

Petrel's Song

Even the most masterful of musicians can't top Petrel when she begins to sing.

by Janie Meneely

When I was younger, still learning to play my guitar, I sat on our Spa Creek dock and sang to the moon, the ducks, the herons—anything that would listen. I heard words sometimes, coming from somewhere, and I wrote them down. Eventually my lyrics came bold and strong, each one framing a memory now, then a moment, and again a snag of history from the Bay.

I'm not the only one who hears the words, the murmured stories on the tide. A whole slew of folks routinely catch tunes and verses from the land and water around them. They write them down, they sing them, people stop to listen, are enthralled. Perhaps the listeners linger for a moment, catching hold of something they didn't know before. Maybe their image of the Bay is transformed, embellished. Maybe they think more deeply about the way the Bay is changing. Maybe they just really like the tune. One older lady once came up to me after a performance and said, "Listening to your songs was like seeing my picture in the paper! You were singing about my people, and the things we used to do!" For me it was the ultimate compliment.

A few years back I went to a party that included some of my old neighbors, folks who had lived near me when I was practicing my guitar on the dock. "Do you still play?" one



asked. "We used to listen to you all the time." My insides froze. I was mortified. "You were listening?" I asked. "Oh yes," they answered. "We'd be sitting on our porch, and your voice carried so well across the water. I'm sure people all up and down the creek could hear you."

I wanted to vanish into vapor, cut away the jungle of years with a time-slicing machete. What was I thinking when I'd ventured outside with my guitar? With the cloak of darkness to make me invisible, I'd warbled away to my heart's content, oblivious to the notion that someone might actually hear me, might actually be listening—someone other than the moon, the ducks, the herons. . . . (The truth is, I sang on the dock because my parents wouldn't let me sing in the house. "Take it outside!" they'd holler in an exasperated tone. Can't say as I blame them; I'm sure it sounded pretty awful back then.)

Or maybe not. My one-time neighbor reached her hand to my arm in a motion of reassurance. "We enjoyed it," she said. "We looked forward to it. If you weren't out there singing, we wondered where you were. I'm thrilled to know you're still at it."

Not long ago I went for a cruise with my long-time friend Karen. We tucked into out-of-the-way spots, anchored out mostly, just enjoying ourselves and the Bay around us. We sailed and sailed. Waves sloshed against the hull, the rigging creaked, the centerboard hummed. Petrel was creating her own symphony, and the wind picked up the theme and carried it on. We'd heard that music many times before, Karen and I. It remains exhilarating,

fresh, vibrant, every time we listen.

That night when I climbed into my bunk to sleep, I could sense the wind picking up. The breeze had clocked around to the south and was funneling through a break in the shoreline, whistling and humming through the rigging. It sounded like Petrel was playing the harmonica—one long low note after another, but in different pitches, a bluesy sort of riff. I sat upright in my bunk. I'd never in my life heard anything like it. Not such distinct notes. Not such a perfect tune. I wasn't asleep. This was really happening. The boat was singing, full-throated and lusty. She was there in that gunkhole, busking for the herons.

Karen woke up. "Jane," she said, softly from her bunk. "Are you awake? Can you hear it?" Yes, I said. We listened in wonder. Perhaps the wind was riffling across the masthead just so, or bending around the spreaders and thrumming against the headstay. I have no idea what made that music, only that it emanated from somewhere deep within Petrel's frame and bloomed into the darkness. We fell asleep, finally, lulled by those haunting notes.

First published in Chesapeake Bay Magazine

