

## Poet honors Stephen Pitcairn in new collection

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<http://www.citypaper.com/bcp-cms-1-1457389-migrated-story-cp-20130313-aeboo-20130313,0,1380484,full.story>

March 13, 2013

**Poet Shirley Brewer** woke up on Monday, July 26, 2010 and turned on her computer to read the news online. She immediately saw a disturbing headline in *The Sun* about her neighborhood: "Murder in Charles Village." The killing had occurred the night before, only one block away from her apartment. When a picture of the victim was posted, she was struck by Stephen Pitcairn's face.

"There was a kindness in his eyes," Brewer says. "He was such a handsome kid. He was only 23 and had his whole life in front of him. He wanted to find a cure for cancer. I started reading everything about the story."

She attended the community vigil a few days later and met Reggie Higgins, the person who held Pitcairn as he lay dying of a stab wound to the chest. On the way home, she ran into a neighbor who suggested that she write a poem to tell the family that the Charles Village community was also grieving.

"I don't think I can do that," said Brewer. "I told her, 'It's way too soon.' Within 10 minutes, though, I started writing. I really thought there was only going to be one poem. I never set out to write a book."

Shirley Brewer's poignant collection of poems about the murder of Stephen Pitcairn, **After Words** was published in February by the Apprentice House press of Loyola University. The book contains 13 poems written mostly in couplets, with several in Stephen's voice, including "To My Killers" and "Slain." They appear in the collection as they were conceived and include the voices of his mother, Gwen Pitcairn; Higgins; and the knife used in the killing.

The poems are bracketed by a dedication from Gwen Pitcairn at the beginning of the book and Stephen's well-crafted personal statement for medical school at the end. Pitcairn comes alive on these pages as a humble and talented young man on the cusp of his 24th birthday, a world traveler who studied Japanese and wanted to "leave some small mark that people will remember," who dreamed of attending medical school at Hopkins.

"Brewer opens her heart to sorrow in these elegiac poems," says poet Laura Shovan, editor of the *Little Patuxent Review*. "In doing so, she shows readers that every murder is a crime against society."

Brewer wrote the first poem, entitled "Offering," in her own voice and sent it to Stephen's mother, along with a card, a letter, and a poem about loss by Irish poet John O'Donohue. Her

poem's first line is direct and sincere. "We felt the knife too, an awful/stab in our collective heart."

"Offering" gives thanks for the time that Stephen spent in the neighborhood and vows to "make good change." Its most stirring line asserts, "Reggie Higgins was all of us, on our knees in the street," and the poem succeeds in uniting the community around Stephen's last dying breath.

"I knew that Charles Village was a good place," wrote Gwen Pitcairn after reading the poem.

A month later, another poem manifested itself-this time in Stephen's voice.

"I was working on another collection and the word 'slain' just came into my head. I felt like Stephen had more to say-things he wanted his mother to know. This is a boy who wasn't ready to die. He was speaking and I was listening. Nothing like that has ever happened to me."

Stephen and his mother had a special bond and he often called her when walking home late at night. They would speak until he made it home. On the night of July 25, he was on his way back from the train station on a warm but comfortable night after a weekend in New York. He had "big news to share" with his mother, but he wanted to save it until he saw her. Gwen Pitcairn heard her son say "mom" before the phone went dead.

"I was so worried about how she would respond to the poem 'Slain,'" Brewer says. "I don't have any children and I didn't know if he would say these things."

Gwen Pitcairn replied in an email:

"I have been crying bittersweet tears since I first read it. These words sound like something Stephen would say and they move me deeply. You have no idea how much you have touched my life."

In the fall of 2010, Brewer wrote one of the most powerful poems in the collection, "My Mother Speaks," in Gwen's voice. Its last line-"Each time I breathe, my chest/feels the blade"-captures the essence of the volume.

*After Words* celebrates many interesting details of Pitcairn's life and his sense of humor while underscoring what was a senseless and devastating loss for his family and the city.

Brewer attended the trial of Pitcairn's killer and met Stephen's family. She remembers the moment when John Wagner, the man eventually convicted of the murder, faced the Pitcairns and refused to take responsibility.

"He said something to the effect that he was sorry for their loss, but that the real killer was still out there. I was disgusted."

The poem "Moon, Tree, Knife" ends with the knife apologizing.

"The killers who used me that night/expressed no remorse."

Late in 2011, Barbara Morrison, a friend and poet, recommended Brewer to Kevin Atticks, who heads up Loyola's student-run press, Apprentice House. Morrison knew Brewer had a full-length manuscript as a follow-up to her chapbook, *A Little Breast Music*, which was published in 2008 by Passager Press.

"That manuscript was still evolving," Brewer says, "so I sent Apprentice House my poems about Stephen. I really wanted to see them published by a press in Baltimore-and it's run by students close to Stephen's age."

She waited a few months for a response and in February of 2012 received good news.

"Shirley was channeling something there," says Atticks. "To have poems from all those different perspectives is totally unique. A normal set of poems could not do this. She began writing on a whim and the poems started popping up in different voices. She provides the narrative of a horribly tragic death-completely by chance."

Bonnie Schupp took the cover photograph, which features a midnight blue sky framed by trees and a full moon.

"That might have been the last thing Stephen saw before he died," Brewer says, "the face of Reggie Higgins and the night sky. He wasn't alone."