

Pisgah Songs

Jon Jeffrey Grier

Song Cycle for Mezzo Soprano and Piano (2012)

on poems of the outdoors by

Jan Bailey, Marian Willard Blackwell,
Keller Cushing Freeman and Sue Lile Inman

Program Notes

These poems – save the last – are taken from *Climbing Pisgah*, an album of poetry and photography of Pisgah National Forest in western North Carolina, published in 2007 by Cedar Mountain Books. The beautiful photographs are by T. Stuart Gaston and all poems are by the four authors included here. These four were part of the small nucleus of writers who launched the Emrys Foundation, a Greenville, SC-based support group for area writers and related artists, in 1982. The organization has been a pillar of support for artists of many stripes and today continues its vital work as part of the arts community in Greenville.

I. Looking Glass (Keller Cushing Freeman) A warm vision of a cold landscape, this text could just as well have been about winter in the west Michigan woods where I spent my teens. The high-pitched swaths of color in the piano attempt to capture the sensation of snow and ice bathed in sunlight.

II. Black Mountain (Marian Willard Blackwell) Wintry sounds not unlike the first song, this time making a simple statement of concern for this delicate beauty.

III. Long After Our Footprints (Jan Bailey) A joyous walk in the woods with many fine sightings along the way, ending in a note of regret that such times are relegated to a secondary role in busy lives. The brief (and recurring) introductory piano melody melds the songs of the black-capped chickadee and the myrtle warbler.

IV. No Straight Path / The Grammar of Spring / No Straight Path (reprise) (Marian Willard Blackwell) This is set in quintuple meter, quirky harmony, and zig-zag melodies to suggest the uneven terrain – challenging perhaps, but worth the effort – on the way to the destination. A second poem, *The Grammar of Spring*, is offered as the destination and set in lush harmony and quiet, gauzy texture to complement its intense introspection. (the original title of the poem in *No Straight Path* is *Mountain Triolet*, a reference to its 17th century French form with the rhyme scheme *abaaabab*.)

V. Laurel Creek (Sue Lile Inman) Low, dark, quiet and turgid to evoke one of those beautiful, rocky mountain streams shaded with hemlocks and laurels. A gentle and innocent surprise invades this rich environment near the end.

VI. At the Cabin, One Last Time (Sue Lile Inman) A day-dreamy meditation on a cherished place, ending in night sounds of the forest. Is the speaker at the cabin or reminiscing much later? Is it really a cabin?

VII. Blue Mountain Breakdown (Keller Cushing Freeman) This poem, written specially for this set of songs, poses difficult questions. Do we really understand what is going on? Do we understand our mistakes? Do we comprehend what we stand to lose? A tense and brutal series of dark images ends eventually in a quiet nightmare – like all nightmares, one that any sane person would wish to avoid.

Interpretive Suggestions

I. Looking Glass Poignant and sentimental. The piano's arpeggios, with damper and *una corda* pedals, should produce a harp-like effect. The *una corda* pedal can be released during rehearsal B. if desired. The vocalist's rhythms at rehearsal C. should be taken as guidelines only. Duration about 2:20.

II. Black Mountain Very slow, quietly intense, heartfelt. Again, a harp-like sound in the piano with *una corda*, which can be released for the mezzo-forte chord in measure 10 if desired. Duration about 1:20.

III. Long After Our Footprints Tempo and rhythm strict and propulsive, except for measures 45-48, in which the vocalist can take much liberty. Piano part snappy, with transparent texture and crisp staccatos; follow pedal marks fairly strictly. At the start, the vocalist recites the title and the piano begins *immediately* after – the title is also the first line of the poem. Duration about 1:50.

IV. No Straight Path / The Grammar of Spring / No Straight Path reprise Steady, motoric, not too fast. The middle section should be starkly contrasting – calm and languid, a bit *rubato*. Duration about 3:50.

V. Laurel Creek Again, steady and motoric, mostly quiet, with occasional gaps and syncopations interrupting as riffles and falls in a stream will do. Very playful in measures 91-102. Duration about 2:40.

VI. At the Cabin, One Last Time The opening – voice alone – should be rendered in a sort of half-spoken, pensive, wondering-to-oneself manner. The pulse should be kept more steadily beginning at measure 8, but the piano part should maintain a misty, loose and drifting quality. The piano solo at measure 26 revisits the opening motives, as does the voice at 32. Duration about 2:55.

VII. Blue Mountain Breakdown Dark and tragic. Quiet sections should sound ominous, loud sections terrifying; measure 4, e.g., sounds of chainsaws – inflect accordingly. In measures 19-20, exaggerate the “SS” sounds in “hissing.” Rehearsal D. brings it to a close in a bit of quasi children's music, suffused with a quiet dread. Duration about 3:15.

About the Composer

Jon Jeffrey Grier holds a B.A. from Kalamazoo College, where he studied composition with Lawrence Rackley, an M.M. in Composition from Western Michigan University, studying with Ramon Zupko, and an M.M. in Theory and a D.M.A. in Composition from the University of South Carolina, where he studied with Jerry Curry, Dick Goodwin and Sam Douglas. Jon has taught Advanced Placement Music Theory and Music History at the Greenville Fine Arts Center, a magnet school of the arts in Greenville, SC, since 1988. He composes frequently for student and faculty ensembles at the FAC, usually when he really should be grading papers. Jon has also been a writer/keyboardist with various jazz-fusion ensembles since 1984. He lives in Greenville with wife Marion and manic mongrels Roxanne and Gracie Jean.

About the Poets

Jan Bailey is a South Carolina Arts Commission Poetry Fellow and past chair of the Creative Writing Department at the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities. Her collections of poetry include *Paper Clothes*, *Heart of the Other: Island Poems*, and *Midnight in the Guest Room*. She lives year-round with her husband on Monhegan Island, Maine, and in recent years has worked extensively in pencil drawing.

Marian Willard Blackwell lives in Greenville, SC, having retired from nursing and teaching. Her husband Albert is a son of the North Carolina mountains, and her love of the same has spanned the more than 50 years she has known him. Among her publications are a journal from the year 2000, *Writing Through a Year*, and a book of poems, *Glassworks*, both issued by Emrys Press.

Keller Cushing Freeman was born and raised in the heart of the Blue Ridge mountains in Asheville, NC. During her more than 50 years as a displaced person in Greenville, SC, she has published several volumes of poems and short stories, including *Corinthians*, *Walking Like a Waterspider*, and *Walking Kiawah*. She has also co-authored a book on World War II, *Shadow of Suribachi*.

Sue Lile Inman lives in Greenville, SC, where she works as a teacher, editor, and writer. She is the founding editor of the *Emrys Journal*. Her published collections of poetry include *Voice Lessons* and *Miriam in the Wilderness*. She and husband Sam escape to the mountains of Georgia and North Carolina as often as possible.

The Poems

Looking Glass

I send you winter love:
ice crystals glittering like mica
in the stiff red clay; the caught breath
of a silent creek, turned glass
by last night's cold; the oldest stars
shivering light from distances
re-marked in years; lines
a severe wind drew and then erased,
tracks a-cross the landscape of a face,
a bare December heart,
wreathed with all the lost green
seasons it remembers.

Black Mountain

In the eggshell light of winter dusk
awash behind a tracery of limbs,
I am suffused with apprehension:
everything I love in this deep world is fragile.

Long after our footprints

folded into leaf and the sprig
of holly you snapped and stuck
in the lapel of your loose coat
curried and browned; and long
after we stopped speaking
of the vexed hawk which shrieked
as we dawdled on the parkway
path, reluctant to take up
the suitcase of departure;
and long after the surly creek
burst into glee and chickadees
were upstaged by warblers
and the poplars shimmered
and the pines brooded, we stored our
springtime hearts beneath the bed
in gray plastic boxes, air tight
and perfectly trussed in mothballs,
like guests we'd grown weary of
and buried, lest they break into song.

Mountain Triolet (No Straight Path)

No straight path will get you to the peak.
The steepest trail will loop, at times descend
to the faint gurgle of a creek.
No straight path will get you to the peak.
With any shortcut that you think you seek
you miss the look-out right around the bend.
No straight path will get you to the peak.
The steepest trail will loop, at times descend.

The Grammar of Spring

Dwarf irises are out.
I see, he sees.
We pass without speaking.

In pluperfect purple syntax
a golden understanding
we had found without seeking.

Laurel Creek

A turn in the path, a winding down
into a sea of ferns and old tree trunks
draped in moss. A tangle of laurels
lean and twist above the creek.
Their shadows create moving patterns,
antique mystery. Along the edge where
springs feed a clear deep pool, dark
oak leaves give off sharp spice. Stones,
like guardians, space themselves. Pebbles,
smooth or jagged, make way for her bar
feet. She sings as she sheds her clothes.

At the Cabin, One Last Time

So what can I do
in the time left here?
Sit on the porch,
watch twilight change
gold sky to yellow cream,
watch color drain
from flame azalea.
Hemlocks deepen;
the greens, so varied in daylight,
of poplar, oak, pine, willow,
blue spruce blend, their distinct hues
swallowed by night shade.
From the eaves, bats take off.
Birds subside.
The woods are dark,
and now the porch.
The sky's still light;
night travels from the ground up.
The stream splashes on
like distant steady rain.
One lone bird calls out:
I'm here. I'm here.

Blue Mountain Breakdown

Here, no silent spring.
Instead, the numbing shrill
of sawteeth gnawing into wood,
the chill knife-slice on skin
too shocked to bleed,
the wrenching cry of dry limbs
torn away from sky,
the fall, relentless as a battle-beat of drums.

When the March wind comes
it makes a hissing sound,
scouring the ground to granite bone.

Gone are the mitigating trees,
the brambled underbrush,
that might have hushed the onslaught.

Unchecked, the merciless rain
devours centuries of soil,
sluicing all sustenance
down thousands of dark veins.

Such happenings, unheard,
will haunt our children's dreams.