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Poet laureate ponders our lonesome roads, lives

By JOANN BALINGIT *Special to The News Journal*



In a dream, I drive alone on an endless stretch of interstate, no other car in sight.

"Where is everybody?" I wonder.

If you are one of the thousands who regularly drive -- or idle -- on Delaware's I-95 on your way to work, home or school, you might consider my dream's empty highway lanes appealing. But I find the image stark and unsettling. It suggests the speed and isolation of our lives.

Inhabitants of the 21st century enjoy far fewer close relationships than previous generations enjoyed, say sociologists. Families are migratory and far-flung.

Ties that used to bind us to community and neighborhood have been lost.

Most Americans spend many hours a week inside the "bubble" of a car.

In her poem "Gift," University of Delaware literature and drama professor Jeanne Murray Walker considers human contact and friendship. The staggered lines move us forward fitfully, as through a fog -- which begins to lift.

I picked her poem from an assortment suggested by Delaware poets to help celebrate National Poetry Month, which is April. It was started in 1996 by the Academy of American Poets to highlight the importance of verse in American culture. The society urges publishers, booksellers, literary organizations, libraries, schools and poets to teach and highlight poetry.

Every Sunday in April, I will highlight another First State poet's work. "Gift," nominated for a Pushcart Prize by The Hudson Review, appears in Walker's new book, "New Tracks, Night Falling" (Eerdmans Publishing, 2009) and is reprinted by permission of the author.

GIFT

For a hundred miles

the fields have worn

beards of ugly stubble

and night is falling

and you can't find

a lover, not on AM or FM,

and the hand at the toll booth

wears a glove

so as not to touch you.

You pay for yourself,

then for the car behind you,

so someone pushing headlights

through the heavy dark

will feel luck

go off like a Roman candle,

so she'll give a car length

to the maniac who cuts her off,

and you, there in your lonely bubble,

can think of each tail light,

each anonymous fender

as a friend.

--Jeanne Murray Walker