

## **Gloria Barkley: Poet and Sculptor** by **Katrin Horowitz**

The only thing that frightens Gloria Barkley anymore is spiders. So much so that her Coquitlam clay studio is equipped with a special trap to keep them from running over her feet. But this poet and sculptor uses her fear to create artistic spiders, because spiders as metaphor intrigue her: they show up both in her poems and as figures she fashions from clay.

She has lived with her fear of spiders for a long time. Back when she was little, she and her sister were roughhousing in their bedroom, jumping on the beds and tossing pillows, when a spider landed in Gloria's mouth. Now 87, she is still creeped out by the memory of those eight tiny legs squirming on her tongue as the creature tried desperately to escape.

It turns out that more than spiders needed to stay out of her mouth. Decades later, after a medical journey that included far too many misdiagnoses, she discovered she was allergic to 95 different foods and food additives, ranging from wheat to caffeine, nitrates to sulphites. And much in the same way she transforms her fear of spiders into art (which she wryly names after food additives), she has turned her long narrative of frightening hallucinations, feelings of non-reality, anxiety, depression and something like the flu — together with the attempts to treat her symptoms — into an impressive book of poems, entitled **Water Window Mirror**.

Although her symptoms began when she moved to Vancouver at the age of sixteen, she didn't take them seriously until she turned thirty, when her occasional, vague, disconcerting feelings turned into something more pervasive and pernicious. At times she wasn't sure if her children were there or not: she could feel the infant in her arms, although she couldn't see him. And her older child, standing next to her, faded in and out of view. The doctors she consulted classified her problems as psychosomatic, schizophrenic, even something bizarre called arthritis of the blood. As Gloria writes in her book, "misdiagnoses piled up like wet diapers." As did all the pills — thousands of white, pink, red and beige pills that she remembers sardonically in a poem called 'Polka Dots.' The pills numbed and dulled her into a "non-stop nap," but her hallucinations and her chronic low-grade headaches continued.

Meanwhile, a doctor who knew his limitations told her to find something she loved and do it: "cure yourself," was his advice. She took that to heart. In the sixties she enrolled in art school at what is now Emily Carr University of Art and Design. She found an affinity for the 3D world of clay, both as art and as therapy. Clay felt real, it didn't disappear in a hallucination, and it let her "get behind things."

She was over fifty years old and sicker than ever when she was finally referred to an allergist who eliminated medicines, food additives and many foods from her diet. And just like that, her many symptoms vanished. Her **Water Window Mirror** poems gain power by exploring both parts of her journey — the long struggle with baffling symptoms and then their abrupt end — a turn of events that was in some ways as disorienting as her previous hallucinations. When she works on her poetry or her sculpture she often has Beethoven's 9th Symphony playing in the background, the piece of music she refers to as "the great healer." Both the music and her

creativity are important elements in achieving Wordsworth's poetic ideal of "emotions recollected in tranquility."

But she also knows that her symptoms can return at any time — all it takes is a single, careless mouthful contaminated with additives or preservatives. Then Gloria's perceptions once again turn into a hall of mirrors, and her panic and her aches recur. It can take up to four days for her body to return to normal. One of her dreams is that her poems and her clay spiders will inspire her audience to "consider the pile of chemicals they're having for lunch," and what games those chemicals might be playing in their own minds.

Gloria Barkley knows a thing or two about turning fears and problems into art. And in my opinion she has already exceeded her stated goal: "to leave the world with one good poem and one good clay piece."

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#### **POEMS FROM WATER WINDOW MIRROR:**

##### **Mixed Metaphor aka Pill Time (p.69)**

Minute by planet hour by jowl  
her mood moos plush to burned jam

Metamorphic  
mental  
muddle mixed  
meta-phive.

##### **Side Effects (p.53)**

Phantom spiders  
crawl  
along her skin

pause at pores

their legs tap  
erratic  
codes

she dare not

decipher.