

Review of *Sweetheart*, by Alecia McKenzie. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2011, 134p.

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In 'Terminus', a short story from her collection entitled *Stories from Yard* (2005), Paris-based Jamaican writer, Alecia McKenzie, sensitively addresses the issue of mental health in Caribbean societies through the unusual relationship between a schoolgirl and a psychologically disturbed vagrant. If the narrative raises the question of what society should do with allegedly mad people in its midst, it also draws our attention to the pervasiveness of mental illness in the Caribbean, which makes one of the characters say that 'mad people all over the place now' (85).

*Sweetheart*, McKenzie's first novel, provides another subtle and absorbing exploration of the apparent ubiquity of psychological disorder in Jamaica. The novel contains the responses of eight characters to the premature death of Dulcinea Gertrude Evers, Dulci for short and the Sweetheart of the title, a young Jamaican woman who led a successful artistic career as a painter in New York under the name Cineia Verse. Interviewed by an American journalist about the 'insane aspect' (63) of many of the figures in her paintings, Dulci significantly declares that 'The whole island is a mental hospital, but please don't write that' (63). Like other elements in the novel, including Dulci's sexual orientation, this statement is not transparent and can be understood in different ways. It could be perceived as a tongue-in-cheek reaction on the part of the artist to the narrow-mindedness of a critic who, like Josh Scarbinsky, Dulci's American husband, cannot help seeing the expression of a form of exotic madness in her use of 'bold lines and vibrating colours' (54). At the same time, Dulci's remark about the mental state of her native country is also the result of her experience of a place that is blighted by a lack of privacy and the unsound ignorance of a tragic past, and which she attempts to escape by moving to the United States. Dulci herself might even be said to display a split identity, a form of creative yet painful schizophrenia that surfaces in her two names as well as in her wish for half her ashes to be strewn in Negril and the other half in Manhattan.

The twelve chapters that make up the novel address the late Dulci directly and are told in the second person by her parents, friends, and acquaintances who are all haunted by her memorable personality. If this narrative strategy confers credibility to the deceased protagonist, it also creates a sense of intimacy around her and allows some previously undisclosed facts to be revealed. Importantly, it also makes it possible to plumb the various manifestations of so-called insanity that pervade Dulci's native island, including the 'murderous fury' (98) of hurricanes in which the 'wind was like a woman gone off her head' (97) and the 'descent into madness' (108) that accompanies political violence. With the possible exception of Cheryl, Dulci's closest friend, a maths teacher who is the novel's main, apparently reliable narrator (yet who is nevertheless not without intimate secrets of her own), the novel gives a voice to several people who, from the outside, can be regarded as displaying various forms of mental imbalance but whose intimate thoughts enable us to view their inner selves otherwise. These apparently deranged figures are significantly mostly women who harbour wounds inflicted by men, and whose behaviour appears for this reason to be out of sync with the world in which they live. These women include Dulci's mother, Marjorie Evers, who is thought to be endowed with limited intellectual capacities, but who, in spite of her father's and her husband's deeply rooted contempt, is nevertheless able to 'feel things' (120); Dakota Beckett, the wife of Dulci's middle-aged lover, who attacks her rival with a machete in a bout of 'white-hot rage' (48), also brought about by her husband's repeated infidelities and the earlier loss of a child; and finally, Mavis, Cheryl's aunt, a taciturn woman who is believed to live 'in a cloud' (16) but, it is finally revealed, is actually a seer who dabs in the occult and struggles in silence with the fact that she was abandoned by her son's father.

Very much like Dulci's canvases, McKenzie's short yet rich novel invites us to '[look] beyond the obvious' (115). While it focuses on the misunderstandings between generations, genders, and cultures that mar the characters' relationships, it intertwines their different fates to forcefully demonstrate the intricate interdependency of human trajectories across time and suggest the impossibility of ever comprehending anyone's 'whole story' (43).