

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Beauty and Death: Midwife's Forever

John Amen · Wednesday, April 15th, 2020

Honing the dark minimalism of her previous sets, singer and multi-instrumentalist Madeline Johnston, aka Midwife, releases *Forever*, a set of compellingly paradoxical tracks, compositions at once heavy *and* gossamer, earthy *and* ethereal, somber *and* celestial.

While I tend to avoid biographical info and gravitate more toward a formalist approach when offering comments on a work of art — feeling, I suppose, that intent is less important than impact — I did find the supplementary comments on Midwife's [Bandcamp page](#) to be of interest (of note: the death of Johnston's friend Colin Ward). At any rate, regardless of the album's origins, opener "2018" sets the tone of *Forever*, blending austere instrumentation and startling lyrics ("This is really happening (3x) / to me." And: "Get the fuck away from me (3x) / 2018") to forge a sustained sense of dread and vulnerability, the piece concurrently shimmering with a funereal beauty.

"Anyone Can Play Guitar" features a grungy 6-string, Johnston repeating: "Anyone can fall in love (2x) / anyone can tell a lie," the doubled vocals on the chorus creating a quasi-hook-y effect, the most hummable melody on the project. "Vow" is an uber-minimal ambient piece, progressions primitive yet diaphanous, connective yet prompted by a palpable nihilism, possibly Johnston's absorption of "lowercase" templates à la Tetsu Inoue or Miki Yui. "Language" launches with a dreampop soundscape, Johnston's voice bathed in lo-fi static and reverb, synth-y accents reminiscent of Bon Iver's electrofolk.

“C.R.F.W.” leads with a pantheistic/Dionysian manifesto read matter-of-factly by the above-mentioned Colin Ward, including such phrases and lines as: “I am not me but the source living itself out through me,” “I am a vessel,” and “I am the present moment with thousands of years in my blood.” While the Spinozoan message may not further the album musically, it serves to indirectly broaden *Forever*’s palette, introducing to the mix a Blakean spirituality, a refreshing departure from the norms of metal-based music. Midway through the track, instrumentation emerges, a droning guitar commingled with ambient doodles. The sequence concludes with “S.W.I.M.,” muddy sounds contrasted with delicate synth-y runs, a PJ Harvey-ish instrumental line punctuating the piece, Johnston lamenting, “I don’t want to swim forever / treading water my whole life.”

Ecstasy is conventionally associated with pleasure or a kind of trans-egoic mania. Artists such as Madeline Johnston (and, I’ll mention here, her aesthetic sibling [Kristina Esfandiari](#)), however, offer music that is paradoxically thanatoid, even oppressive ... yet concurrently euphoric and transportive. While *Midwife*’s music will elude listeners demanding the anthemic hook, those who surrender to Johnston’s craft will be elevated by her trancey flows, sublime textures, and self-erasing lyricism: the bardos of disorientation and despondence may well lead to a glimpse of nirvana.

7.8/10

(Artist photo by Alana Wool)

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