



BELLINGHAM *Chamber Chorale*

Interview with Poet Carla Shafer

How do you start a poem?

I get a blank piece of paper or the screen on my computer. Pen in hand or fingers poised on the keyboard, I start to pay attention to what is going on inside or outside: what I'm feeling, what I see or hear and I write without any real intention. The words deliver a sense of going somewhere with sounds or ideas and I watch the poem unfold and along the way I impose myself into it and then sort of "clean it up" later. And sometimes I start with an idea. One day I wanted to make a poem using the pronoun "you," but it couldn't be directive and I didn't know who "you" was going to be. I wrote: You were starting...and then I knew it wasn't even someone I wanted to write about. It was someone I'd known in the past, a "you" I hadn't thought about in an intimate way for a long time. And there he was sitting in the kitchen reading before doing morning chores. I could almost feel the room get warmer from the wood stove. The poem had an insistence about it. I kept wanting to stop and it kept wanting to tell the story. I like the poem. I usually like my poems, at least for a while.



Carla Shafer, 'Elixir of the Solar Spectrum' poet

How does living here in the Northwest influence your poetry?

Everything is greener, wetter. The light is often pure as it shines into a poem. I imagine if I wrote in the Southwest, the words would come drier, redder, with a steadier light.

What inspired 'Elixir of the Solar Spectrum'? How did you name it?

I was a beekeeper for eight years and wrote poems about what I saw, felt and imagined. But those poems captured the essence of bees or beekeeping and I wanted a poem that celebrated the honey. I was surprised about the different hues based on the different sources. One time we planted a field of buckwheat and when we got the honey it was a magical deep, rich color. I wanted to write about that! I wondered if I could do it, so I tried.

Naming it was fun. First idea: Don't use the word "honey." Second: Honey is like an agate, its color is best when you hold it up to sunlight. Third: honey has a spectrum of colors. Fourth: I looked up solar spectrum and found a kind of scientific accuracy with two words that lusciously rolled around in my mouth (like honey). Finally, in my several poems about beekeeping I kept having to come up with new and different words for that viscous juice we call honey, elixir is my favorite. I think I came up with the title first and it led me to the poem.

Why did you choose 'Elixir' to submit for consideration in the poetry competition for this composition?

Music likes repetition. And the poem has that. I thought the celebration of nature and the qualities of our world that show up in honey are kind of rhapsodic. Because it was short and we all like honey, I imagined that the composer would either like it immediately or set it aside without regret. I was so happy that he chose it!

Who are some of your favorite writers and poets. How have they been influential in your writing?

My favorite poets are Carolyn Kiser, Naomi Shihab-Nye, William Stafford, Lee Young-Li and Richard Hugo and Denise Levertov and Tim McNulty, Bethany Reid, Scott Stodola....the list goes on. My writing is encouraged by what I hear and the people I meet at local poetry readings.

Where can people find your work?

I read along with some other wonderful poets and writers at Chuckanut Sandstone Writers Theater on the second Wednesday of the month. I have a new chapbook coming out, "Lessons in Beekeeping." I think they'll let me put out a few copies at Village Books. "Rain Song" is in the public library. They might take "Lessons." Otherwise e-mail me:

chuckanutsandstone@gmail.com

How can aspiring writers connect with a community of local writers?

Poetry Night on Mondays, now at the Bellingham Public Library, Chuckanut Sandstone Writers Theater at the Firehouse Cafe, check in at the writers table at Village Books. Get to know some writers. Look up poetry Bellingham on the web. Send me an e-mail. We'll meet and write.