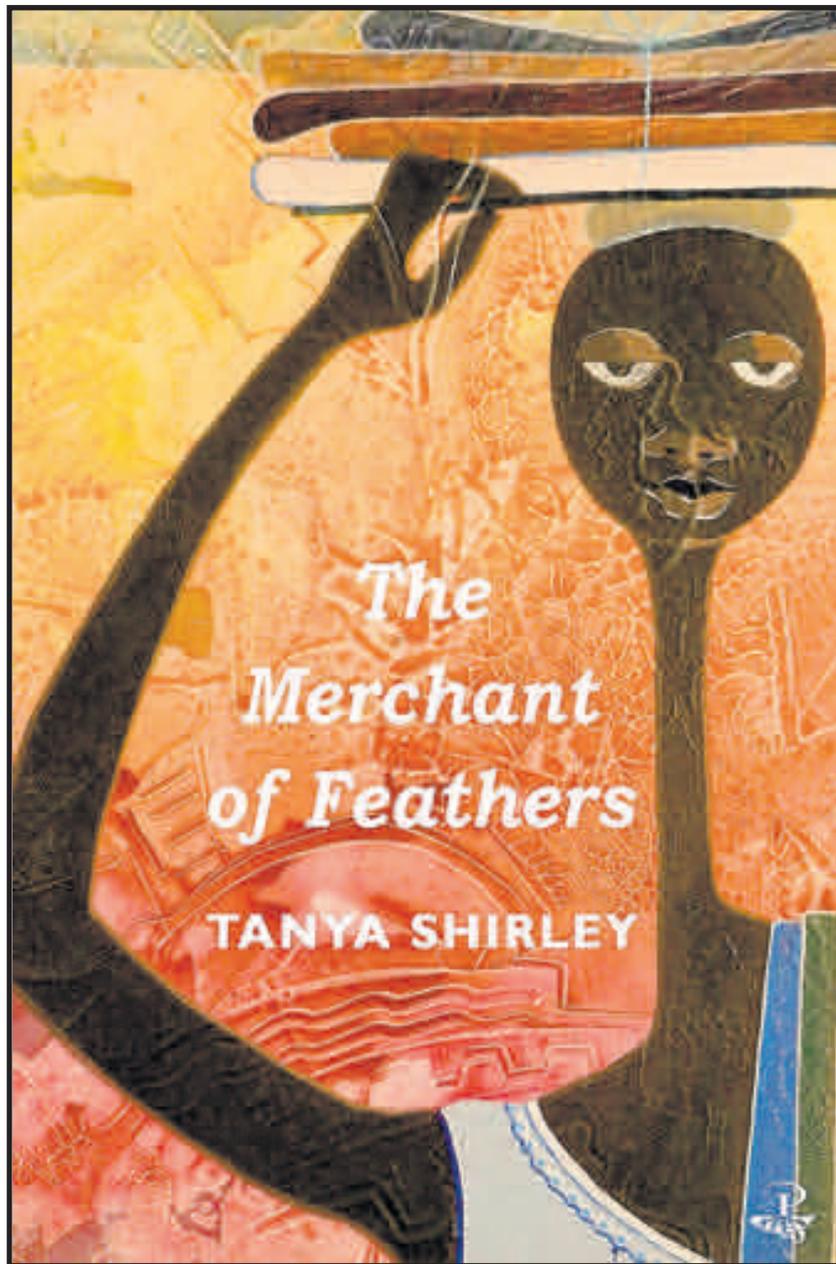
She watches the party from a small window,
face sandwiched between burglar bars,
forlorn but not foreseeing
that this is the beginning
of a life sentence. (11)

In a wonderful prose poem, "The Sea" (which indicates Shirley's adeptness at moving between poetic styles), the narrator remembers "a friend who fell into the water and the propeller [that] tore open her arm" (23). The poem concludes with Shirley's signature ability to gather meaning from the disturbing: "I am thinking about the sea, how deceptive blue is, how thirsty I have been" (23).

However, *Merchant of Feathers* is not a hard-luck story. It is a tribute to what women can, and have, survived. *How* they survive. "Flower Girl" portrays an unbreakable girl whose mother, aunts and hairdresser, attempting to straighten her hair, are no match for the child's spirit: she released a howl, the kind that scares the prey and shatters ribs on its way out the body — the body skilled in contortion — pushing the limit of limbs and restraints. (16)

This is the kind of soul — fierce and unrelenting — that will grow and claim glory throughout Shirley's book.

In the second section, "Standing Outside the Circle," relationships between women, boundaries that might constrict them, and the portrayal of life's complexity come to the fore. Shirley does not simply allow her readers to look through female eyes. Rather, she makes her readers bore through subjects and people with the vision she gives them. "Message In A Dream" sums up the power of



Shirley's voice. Walking "through a bazaar on the beach," the narrator is met by "a woman [who] walks out of the waves":

'I must read your palms, O woman of magic.'
She pulls me down into the sand

.....
Lightning rises out of my palms
hits the water and the waves spit fire.
'You are too passionate,' she whispers.
'You will kill things along the way.' (38)

Shirley seems to suggest that women survive by means of passion. "In Times of Trouble" praises the miraculous resilience that hides in the wings of turmoil:

... You were born
broken unto a broken mother and a broken father.
Your umbilical cord was buried under a barren tree.
You will need God to interpret the language of death,
angels and ancestors to thunder their chests. You need
the most violent upheaval: to catch a fire and burn to
nothing. (48)

It is this kind of metaphysical or spiritual insight mixed with beautiful portraits of such varied and so-very-real subjects as prostitutes, a Grandmother, and a "mother whose son is found / in a compromising position with a man / in a university bathroom" who uses her body to "pacify" the father who appears "at her door to beat her son some more" ("The Merchant of Feathers II" 44) that sets Shirley's voice aside as clear and distinct.

This is a very real book. It shows love and admiration for the vulnerable — not only women who must survive a misogynist world but also those such as "the resident mad man" ("Every Hoe Have Him Stick a Bush"), the man who tends to the narrator's grandmother's grave (there are two poems in this figure's honour), the woman who is told "...she can't carry unfrozen curried goat through customs" ("Dining at Customs"). This is a poet and book in touch with the real world. Unafraid of getting dirty. Fearless of touching subjects. "His d--k is a dead man on her back," the narrator of "When the World is Sleeping" says. "She imagines the world he left behind: / small triumphs, gargantuan failures." Shirley disregards politeness and the dictates of machismo, employing language and images many women have not dared to offer on poetry's polite pages. "But some nights / his dick on her back is a dead man / who didn't want to die," Shirley continues, the narrator noting, at the end, that "...loving is always the act / of dying and [that] only the determined few breathe / themselves back to life" (42). Shirley's voice breaks with a tradition of reticence, especially in Caribbean women's poetry, which seems to have long avoided anything that could smack of bad girl talk. "... [W]hich woman really needs a head / unless she is proficient in giving head, / and keeping her mouth shut when she's not?" the narrator of "Said by a DJ at an Uptown Dance" questions (43).

Notably, in the midst of women who might admit defeat, internalise hatred and choose to remain unloved, poems praise love's power and beauty. This is especially true of the third section, "Let This Be Your Praise." Here, "Love burned the past down to dust" ("Love Done Did It"). A narrator and her lover in "Sunday Drive Out" "find a revivalist church where / ... the

turbaned women spill out / like white orchards on a painter's easel" (62). These last lines are Shirley at her best as she offers stunning, beautiful images grounded in the paradox of life that this book describes. To be alive, of course, is to live. That's what the merchant seems to tell us and how the last poem concludes a painfully beautiful collection as the narrator thinks of how she'd like to be remembered when she dies:

I want you to grieve for my flesh
that knew what it was to be pinched
and squeezed, bitten, adored.
(from "Edward Baugh, When I Die")

Shirley never reduces women to stereotypes. This is one of the book's greatest strengths. The merchant of feathers herself is "bad gyal and mermaid, windmill and still breeze" ("The Merchant of Feathers III"). She is "a woman / selling softness in these hard times," a "domestic worker," "... the woman whose song / lifts like mist from the Blue Mountains" ("The Merchant of Feathers I" 53).

With crisp, original images, impeccable line breaks, rhythms frequently drawn from dancehall, and a bold heart, Shirley gives readers the eyes to grind through stones.

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