

*Shaman's Eye* by Beth Beurkens, Sky Ladder Press, 2009.

by Jackie McNamara, M.A.;

published in the College of the Siskiyous, RightByte, 2009.

In her first book of poetry, Beth Beurkens, M. A., adjunct instructor in Women's Studies at COS, offers the reader a perspective through the eye of the shaman. Traditionally, the shaman is aided by spirit allies in making an ecstatic journey through the veils that separate the human from the spirit world; the purpose of the journey is to treat illnesses in the individual and in the community. Beurkens' book is an invitation to understand poetry as a shamanic practice and to experience life through the shaman's reverential and animistic worldview.

Beurkens begins by invoking the spirits of "ancestral shamans" who appreciate that everything is alive and a site of potential consciousness: "crimson dawn chants/ jaguar night riffs". The Milky Way is the bridge in "Shaman's Bridge" and the shaman travels across it by the beat of the drum: "the drum is the horse/the moon is the shaman's eye/ the sun, her heart". Like the poet who works with the meter and rhythm of language, the shaman moves on the rhythms of the drum. Both the poet and the shaman also practice attentive listening.

I hear the reed-like song of Pleiades  
glass-tinkling hum of Milky Way  
as a wild child in the Midwest  
I could hear corn roses  
sunflowers

This alert presence keeps them open to discovering realities accessible only through heightened states of consciousness: "my cells open like hungry mouths/of fledglings"

all the ancient stories say  
creation is  
pulsing vibration  
the gods  
singing  
dancing

## uttering magic

Open and empty, the theme of hollow spaces runs throughout the poems. In “Longing for the Cure” “bare stalks of words” are “hollow ideas.” A circle of women in “Gathering the Pieces” pass around an “antique talking stick” made of “dark bone tusk” and the “stories” they tell are “pressed/ into the hollow bone mass”. The speaker in “Lost Bearings” begins to “fill/ the well”. But emptiness appears as a necessary condition of shamanic practice: “Power pours in the shaman’s hollow bones” in “Ambrosia of the Spirits”. Hollows also appear in the shape of the poems. Unexpected empty spaces appear between letters on the page and in a circle of women’s names that takes concrete shape to create a passageway within the text. “I’m an empty vessel/ a *tabula rasa*/ a begging bowl” the speaker says in “Shaman’s Death,” and in “Hollow Bamboo”:

Mine is the crooked path  
of bones and stones  
the hollow bamboo

In “About These Poems,” Beurkens writes that “words have a semi-sacred status and, as instruments of power, are understood to carry healing.” As such, *Shaman’s Eye* might well present unexpected benefits for the reader.