

A KIND OF ESSENTIAL MUSIC: CONVERSATIONS WITH KATE BARNES

By Kate Flora

Originally published in the *Wolf Moon Journal*

Poet Kate Barnes lives alone on a 250-acre Maine farm, high on a ridge overlooking Sennebec Pond. In her seventy-second year, she still has a voice that is lively and girlish with enthusiasm, especially when talking about a good horse or another poet. In 1996, she was designated Maine's first poet laureate. In a sound bite age full of careless grammar and sloppy locutions, her speech is lapidary. She chooses her words like a jeweler, arranging them so the finished product shines. She is what we so often long for in our writing lives—a poet who speaks eloquently and thoughtfully about her craft.

As a child, she spent her summers at Chimney Farm in Nobleboro, Maine. The experiences of those summers are a major influence on her poetry. She comments on her childhood with a poet's sensibility and precision about how language is used. At Chimney Farm, she "breathed in the fact and feeling of what was still largely subsistence farming. At that time, the social unit in Maine was 'the road.' We knew everyone on the road. We knew how people were living...As a child, I had a sense of the difficulty and reality of such a life."

"Listen to this," she says. "I want to read you something my father wrote: 'The principal thing I stand for is, I suppose, not a "return to nature," which is a phrase capable of a quite childish interpretation, but the return to a poetic relation to nature'" (Henry Beston, *Especiallly Maine*).

This poetic relationship to nature is embodied in Kate Barnes's work. Her poetry "is deeply spiritual and personal, grounded in the tiny moments that make a life," wrote Linda Tatelbaum, a professor at Colby College, when nominating Barnes.

Daughter of well-known Maine writers Elizabeth Coatsworth and Henry Beston, Barnes as a child took writing for granted, learning it from her parents the way another child might have learned farming or woodworking or sewing. Writing was "the habit of the house," and she didn't so much decide to be a writer as assume she'd be one. Asked if being the daughter of well-known writers posed problems for her, she says no.

"When I look at my parents' work, I'm aware that they maintained standards of language that were heartfelt and sincere, and I try to maintain standards of language in a natural way. If you were the child of someone who always kept his axes sharp, it's likely you would sharpen your axes, but not that you would think about it. So I certainly didn't feel their writing imposed responsibilities on me as a writer at all, but I am their child."

She captures the essence of that writing home in her poem, "At Home."

My mother, that feast of light, has always sat down,
composed herself, and written poetry, hardly
reworking any, just the way she used to
tell us that Chinese painters painted; first they
sat for days on the hillside watching the rabbits,
then they went home, they set out ink and paper,
meditated; and only then picked up their brushes
to catch the lift of a rabbit in mid-hop.

"If it didn't come out I would throw it away."

Oh she

is still a bird that fills a bush with singing.
The way that she touches her tea cup, the look she gives you
as you sit across from her, it is all a kind
of essential music.

I also remember my father
alone at the dining-room table, the ink bottle safe
in a bowl, his orange-red fountain pen in his big
hand. The hand moved slowly back and forth
and the floor below was white with sheets of paper
each carrying a rejected phrase or two
as he struggled all morning to finish just one sentence—
like a smith hammering thick and glowing iron,
like Jacob wrestling with the astonishing angel.

Her mother, who was a strong believer in getting a taste of professional life young, sent Barnes's first poem to the *Christian Science Monitor* when she was in third grade. By her teens, she was doing her own sending out, following her mother's example of being strictly professional. She always sent the briefest of letters and never mentioned her parents. By the time she went to college, at sixteen, she was regularly selling to the *Saturday Review*. By twenty-one, she was selling to the *New Yorker*. Back when she was young, she says, she didn't know that being a published poet was something that was hard. She thinks it is much harder, now.

At twelve, when she left for boarding school at Emma Willard, her mother gave her two books, *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, and Arthur Waley's translations from the Chinese. She cherished these books because she was homesick, reading them often and even making tunes for the poems in her head. Reading and rereading them led, by college, to creating collections of her own, copying poems she'd chosen out by hand. She made books like this for her mother and close friends, and later for her children. She

says, "By the time you copy out a poem, you know it and get close to it." Often, she didn't like the poem as much when she'd finished copying it out.

Barnes attended Scripps College, in California, where she married and raised four children, an odyssey that inspired her most recent chapbook, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Unlike her mother, but like many women at that time, she put her professional life on hold, not writing except for the occasional poem. Later, she taught English at a girls' boarding school, then ran a riding school with a friend. In 1977, she came back to Maine to care for her aging mother and, away from the routines of her life, began writing more. As she says, "I have been lucky enough to have a piece of time in which this became my full-time job, and that's why my books have come out late."

The art of poetry, Barnes says, quoting a German philosopher, is "letting resound the words behind the words." She believes that to write good poetry, a person must, as Robert Bly puts it, acquire soul weight, psychic weight, and that it takes time to get this. In creating a poem, the poet has made a great effort to push through an invisible barrier into another kingdom. There is also a way in which the process of creating poetry reveals us to ourselves. "When I was seventeen," she says, "I suddenly noticed that I was writing some poems that told me things I hadn't known. That was the point at which I began to write real poetry, though I didn't know it."

Barnes is a firm believer in the necessity of reading poetry in order to write it, of becoming grounded in the poetic tradition. "Something that is very much forgotten in contemporary writing courses is that to be a writer you must be a reader." She thinks this strong connection to any artistic tradition is like the mother connection, and that it is something we need at present which is not being much addressed. The difference between the connection to a creative tradition and the mother connection is that the creative connection can begin at any time. All you have to do is find something you love.

Ideas for real poems come from a combination of conscious and unconscious factors and these are going to be different for each person. For Kate Barnes, her deep connection to the Maine countryside often stirs up feelings of wanting to write. So does reading other people's work. Sometimes there is a games-playing aspect. You think, "what a nice game so and so is playing. I want to play that. I'll give it a try..."

Asked how she approaches writing a poem, she says, "There is usually a wish, a feeling about something which gathers like clouds, and then, after a while, it breaks through, like rain, and a poem, or maybe three or four, comes out of it. And if you get those gathering clouds and you don't get the breakthrough, it's hard on you. Like making love and not coming."

That idea, or first draft, though, is only the beginning. Poems are shaped by the revision process. "Poetry," she says, "is in no way identical to self-expression. Writing takes a lot of work." She quotes James Merrill's comments on revision, "The words that come first

are anybody's, a froth of phrases, like the first words from a medium's mouth. You have to make them your own."

Barnes does many versions of a poem. She thinks of the poem as it's just written as the raw material: "and of course, we're looking for that unconscious factor... The unconscious factors continue to come out in revision. Revision is an extremely important thing. We want the poem to be completely satisfactory and finished. There's a kind of immense joy in getting it right. The long work of revision is supported by the poet's pleasure in working with language. Like a potter working with clay, they're happy to have that stuff in their hands." Often, she will come back long after a poem is "finished" and work on it again.

Barnes has also taught poetry. Asked what it was like to be a poet teaching poetry, she responds with a story about her friend Marion Stocking, who taught a wonderful poetry course at Beloit for thirty years. Her students thought she was unforgettable, but asked if she had ever created a poet in all those years, she said, never. The ones who became poets were poets to begin with.

"What you are teaching, after all," Barnes says, "is a kind of love. And it's going to be different for each person." One thing she did with her students was ask them to make an anthology of poems they really liked, copying it out by hand. Another thing she emphasized was reading aloud, something most people haven't done. "It was very strengthening for them to read poetry out loud every time the class met. Donald Hall said that when we read a poem, we should read it out loud in our heads, because only that way can it have its way with us."

The importance of reading poetry aloud is a point Barnes returned to many times. "Poetry cannot be translated into prose. It relies too much on the trancelike effect of language artfully used." Quoting Auden's remark that poetry is the one art that hasn't been reduced to being consumed like soup, she says, "in order to live, it has to be read or listened to." There is art in reading poetry, as well as writing it. "When poets read out loud, they almost invariably find they begin at a certain point to sway. This is when the real spell is taking over. This spell is connected to rhythm and rhythm is necessarily connected to the line. And one of the great vices of our time is reading poems syntactically."

Quoting Denise Levertov, she says, "You leave the pause of a semicolon at the end of most lines. At the end of a run-on line, you nonetheless leave a comma's worth of pause, and these nonlogical pauses produce a syncopation." Kate Barnes pauses. "Respect for the line," she says. "No line, no poem. We need to read by the line at the same time as we are reading by punctuation and meaning. It all comes back to the heartbeat...to that innate sense of rhythm." Then she reads a poem.

Why do you ask?

I can't make
 any story
 about my life
 tonight. The house
 is like an overturned
 wastebasket;
 the radio
 is predicting
 more snow,
 I ask my dog
 To tell me
 a story, and she
 never hesitates.
 "Once upon
 a time," she says,
 "a woman lived
 with a simply
 wonderful dog..." and
 she stops talking.
 "Is that all?"
 I ask her.
 "Yes," she says,
 "Why do you ask?
 Isn't it enough?"

The invitation from Governor Angus King to become Maine's first poet laureate coincided with her being diagnosed with leukemia. The illness sapped her energy, a tragedy for anyone, but especially for a poet, for, as she says, "poems are made of vitality." Fortunately, the job of poet laureate was left to her to define. "There are two types of poet laureates," she says, "paid and unpaid. The paid kind becomes a state teacher, sometimes to the detriment of his own work. The unpaid poet laureate continues writing and just writes some occasional verse when it's needed."

She regarded the honor as the public wish to honor her work as a poet, but not to shackle it. "I was very much touched by the state's wish to honor poetry. I thought of the poet laureateship as the public recognition of the importance of poetry in the public life. I did many readings and several occasional poems, one for the Governor's second inauguration. Occasional poems are part of the playfulness of poetry. I like that border where verse and poetry bleed into one another."

Although she was originally resistant to the idea of writers' groups, for many years she has been a member of a group she truly loves, which includes poets Elizabeth Tibbetts, Candice Stover, and Kristin Lindquist, all of whom she describes as "serious, gifted, working poets." While a writer can benefit from such a group or from a poetry

workshop—how else, she asks, are people going to get feedback?—she urges writers to be choosy and rigorous in selecting a group. The right group can be very, very helpful for people. But it is necessary to find a group as serious as you are. Keep shifting around until you find the one that really suits you. Otherwise, it is a waste of time. And, just as Marion Stocking’s class didn’t make poets, neither do MFAs or groups. They strengthen poets.

These days, with her energy limited, sometimes she finds it hard, when an idea is percolating, to get it over the threshold. It is often her relationship with Elizabeth Tibbetts that gets her writing. Tibbetts is very busy and has limited time, so the two poets, when they can, will take a piece of time for themselves. Call up, give themselves an hour to write, then call back and read what they’ve written, no matter how awful.

People, she says, often have a somewhat romantic feeling about poets. They feel that someone else is living out something they are not able to live out in their own lives. She speaks with great appreciation of the people who come to listen to poets. “I think the people who come to poetry readings are heroes. Listening hard to poetry is hard work. I’m glad it’s worth it to people. There are people who say they come to poetry readings just for the language. If poets aren’t working hard at the language, they aren’t poets at all.”

When she gets up to read, she feels a tremendous connection to the audience, is listening hard to their reactions. She always has her program prepared and has alternatives in the folder as well. The public, she says, has an unusual relationship with the poet, and the poet is mindful of this. Think of the straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles—when there are equal currents flowing in opposite directions. One current which is your meditation and where you are speaking from a perfectly balanced part of yourself, and the other where you never forget that you are talking to other people.

For Governor King’s second inauguration, she read this poem:

Neighborliness

In Maine we’re used to it, it’s still
the custom to look out for the neighbors, a habit
handed down from the start
of the earliest fishing villages, of the first
long strings of hundred-acre farms
stretched along the ridges, each one usually
just called, “The Road.”

On that road,
if a man fell sick, or a widow
was facing a hard winter, it was neighbors
who filled the woodshed, the neighbors

who shared meat when they butchered. If a house
burned down, the whole neighborhood
turned out to help build another. When a storm
threatened anyone's cut hay, it was everyone
who hurried over to help get it safely
into the barn. And the helping
goes right on: this fall I heard
of someone who had to put a whole paycheck
on an old debt, and found a hot dinner
waiting on the step when he got home from work
every night for a month--but no one
ever admitted a thing.

In Maine
we have a way of looking out
for one another. When the great ice storm
struck us last year, the grocery stores
were full of extra heaters left there
for anyone to borrow, and the whole state
was busy with jeep cans of water and stacks of wood
making sure we were all alright, that everyone
would pull through.

In Maine
we are glad to be part of a land
that remains so beautiful under its green skin
of woods and open fields, that is glitteringly
bordered by thousands of miles
of breaking waves, and that is lovely,
too, with an unbroken tradition
of concerns, with the kind, enduring grace
of its neighborliness.

Kate Barnes is the author of *Where the Deer Were*, published by David R. Godine, Publisher; *Crossing the Field*, published by Blackberry Books; *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, published by Oyster River Press; and *Kneeling Orion* by David R. Godine, Publisher.

"At Home" from *Where the Deer Were* by Kate Barnes. Reprinted by permission of David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc. Copyright © 1994 by Kate Barnes.

"Why Do You Ask" from *Kneeling Orion* by Kate Barnes. Reprinted by permission of David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc. Copyright © 2004 by Kate Barnes.

