

# In Shoshanna Wingate's Secret Garden

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**BARBARA CARTER**

I WAS INTRODUCED TO SHOSHANNA WINGATE'S POETRY BY ANOTHER TNQ EDITOR, Amanda Jernigan. When Amanda sent me the poems that appear in this issue, she was living in Newfoundland. Amanda had gotten to know Shoshanna through her role as Executive Director of the Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador, a post Shoshanna has since stepped down from to delight in her new daughter. The poems' immediacy spoke to me and enticed me to enter a world that was both foreign and intriguing. Shoshanna Wingate's "Chapel Hill, North Carolina" is not the university town I envisioned. I began to wonder how a writer living in Newfoundland found the voice of a southern American, the authenticity of which drew me into a childhood of poverty and strange charm. I learned later that Shoshanna received an MFA in Poetry from New York's New School and had worked at *Poets & Writers Magazine* in New York before settling in Newfoundland. I learned too of her southern American roots. It is these roots that inform her poems and the conversation that follows.

**BARB:** When I first read your poems, my responses were these: they each tell a story succinctly; they are poignant without being cloying. They leave lots of room for the reader to enter the poem, or as the speaker of "Living with the Dead" might say, they know *the power of what's left out*. What governs your choice of which details to leave out?

**SHOSHANNA:** I leave out what isn't important to the story. When one is writing about



personal experience, memory can get muddied with details that may be attached to that experience, but aren't relevant to the story being told. The imagery being employed must conjure the essence of the story, the immediacy, in order to draw the reader in. I guess sometimes I have to learn how to get out of my own way so that the poem can have a life of its own.

For example, in "Chapel Hill," I wanted to write about my old home. I only lived there for a short time, but it retained a strong influence on me into adulthood. We lived out in the woods, at the end of a dirt road, in a predominantly black area. I was the only white kid on the school bus. Our neighbours lived in a log cabin with a dirt floor and no electricity. The father had inherited this log cabin from his father, who had been a sharecropper. We didn't have electricity either and kept our food in a cooler in the creek, tied closed with a rope to keep animals out and prevent it from floating away. Many of our meals were communal, cooked over an open fire outside. My father's friend lived in our yard, in a bookmobile, and drove a Cushman, an old postman's truck. On Saturday mornings, the little girl next door and I would pick wildflowers and load them into buckets in the back of the Cushman. The adults would all sit in Denny's and have coffee while we kids sold flowers on the side of the road. When we'd made enough money to pay for breakfast, we'd shut down and join our parents inside.

Now when I tell friends this story, their eyes bug out and they say things like, "you were that poor?" Yeah, we were that poor. But that is not an unhappy memory for me. There were unhappy memories from that time and place, for sure, but I loved the outdoors, our wildflower field, the creek.

When I sat down to write "Chapel Hill," I wanted to tell the story of my neighbours in the log cabin, whom I also loved. We had our own world back there in those woods. We didn't have a TV. I don't remember

listening to the radio. I had a few pet turtles. But those woods were our playground. Every little girl loves to throw a tea party, so we held ours on tree stumps. I wanted to capture the wildness of childhood, how imagination functions, how kids find what they need and want, without the judgments of adulthood.

In order to tell this particular story, I had to pare it down. I couldn't throw in the bookmobile, selling wildflowers by the side of the road, the communal dinners outside. I wanted simplicity so that I could play around more with language, like "joust with drooping cattail reeds" or "wrap the willows around our necks like scarves." I wanted to conjure the magic those woods held for me and in order to do that much of the background story had to go. But in cutting all the other details, I was able to highlight the ones that could really speak to the time and place in the poem. This poem needed a certain weight and speed to mimic childhood and I had to find just the right language in order to do that.

BARB: I am curious about how memory influences poetry. I wonder if one compares writing a poem inspired by an experience in childhood to prose inspired by a memorable occurrence if the attention to detail is the same. I suspect a poem may work more on emotional impressions than the literal evocative detail on which a story or memoir might depend.

SHOSHANNA: I can't say that I had poetic theory looking over my shoulder when I wrote them, nor did I consciously choose one form over another. "Chapel Hill" came out in tetrameter, as if the rhythm were pulsing through my head as I wrote it. That poem was born in that form.

I was conscious of compression, by which I mean that I whittled each of the poems down during multiple revisions in order to gain the rhythms and power.

I might have let myself wander a bit more in prose, maybe take a few side paths in the story. Not that poetry demands more detail, but it does demand more precision, more economy. That's where it gets its force.

I had an unusual childhood and it remains charged for me, especially since I live so far in distance and culture from where I grew up. The imagery came to me first and the poems grew from that. Were they born from emotional impressions? Yes, I guess so. But, I also think the form of the poems rose out of their particular rhythm—of poverty, violence, and beauty, and maybe a feeling of loss mixed with regret. If I had to label the impulse, I would refer to negative capability. I sought the tension between beauty and violence or the loss of home and rejection of the stereotypical southern poverty. I might have felt the pressure to make some sense out of all of it if it were in prose, or explain the background, or transpose meaning where I'd rather explore imagery.

In a poem, I allow myself to float back and forth, between the memories of home and all the attachments I carry with me, both good and bad, and the adult impulses that desire meaning and resolution for those memories.

BARB: I am interested in your comments about how the form of these poems grew out of *a rhythm of poverty, violence, and beauty—and maybe a feeling of loss mixed with regret*, and that if you had to label the impulse, you would refer to negative capability. You send me back to thinking about Keats and how truths found in the imagination held for him supreme authority. How glad I am that, like Keats, you resisted “*any irritable reaching after fact & reason.*” Is it negative capability that prevents the poems from being confessional and allows the reader to enter their world?

SHOSHANNA: Yes. I like to straddle the fence, I guess. Or else I'm too aware of my own ambiguities to allow my poems any kind of finality. “Living with the Dead” is probably a good example to use in this case. That poem for me was about learning that my relationships with *my* dead are changing and evolving still, even though it's essentially a one-way street. It's just me carrying them around. But I don't want to let go and I guess I can't let go. It's about love. My life goes on and I change and I want to bring them with me because I love them, and in the course of doing so my relationship to each of them changes because I've changed. Nothing is static, not even the dead.

Each of these three poems, in one way or another, examines the complexities of loss. There is sadness there and joy and anger and hurt and longing. There is nostalgia for a place and time that is now gone, forever. But there is also anger and hurt, because this was not an easy place to be a kid. Perhaps that's also why I'm such a slow writer. I can't travel in a straight line. I have to creep sideways and back and forth, examining each piece in a new light. I could have written these poems in a more direct, confessional manner, but I would have lost something.

BARB: And, how pleased I am you chose to explore imagery. Both “Chapel Hill, North Carolina” and “The Cotton Mill” speak of childhoods that terrify and tantalize me. I am eager to enter both worlds because they are so different from my own. It is the imagery that allows me to do so, to *drape willows around [my] neck / Like scarves, serve moss tea to frogs / On stumps that serve as parlor sets, / And fan [myself] with ferns like [a queen]*. The earthen floor *that's never clean* and the speaker's *quaint and cheap* digs are softened by youthful perspective. I hear no judgment in that voice. How does your unusual childhood remain charged for you?



SHOSHANNA: I grew up in the South, in South Carolina and North Carolina mostly. My parents were hippies, which is already a clash with the native culture down there, a conservative and tradition-bound culture. They were divorced, and in what was a regrettable decision, each took one child. My sister was raised by my mother in New York, and I by my father in the South. This fractured my life in many, many ways, but one of the most striking was that I was very much a southern girl and my sister a northern one. I had an accent as thick as molasses and went to a Baptist Church with my grandmother, while my sis-

ter took piano lessons and attended Temple with my other grandmother. Our lives couldn't have been more different. Perhaps because of this, I learned to regard her as a mirror. She reflected back to me who I truly was, this wild child who had more cases of ringworm than I'd care to admit, abhorred shoes, and didn't really care for television.

I lived an outcast childhood at home. My father wore sandals and "Save the Whales" t-shirts. We attended demonstrations against nuclear power and visited prisoners, attended Quaker potlucks and didn't eat meat. I can't say I had a lot of friends growing up. I don't know what the other kids thought of me, but I'm pretty sure I know what their parents thought. Still, childhood can be forgiving. If you aren't batted down with rules, they don't enter your imagination. I had a lot of freedom to explore. I met all kinds of people, from pacifists to nuns to bikers to Allen Ginsberg and Richie Havens, and lived for many years without some traditional comforts like hot water and electricity.

Then, when I was twelve, I moved to New York and lived with my mother and sister. I experienced enormous culture shock. Now my life revolved around suburban Long Island, with its strip malls and subdivisions, and I wasn't allowed to wander off alone because it was considered too dangerous. I felt stifled and miserable, but also relieved to have more stability and normal stuff like ballet classes and friends who invited me for sleepovers.

Now I look back and think all these experiences allowed me to learn that nothing is black and white. Memories are snapshots of experience, but often we try to contain them, to make sense out of conflicting impulses. As a writer, I regard it as my duty to unravel memories so that I can follow them down an unexplored path, to search those dark corners and forgotten places in order to portray a more complete story. I'm grateful that I had such a varied childhood

which allowed me not to be too comfortable with one truth.

BARB: The reader benefits too. Your poems suggest there are many layers to the truth, layers prompted by a weaving of past and present. In “The Cotton Mill,” the closing image—a tour de force of synecdoche—is harsh—*houses...shifted away from the sun, / grew thin, / wore their housecoats all day long*. Yet, the youthful voice in the poem cannot, even if she wants to, shake entirely the past’s fascination: *We pitched rocks at the windowless windows, / defying the shadows, to be rid of their stories, / which lingered on like coats of paint / on walls that haven’t been scraped*. The stories of the cotton mill are just as real for her as the deads’ *whisper[ed] stories of the river* in “Living with the Dead” are for the protagonist in that poem. You spoke of loss of home earlier. Were these poems prompted by having left a past and culture behind?

SHOSHANNA: I wrote “The Cotton Mill” over a period of seven years. The idea came from a visit I made to the old mill village with my father, during his last trip home. He was living in San Francisco at the time and I in New York. We both flew to Columbia for a family reunion and decided to drive over to visit some of our old houses. When we’d lived there, the mill village was considered ‘the other side of the tracks’ and one of our houses quite literally had railroad tracks running through the front yard. But on this visit, we discovered the neighbourhood had been gentrified; the houses restored, and little plaques hung next to the front doors with the dates they were built. I was devastated. The mill village had been transformed into a place I didn’t recognize. The Holy Roller church was torn down and a strip of condos built in its place. It wasn’t just the character of the place that was lost. What struck me (probably later, I admit) was that the

plaques implied that history was being granted to the mill village and yet the gentrification erased the history I knew. Many of my favourite spots to play were gone, paved over or turned into housing. The mill village had been incorporated into the greater city and had lost its unique charm.

Years later, I read an oral history on cotton mill workers, a beautiful book. It was a collection of interviews and one of the mill workers said they used to be called lintheads, as a derogatory term. And I recall thinking at the time that I was part of the cotton mill just as it was part of my history. We were looked down upon for living in the mill village, even though the mill was no longer in operation, because that part of the city had always been considered undesirable. The people who lived there were always looked down upon.

When I was struggling with this poem, I googled Granby Village, to jar my memory. Since our visit, the old mill had been turned into a shopping center. I realized that the place I knew had now been completely transformed. And that’s when I began to write about my personal history there, I guess as my own oral record of life there as I knew it.

My father worked for a time for the Brown Lung Association, a non-profit group that assisted cotton mill workers who had developed Brown Lung, a disease caused by cotton dust in the lungs that causes a narrowing of the lung’s airways. He told me the mill owners used to seal up the windows to promote humidity, which increased the production. This image terrified me as a child. I rode my bike past this old broken building every day, and I guess I did think of ghosts. I mean, ghosts are supposedly souls that aren’t at rest. Who could rest in death if they were forced to work their whole lives in a dark, airless room? The mill had a life of its own because even after it was shut down, it still had this stranglehold on us, on our

reputation, our history, but more importantly, on our imaginations.

What also informs these poems, as you said, is having left a past and culture behind. Because my father died, I remain the keeper of our history. My memories are then of place and time, located in a child's mind and memory.

BARB: In "Living with the Dead," the dead are both a formidable and a welcomed presence for the speaker: *They want my life and dreams and future dreams / to include them all. I want this, too.* Is there a particular family-scape that informs your poems?

SHOSHANNA: I experienced quite a bit of death early on in my life. Too many people close to me died and this weighed on me. My stepmother passed away when I was fifteen, my father passed away when I was twenty and my boyfriend died unexpectedly a year later. These relationships were all significant to me and each death affected me differently, but as the years went on, I developed a shifting perspective on each one and what it meant to my life up until the point of their deaths, and how each relationship altered and grew beyond their deaths. Just because they had died didn't mean the relationship had ended. I still carried it. I altered it. I examined it. Because each loss devastated me in a different way, I had to learn how to put myself back together over and over again, and that meant they lived on inside me. I carried them into my future life. These were tragedies. I wondered many times how each of their lives would have played out if they had lived and how different mine would have been had they been a part of it.

When one loses a parent, that doesn't mean she loses her need for that parent, but those needs do change throughout adulthood. I have a nine-month old daughter now and in some ways being a mother

has brought me peace from the loss of my father and stepmother, because I have a new parent-child relationship to live out, even if I'm now on the other side of the equation.

BARB: Before the birth of your daughter Ava, you were the Executive Director of the Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador. What was that experience like for you?

SHOSHANNA: My job was a wonderful crash course in the local Newfoundland and Labrador writers' scene. The local literature here is vibrant and the writers are a warm, close bunch. During my tenure, we were approaching the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Writers' Alliance and I wanted to do something special. We had a little bit of money, so I approached the board and suggested we publish a one-off journal celebrating local writing. The journal, named *Riddle Fence*, was sent free to all members and sold to the general public. It was an immediate hit and not long after a local businessman approached me and asked if we would consider turning it into a permanent, regular journal. Of course, I had fantasized about this already. Writers started stopping by the office to ask about *Riddle Fence's* future as well and we got a good amount of press coverage because at that point there was no longer a literary journal in the province.

So, Mark Callanan and I had a beer or two and put together our wish list of editors, all of whom said yes. We started fundraising, put out a call for work through the local channels and jumped in head first. Our editorial board is amazing: Pat Warner, Michelle Butler Hallett, Carmelita McGrath, Bruce Johnson, Mark Callanan, and me. The enthusiasm and need for *Riddle Fence* got us a fantastic board which includes Lisa Moore and Michael Crummey, both so generous with their time and two of the nicest, most genuine

people I've met.

BARB: What are you writing now? What can we look forward to?

SHOSHANNA: I recently completed a young adult novel, *Dear Henry*, about a runaway who has a gift she doesn't understand that leads her into another realm, called the dreamlands, where mythological beings like coyote and raven live. This is my first novel and I had a lot of fun researching Native American mythology for my characters.

I'm working on another young adult novel now, but it's too early to talk about it.

BARB: Ah, yes, I respect your reluctance to talk too much about work that hasn't yet found its form in the imagination or on the page, but I cannot resist asking

about the attraction for you of the young adult novel, about that audience and about the imaginative license that goes with that genre.

SHOSHANNA: Well, a number of years ago I started reading young adult novels and something really resonated with me. I was especially drawn to urban fantasy. I loved the idea of populating a modern environment with hybrid mythological creatures, the marriage of modernity and myth. And I suppose because our teenage years are full of energy and confusion and reinvention, having a main character in that age group inspired me to push out of my writing comfort zone and make more leaps than I might have otherwise made. I just had a lot of fun writing *Dear Henry* and creating this other world, the dreamlands, where myth is alive and well. That's the kind of world I would love to explore.