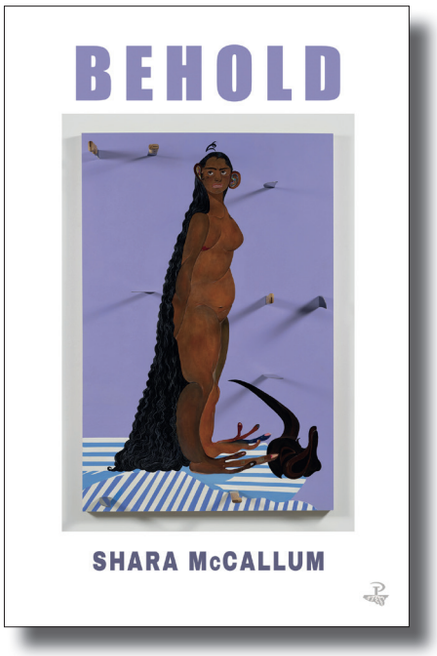
T. S. ELIOT PRIZE 2026 READERS' NOTES

The T. S. Eliot Prize 2026 Readers' Notes offer a selection of poems from each of the ten exciting collections on our Shortlist, plus reviews, reading suggestions, and a writing prompt or two for those inspired to respond creatively. We hope the Readers' Notes will aid your deeper reading as an individual, with friends, or within a book group or writing workshop. English teachers: if you're preparing your students for any Unseen Poem papers, why not hone their skills on this year's Shortlist? And don't forget to check out the T. S. Eliot Prize Young Critics Scheme.

2026
T. S. Eliot
T. S. ELIOT PRIZE



Behold (Peepal Tree Press, 2026) by Shara McCallum.
www.peepaltreepress.com

On *Behold*

'McCallum's seventh book is a lush collection of ekphrastic poems (responses to artworks) and reflections on Jamaican American ancestry. In 'Self-Portrait' – the first in a series with that heading – those major themes blend beautifully with a hefty dollop of assonance and sibilance: "At this point, I don't know what in me is Jamaican / versus American [...] since / we're on the topic of the singular, about this subject: / she's awfully tired of being parsed to see if she's a fraud." She applies art terms to the self: "Chiaroscuro" for a mixed-race identity and "Craquelure" for the wrinkles that provide "evidence of my ravishment" by time. Passion for art history (especially art by women and people of colour) meets fervour for social justice as McCallum exposes "the casual violence of misseeing" – who would look twice at the photograph of her Jamaican grandmother sweeping in midlife?' – **BookishBeck.com**

'From the opening intention in the epic echoing-answering pre-poem 'Passage' [... McCallum] submerges her reader in her distinctive, unapologetic voice: "I have come / not to beg nor barter but to enter". [...] McCallum draws us into her "susurrating wind and sea. / Called back by the roots of my hair, dirt" and tumbling in this vivid examination of awareness of death, the portents of which fly around unhindered, she bequeaths us a legacy of timeless recall [...] Each stanza has an ominous but real conclusion, as here: "on and off, their light burning / with the knowledge of death." One can argue, why state the obvious? Take yourself instead, back in memory, to those tender edges of your liminal being, and imagine, watching like a film, the descent into awareness, much like Milton depicted famously in *Paradise Lost*, but from a non-Anglo dominated canon; that arousal of awareness, something you wish you didn't know, but cannot ever expunge. Then you understand the purpose of *Behold* in its disquieting, essential truth [...]'
– ***Austin Poetry Review***

About the poet

Shara McCallum is from Jamaica, of Jamaican and Venezuelan parentage. She is the author of seven books of poetry, published in the US and the UK, including *No Ruined Stone*, winner of the 2022 Hurston/Wright Foundation Legacy Award in Poetry; and *Madwoman*, winner of both the OCM Bocas Poetry Prize and the Sheila Margaret Motton Book Prize in 2018. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Musgrave Medal and NEA Poetry Fellowship among other awards. Appointed a Cheney Creative Fellow at the University of Leeds for 2026–27, McCallum is an Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of English at Penn State University, USA.



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What do you think?

- You can find the painting referred to in 'Pastoral' online **here**. Where does the painting stop and the poem begin?
- Do you need to know the relevant artwork to appreciate an ekphrastic poem?
- Have you ever shared the experience in 'What's Your Favourite Piece' – asking a gallery attendant about their favourite of the pieces on display? Maybe you've been the gallery attendant, and people have asked you what you think. What does this poem have to say about assumption?
- Why is 'Self-Portrait' called 'Self-Portrait' and not 'Autobiography'? What can the one form do that the other can't?

Reply in writing

Adopt Shara McCallum's creative practice and take yourself and your notebook to a gallery (or an online one if that works better for you – **artuk.org** is a good place to start). Sit, look and free write for as long as you've got. What have you begun to create or curate?

Find out more

Other work by Shara McCallum

No Ruined Stone (Alice James Books, 2021)
Madwoman (Peepal Tree Press, 2017)
This Strange Land (Alice James Books, 2011)

On screen

As well as her recent contributions to the **T. S. Eliot Prize YouTube channel**, you can find Shara McCallum reading poems from *Behold* on the **Alaska Quarterly Review** channel. She also gave the **Third Annual Craig Sharp Lecture**, co-hosted by the Centre for Robert Burns Studies and the Robert Burns World Federation, talking about her reimagining of Burns's life in her collection *No Ruined Stone*.

If you like Shara McCallum's work, try...

- Natasha Trethewey
- Anthony Vahni Capildeo
- Victoria Adukwei Bulley

About the T. S. Eliot Prize

The T. S. Eliot Prize, which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2023, is awarded annually to the best new poetry collection published in the UK and Ireland. The Prize was founded by the Poetry Book Society in 1993 to celebrate the PBS's 40th birthday and to honour its founding poet. The T. S. Eliot estate has provided the prize money since the Prize's inception, and the T. S. Eliot Foundation took over the running of the Prize in 2016, following Inpress Books' acquisition of the PBS. It is the most prestigious poetry prize in the world, and the only major poetry prize judged purely by established poets. The judges for the 2026 Prize are Leontia Flynn (Chair), Ishion Hutchinson and Daisy Lafarge. For more information, visit **tseliot.com/prize**

T. S. Eliot Prize 2026: join in

- Join our shortlisted poets live at the celebrated **T. S. Eliot Prize Readings** at the Southbank Centre, London, on Sunday 17 January 2027. Hosted by Ian McMillan and British Sign Language interpreted, readings are simultaneously live streamed to a worldwide audience. Book for in-person tickets at **bit.ly/eliot26readings** or for the live stream at **bit.ly/eliot26livestream**
- Look out for the latest additions to our amazing **video archive of interviews and poems** with Eliot Prize poets on our YouTube channel: **bit.ly/tseliotprizeyoutube**
- **John Field's authoritative reviews** of all the shortlisted titles will be published on the T. S. Eliot Prize website over the coming months. Read them online at **bit.ly/eliot26shortlist**
- Browse the brilliant **Writers' Notes series**, devised by our partner the Poetry School, in which Eliot Prize shortlisted poets reflect on the writing of their nominated collections. Visit **poetryschool.com** and search 'writers' notes' –and look out for new additions by poets shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize 2026
- **Sign up to our weekly newsletters**, packed with information and insights about all ten shortlisted poets, and specially commissioned features and giveaways. Subscribe at **tseliot.com/prize**
- Follow the T. S. Eliot Prize on **Instagram**, **Bluesky**, **X** and **Facebook**: @tseliotprize

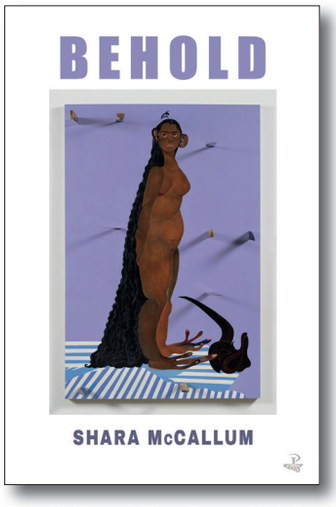
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Pastoral

Crop Time, Albert Huie

This is the Jamaica you were not born
into. In this field the artist has layered
bodies of labourers, hefting wrapped
bundles of sugar cane, lifting these
onto bull-drawn carts. Other men raise
machetes as if in choreographed motion.
Others in unison hunch over earth,
digging. Only one figure on this canvas
faces front, holding a reed to his lips.
You want to believe he is the piper.
Behind him soars a grey cluster
of buildings, smokestacks, smoke
wreathing up to the sky. The smell,
that burning is in you still.



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What's your favourite piece?

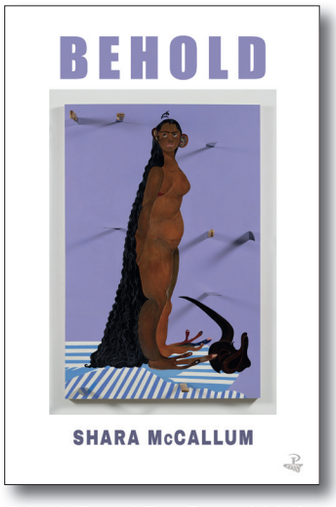
One museum guard replied not directly to my question but indirectly that she likes the East Wing, where we were standing. As someone who has to be in a space for long hours, she prefers when she's assigned there: because of the light, she explained. Her colleague (they'd been chatting when I approached) said she prefers the West because she likes the French painters.

Another guard, in a different gallery of the same East Wing, told me of a painting I should look for in the West: two dogs searching for someone in a mountain pass, trapped in snow. He came to appreciate it, he said, after overhearing a docent addressing a group and learning its backstory. He couldn't remember the title or the artist's name but hoped I would still be able to find it from his description.

In a different museum, I spoke for at least fifteen minutes with B., the longest conversation I had with any museum guard in all my travels. She offered two answers: Renoir's *Luncheon at the Boating Party* and Lawrence's *Migration Series*. When I asked why those, she spoke less about the art and more about her experience of living as a child in the neighbourhood where the museum is now. She told me of her great grandmother, who took her to the museum often and told her to be sure she didn't act like she'd never been nowhere.

In another part of the same museum, an hour later, I posed the question to D. His selection echoed B.'s first: *The Boating Party*. *Why*? Because he loves Impressionism, he replied, then volunteered he too was a painter and pulled out his phone and shared with me some of his work.

What I haven't explicitly said, though maybe you've already intuited, is that I was in Washington D.C. and all the guards in this story were young Black women and men, except B., who was older than the others and older than me. What I also haven't said is I don't know if any of them figured out while we were talking that I'm also Black.



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Self-Portrait

I am what's called *Jamaica-white*
which is not a white Jamaican.

And into that difference of syntax
lies the difficulty of summing up history.

When I try to speak plainly
I find myself again at the proverbial shore.

As a child, I'm told I wandered our yard
in Kingston, head tipped as if I was listening

to the not-far-off sea or could cipher the wind.
I talked to fowl and expected their reply.

Maybe even then I was pursuing the wrong gods.
I know the moon, saddled by its rotation

around an all-consuming light
cannot be other than a mirror. The problem

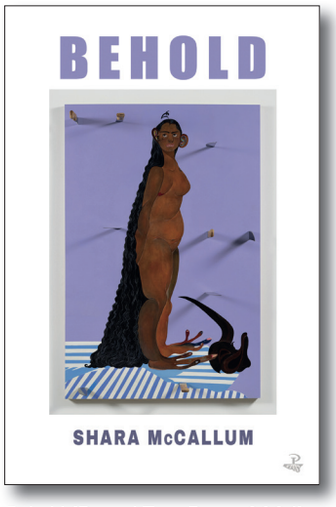
with every storytelling is that shorthand
too often becomes longhand.

If another grammar exists,
I still can only locate it

in the stilt-walking egret
wading through mangroves, in the air

after a storm and the slowing rain
pinging on a galvanise roof.

All the seconds like horses, gathering
their galloping hooves into my chest.



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