"At Bubble Pond"
The Back Story

Why and how does a professional oboist become a publishing poet in middle age? To me it is still a mystery. I never set out to write poetry. It just happened. A poem came to me seven years ago while I was driving through the rain: "Pallid profile in alabaster / but for the dark hair, / perfectly coiffed, / redder than I remember. / Is it blood-stained?..." The poem helped to dispel an image that had haunted me for decades: the silhouette of my eldest sister lying in a casket when I was twelve. The following week I joined Jean Hollander's poetry workshop at the Princeton YWCA and read the poem, barely getting through it. The comments I received were encouraging. I was hooked.

In the beginning I kept poetry in a separate compartment from my life as a musician. I'd started playing the oboe when I was nine and realized at some point in high school that if I pursued medicine, which had always been my conscious intention, music would be relegated to a hobby. I wasn't sure I could live without it, so I attended the School of Music at Northwestern University, studied historical musicology at Princeton, and traveled to Vienna to study Baroque oboe with Jürg Schaeftlein. For the last twenty years or so, I've been serving as artistic director for Baroque chamber music ensembles, playing freelance jobs, and raising two children.

One of my longstanding passions is creating programs, especially ones that combine music with readings, such as "Versailles: Music & Intrigue at the Court of Louis XIV" (March 2009) and "Music in London: Purcell & Handel" (November 2009), both performed in Princeton and Doylestown, Pennsylvania, by the Dryden Ensemble. For the Purcell half of the London program I put together a script that draws from John Evelyn's diaries; the Handel portion consisted of arias for Medea from Handel's opera *Teseo* (Theseus), interspersed with a narrative based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Plutarch, and the eighteenth-century English translation of the libretto.

Stimulated by the positive outcome of that first poem, I kept reading and writing poetry and participating in workshops in Princeton and at the 92nd Street Y in New York. I could soon see clearly that my years of immersion in early music had given me an excellent foundation for poetry. Composing sonnets seemed to use the same part of the brain as exercises in Renaissance counterpoint, wherein one attempts to write two or more vocal lines so that they soar, both simultaneously and distinctly, in the manner of the great Italian master Palestrina. Through music, I'd developed an intuitive sense of line, form, rhythm, and meter, and the hours I'd spent scraping and squawking on reeds had fine-tuned my ear. To me, the aim of the poet is not much different from that of the Baroque composer: to express an emotion or affect in order to move the listener.

After four years of disciplined writing, I'd accumulated stacks of poems, so I signed up for Marie Ponsot's manuscript workshop at the 92nd Street Y in New York, a two-semester course in which the focus was not on individual poems but on organizing a collection. At the end of it I started submitting versions of the manuscript to various contests without any luck until my poem "Vanitas" appeared in the Fall 2009 issue of *The Georgia Review*. Robert Fink, poetry editor at Texas Tech University Press, saw the poem and invited me to enter the Walt McDonald First-Book Competition. During the three

months leading up to the deadline, I became obsessed with the manuscript, wrestling with which poems to include, which to leave out, and how to order them. For me, the turning point came when I was able to look at a poem and say, "Yes, I needed to write that, but it doesn't have to be part of this manuscript." I came to understand that certain poems had merely laid the emotional groundwork for later ones.

At the end of May, editor Judith Keeling phoned to say that I'd won the competition. I was so excited that for a few weeks I kept waking too early, exhilarated by the thought of a book being published, but at the same time apprehensive about letting my poems go out into the world. It was astonishing to see how completely poetry had transformed my life, to realize how far I'd come since that "profile in alabaster."

The poem "At Bubble Pond," one of four in the Fall 2010 *Georgia Review*, appears in the final section of the book, which will be published in February 2011. I visited Bubble Pond, in Maine's Acadia National Park, for the first time in 1989 during a vacation with my husband and then two-year-old son. We found a flat boulder near the edge and ate our picnic lunch while gazing at minnows and trout; that September marked the beginning of my family's love affair with the park, to which we have returned many times.

Bubble Pond is a quiet spot, a perfect contrast to waves crashing against the rocky coast. The water is so clear you can see the bottom, and it's nearly always calm. Even before I started writing poetry, I would make a point during each visit of spending a bit of time by myself at the pond. Two summers ago, while I was moving from one boulder to the next at the pond's edge, a wave erupted, startling me. I looked down and saw three streams of minnows "sorting / themselves beneath the surface." I had a feeling then that these minnows would eventually find their way into a poem, but it didn't happen until months later, the morning after a conversation with Marie Ponsot about lyric poetry. On sitting down to write, I sifted through memories to find a lyrical subject, a single moment with the power to transcend itself. Suddenly, the minnows took hold, and the words started flowing as fast as "that rush of muscle and nerve." In a fairly short time I had a first draft, which I later revised slightly for clarity. It was as if something Marie had said touched a nerve, creating an opening, and the poem I'd been harboring found its way out at last.

--Jane McKinley
October 2010