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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* etheric, 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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