KNOPF Q & A

A Conversation with

JILL BIALOSKY

author of

Intruder

Q: You are a poetry editor, at Norton, as well as a poet. How does editing others' work help (or hinder?) your own poetry writing process?

A: I started my career in publishing straight out of the Iowa Writers Workshop where I received an M.F.A degree in poetry. I got my first job in publishing by answering an ad in the New York Times for an editorial position at a university press and six months later found my way to Norton. At that time I was writing poems that would eventually find their way in my first collection, *The End of Desire*, a book that was eventually taken by the legendary poetry editor, Harry Ford, at Knopf. By day I answered phones, read manuscripts, and typed correspondence for two editors at Norton, and at night and in the early mornings and on the weekends, I worked on my poems. This is a long way around saying that from the beginning I learned to compartmentalize the two vocations, editing and writing.

It's been a privilege to work at Norton and to eventually edit some of the poets I admired in graduate school and before, poets like Adrienne Rich, A. R. Ammons, and the wonderful Irish poet, Eavan Boland. I suppose over the years in my role as editor, I've learned from the poets I've worked with the importance of trusting one's own poetic voice and sensibility, vision and craft, and staying true to the course. The poets I admire have continued to mine and extend their own obsessions in poetry. It took me a few years before I saw that we, all of us who write and edit, are part of a community. The only hindrance to being a poetry editor and poet is that sometimes poets who sit on committees for grants and prizes, poets whose work I have perhaps published or perhaps passed on, may have had to recuse or not recuse themselves when my work comes across the table! It can be a little tricky.

Q: In all of the poems in this collection, you use "the poet" instead of "I." Why did you do this, and how do you think this affects the reader's relation with the poem? How did you want it to?

A: Over the years I've been thinking a lot about the question of the "I" in poetry. Is the "I" the poet or a construct the poet has created? My most successful poems over the years are the poems where I have, through the act of transformation that is the art of poetry, been liberated from the experience the poem may have derived from. In *Intruder* I wanted to write a book that was intimate, but at the same time idea driven, and would explore the construct we call "the self." Is poetry fiction, memoir, or an act of the imagination? These are some of the questions I pose in the book, through the construct of "the poet." I don't want to sound mystical, but "she" came to me fully formed and powerful. I knew it was risky, to write a book of poems where the vocation of the poet is at its source, but I was compelled to explore it nevertheless. And as a woman there was something subversive about the reclamation of "the poet" as a powerful figure that intrigued me.

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Q: You have said that this is your least personal poetry collection. How so? Does it have to do with the use of "the poet"?

A: As I mentioned before, this book is idea driven. My first two books, *The End of Desire*, and *Subterranean*, contain poems that were drawn from necessity. In those books I wrote about the loss of a parental figure, the loss of a child, suicide: all experiences that have touched and shaped my own life. The power of the imagination and the reclamation of it as a force outside the self drive *Intruder*. The poems in *Intruder* were born from the necessity of the imagination and its desire to transfigure and transform.

Q: This collection is divided into seven parts, with the short, spare poem "Demon Lover" coming before all of those parts. Why did you set that poem aside? Is it mean to serve as an introduction, and if so, how does it do so?

A: "Demon Lover" is a poem I wrote early on during the gestation of the body of the work, in INTRUDER. The 'demon lover' is a troupe in poetry and in literature, certainly not something I can claim to have invented. I wanted to explore the 'demon lover' and play with 'his' many guises. Over the course of this work 'he' came to enchant and possess me and I began to think of the 'demon lover' as an intruder, sometimes a necessary intruder on the order and tranquility of the ordinary life. I wanted to explore the demon lover in all his guises, as lover, as doppelganger, as muse and creative force. When I came to the end of the gestation of the manuscript, and began to order the book, it seemed right that the poem, which contains an air of mystery, should act as a sort of preface to the whole.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your writing process? Do you jot down a complete poem and come back to re-work it? Or do you work line by line, honing words and phrases as you go? How does an idea for a poem usually come to you? (A word? An image?)

A: My process is about exploration and argument. Many of the poems in this book began as philosophical puzzles for expanding and exploring the notion of "selfhood." What drives us? Those ideas I have come to think of as the under story in the poems. But the narrative, or physicality of the poem is drawn from images, certainly. Sometimes a poem begins with a landscape. The long poem at the center of the book, "The Skiers," was inspired by the landscape of the Colorado Rockies. The series of poems called "Intimacies: Portrait of an Artist" was drawn from the work of the painter Eric Fischl. There is something creepy and transgressive about those early paintings that captured my imagination. For me they are about the invasion of boundaries between intimates in families. Or at least that is what the paintings evoke for me Those ideas about intimacy and connection form part of the longer narrative in *Intruder*. Once I have the physical landscape of the poem down, I go back to it again and again, honing it until it feels right.

Q: Nature—forests and mountains, snow and rain, wild animals—is virtually everywhere in this collection. The way you feature nature in all its forms adds a certain dreamy quality to these poems. That dreamy quality is sometimes mystical and inviting, and sometimes intensely foreboding. Do you agree that its role morphs as we move through the collection? Has nature always played a role in your poetry? It's pretty interesting, considering you live in Manhattan!

A: I suppose I am drawn to nature as a subject in my work. I hope in some ways the natural world provides an anchor for some of the philosophical or esoteric ideas I am exploring. I like too that you see it as adding a certain dreamy quality to the poems. My intention was to create a mythic world living in tandem or against the ordinary world. In *Intruder* I am attempting to explore the different layers of reality we inhabit and to give voice to those layers. I myself inhabit two concretely physical

worlds! We have an apartment in the city and a house in the country and I find that both places bring out certain aspects of myself. Elements from these distinct landscapes—birds, wildflowers, deer; violins, fire, cut flowers—drift in and out of the poems, sometimes forming their own archetypes and identities.

Q: I'm intrigued by "Music is Time" in which the "violin master" coaches the boy on the violin. I sense the poet's loathing toward the violin master in this scenario, the master's voice becoming "shrill" as she guides the boy. But I also automatically assume that the violin master is the poet, given all the poems surrounding this one. Can you tell what you feel this poem expresses?

A: The poem is somewhat of a mystery to me as well. I like the idea of the "violin master" being the poet. I think that's right. Or the poet also being the boy. Art, music, poetry, even baseball, all undertakings in these poems, are expressions of the self and vehicles for expressing the "unknowable" in us. I'm intrigued by the idea of "access" to the "unknowable" and about the mysteries that still lurk within us. It's forever interesting to me and a theme I have been exploring lately. The violin is an unusually complicated instrument. For years I have watched from afar as my own son has been learning how to play it. I suppose what intrigues me about the violin is the amount of practice it takes to get it right, and how the whole body and soul is the agent for creating music. It's so very beautiful to me.

Q: How did the poem "The Skiers" come to be, and can you tell us about the form this long poem takes and why?

A: The poem was inspired by several ski trips we took as a family to Colorado. I'm not a terrific skier. To be frank, I'm more interested in the beauty and terror of being in the mountains then being a good skier. Once while going up the chair lift and looking down into the bowl of the mountain I thought about *Paradise Lost* and suddenly it was as if the poem came to me in a vision. The landscape seemed immediately frightening and forbidding and incredibly seductive. It became a place to explore the primal instincts of eroticism and the idea of a spiritual power outside the self. The poem took me a few years to write. Or at least, to tame it. What I mean is that I often write a draft and then let it sit for a few months and go back to it with clearer eyes. It was longer and more unwieldy and eventually it seemed a good idea to try and give it more order and then I became obsessed with ten beats per line. The rhythm and jagged lines began to mimic the act of skiing. And then I thought I would see what would happen if I imposed fourteen lines to each section and I liked the sense of imposing order on disorder and the discoveries I made in the process. The world of the poem is about chaos and the wilderness and succumbing. In some ways it is the strangest and most daring poem I've ever written!

Q: The "*Intruder*" weaves in and out of these poems. He draws a strong reaction from the poet, and from the reader. He ups the tension—sexual and otherwise—in the room when he walks in, but he seems not altogether unwelcome. Who is he? How did you come to realize that he was a presence in all of these poems, and that the collection should be named Intruder

A: This is a complicated question to answer. I'm afraid if I impose too much meaning to the "intruder" that it might become reductive, and as a poet I hope that readers will find their own mysteries magnified in my creation. The 'intruder' threatens the stability of the self, and also is a necessary vehicle for accessing the self, which in some ways is the creation of art. I found as I was writing the poems that the 'intruder' became a vehicle for me to go deeper. How far can we go inside our imaginations without threatening the "ordinary" world we live in? When I say ordinary, I mean the world of taking our children to school, going to little league baseball games at sunset, sus-

taining a marriage. Art and the Conforms of Society have not always made great marriages.

Q: You have written two novels. How do you see those two art forms intertwining and relating to each other in your life as an artist? When you have an idea, how do you know whether it will be poetry or prose? Do you have "poet" mode and a "novelist" mode when you write?

A: I like moving between the two worlds of making a novel and making a poem. I find an eerie freedom in it, in not being confined to one form of expression. To be truthful, the subject matter finds its own form. The pleasure of writing a novel is creating characters, and dialogue, and harnessing emotion and I suppose some of those pleasures also found its way into INTRUDER. But poems can be moodier, and more language and idea driven. I derive great pleasure in thinking about rhythm and word choice and sound—the mechanics of poetry. Poetry is my first love and it has continued to enthrall me. I hope it never stops.

Q: What is next for you?

A: Thanks for asking. I have several projects up my sleeve but nothing I'm quite ready to talk about yet.

FOR BOOKING INFORMATION, contact:

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