

NADINE SHELLY

Three years ago I was invited to be Writer-in-Residence for a week at Ganges High School on Salt Spring Island. Bill Underwood, a brilliant and sensitive teacher who actually believes writing is important and that students should be encouraged (!) brought a pile of manuscripts to my house so I'd be able to read his students' work beforehand. "I think we have a prodigy," he said.

While all the work I read was of a higher standard than most high school writing I'd seen (thanks, I imagine, to the enthusiasm generated by Bill Underwood), one poet had a voice so haunting, so original, so *frighteningly* mature, I recognized someone in touch with voices from a world far older than the present organization of her 16-year-old self.

Nadine Shelly and I met for a private conference. She had published one poem in *Grain* — I told her what I had been told at the same age: start sending your work out to magazines and get used to rejection slips. Also, to read. She didn't need creative writing classes, she just needed to absorb as much poetry as she could, immerse herself in that world. She said all she wanted to do was to travel and to write. I told her there was nothing I could say about her work, other than "don't stop." I told her what Sylvia Plath had said, that "the blood-jet is poetry: there is no stopping it."

Nadine left to meet Josh and I left to catch a ferry back to Vancouver Island. That may have been the end of my role in this had not Sean Virgo been staying at my house. I told him I had met a remarkable young poet and he asked to look at her work. He read her poems once, twice, three times, and then asked if I thought she would like to have a book published. Exile in Toronto was one publisher still willing to take risks with promising but as yet unestablished writers.

Sean called Exile, who, on his recommendation alone, offered to publish the book the following month. I returned to Salt Spring the next day to give Nadine the good news. All she had left to do was to find a title.

Barebacked with Rain was published, and Nadine won the Morley Callaghan Award for a Young Writer (\$5000) and, a few months later, a second Young Achievers Award. With the prize money she travelled to India and then to Mexico. The last time I saw her it was in my garden on the Saanich Peninsula where she was being interviewed for YTV in conjunction with a prize she had won.

She's a muse, a magician, a priestess; most of all she's her own person. And Nadine will be going wherever poetry takes her.

— Susan Musgrave