I have to admit that I was legitimately blindsided by this latest project from Sister Grotto's Madeline Johnston, but I would have been eagerly anticipating it if I had been at all aware of her previous work, as last year's *You Don't Have To Be A House To Be Haunted* is similarly quietly stunning. The key difference with Midwife is simply that Johnston (with the aid of co-producer Tucker Theodore) has now distilled her languorous and hazy dreampop vision into something a bit tighter, hookier, and more sharp-edged. Obviously, any female solo artist making artfully blurred, melancholy, and reverb-swathed music is doomed to be deluged with Grouper comparisons (favorable, in this case), yet Johnston's aesthetic is quite a bit more muscular and direct, albeit slowed to a somnambulant Codeine-esque crawl. While those are certainly great reference points to have, the real magic of
Like Author, Like Daughter
largely lies in the songcraft and execution, as this is simply a batch of strong, memorable songs presented beautifully.

[Whited Sepulchre](#)

The opening "Song for an Unborn Sun" is prime Midwife, capturing Johnston at the absolute peak of her powers and laying down a solid template for everything that follows. The core of the song is quite simple, as the piece is built upon a simple, bittersweet, and lightly distorted chord progression slowly strummed over a glacially slow and hyper-minimal drum beat. Naturally, there is a lovely vocal melody as well, so all the pieces are in place for a fine song, yet Johnston merely uses that as a departure point and deftly enhances it with a host of sublime details and intuitive great decisions. For example, she casually drops a subtle guitar hook that would have made Lindsey Buckingham or The Byrds proud, then doubles down to include a second and similarly understated synth hook that appealingly bloops beneath the sheen of tape hiss. Also, I was quite struck Johnston's decision to highlight certain lines of the song with a cathartic chorus of layered vocals, which gives the song enough bite to fleetingly tear through its otherwise dreamlike spell. Equally crucial is what Midwife does not do, such as lapse in navel-gazing or mopery, which are easily the greatest pitfalls inherent in music of this type. Instead, Johnston delicately maintains a more ambiguous, almost autumnal mood and does so with an appealing degree of unpredictability and quiet heaviness. As if that was not enough, "Sun" ends in under four minutes, making it a damn near perfect song that does not waste any time or linger around to overstay its welcome.

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Old habits die hard though, so *Like Author* rarely manages to attain that level of chiseled concision again, even though Johnston otherwise sticks quite closely to the same plan....for the most part. The next few songs suppress Midwife's more "pop" instincts for a turn into more bleak territory, though "Reason" somewhat compensates for the decreased energy level with a wonderfully woozy haze of feedback. The lengthy instrumental "RTD, Part 1," however, slows everything to a crawl of ringing, minor key arpeggios, albeit one nicely embellished by nimbly executed counter-melodies that dance between the languorous cascades of notes. It admittedly feels like a bit of a indulgent lull at times, yet it unexpectedly segues into another gorgeous bit of bleary, soft-focus pop genius with "RTD, Part 2," which beautifully embellishes a single obsessively repeated lyric with tender vocal harmonies and swirls of buried guitar noise. The more delicate and understated "Name" is yet another heavenly stand-out, maintaining a quietly smoldering intensity of lazily intertwining arpeggios and lovely tape hiss-ravaged vocals that fitfully erupt into unexpectedly visceral pseudo-choruses. Elsewhere, "Liar" is yet another gem, as Johnston's vocals unfold vaporously over a groove that feels simultaneously propulsive and like it is slowly straining through a pool of molasses. It is quite an impressive balance of textures and dynamics all around, managing to blur together force, simmering intensity, restraint, and blearily dreamlike vocals into a perfect cocktail of precarious co-existence.

My sole critique of *Like Author* is merely that Midwife has a clear formula and a limited palette (hazy vocals, a drum machine, and a very consistent guitar tone), which makes its nine songs feel like a series of variations on a single theme with somewhat diminishing returns as I get deeper and deeper into the album (even though the second half features many of the best songs). The same could be said for plenty of artists that I enjoy though, as there are lots of talented people who do one thing brilliantly and can fruitfully explore a single constrained niche for album after album. Johnston definitely falls into that category, which is just fine by me, as she is a fresh and distinctive voice and a stellar songwriter. It just means that I am more likely to play individual songs to death rather than return again and again for album-sized doses. It is also worth noting that we are in the midst of a phase in the nostalgia cycle in which plenty of hip young bands are eagerly embracing classic shoegaze and dreampop albums as their influences and that Midwife is undeniably one of them. At its peak, however,
Like Author, Like Daughter
is one of the few albums in that milieu that transcends its context, feeling like an legitimate unearthed gem from the 4AD/Creation/Kranky glory days rather than just another skilled pastiche from another current artist who loves those albums as much as I do–Johnston captures the essence every bit as much as she captures the style. That said,
Like Author
still falls a bit shy of being an instant classic for me, but I sincerely doubt I will hear many songs better than "Song For An Unborn Sun" or "RTD, Pt. 2" this year.

   Samples:
   -   [Song For An Unborn Sun](#)
   -   [Name](#)

Brainwashed - Midwife, "Like Author, Like Daughter"

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- [Liar](#)