



Poetry: Unlocking doors to the present

By JoANN BALINGIT, Special to The News Journal

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"We look at the world once, in childhood./ The rest is memory."

That's one theory of poetry: That only in the country of childhood is the world both crystal clear and saturated with wonder. Poets often mine the riches of their early landscapes.

The lines I quote conclude the poem "Nostos" by American master Louise Glück, from her book *Meadowlands* (1996). Glück's poem suggests that the secret gardens of childhood hold the first impulses toward poetry.

The visual language that moved a young heart and mind later anchors the ways an adult maneuvers "relentless earth," as Glück calls it.

Her point is worth noting during April, which is National Poetry Month.

Glück's poem suggests that childhood memories sometimes sustain us, sometimes mislead us. Therefore her poem begins wistfully: "There was an apple tree in the yard ... " The tone is wistful because places change, relentless earth shifts under our feet, and childhoods are fraught as often as happy.

Poems try to make sense of the world. A poet picks a place to start and attempts to be present.

However, we constantly see the past. Astronomers tell us that although we may think we are looking at the present, what we see is the past, since light takes time to travel to the retina. The reflected image we see right now is a manifestation what just happened -- even if that "past" occurred only a microsecond ago.

When gazing at a star, we see a very distant past. Starlight takes ages to travel through space to Earth and our eyes. Therefore, the starlight we see represents the star as it existed millions of years ago when that light began its long journey.

Evidently, humans don't see anything truly "in the present."

Perhaps the job of the poet is to defy physics. A poem rubs past and present together like two sticks. A poem can inhabit multiple eras, not to mention places, and works very hard to overlay a maturing wisdom with the clarity of childhood. A jaded view gets a fresh set of eyes.

The mostly narrative poetry of Elizabeth Dolan's first book, *"They Abide"* (March Street Press, 2009) mines past memories to understand the present. A Catholic girlhood, families in the Bronx, an Irish heritage, sexism, Red Barber's baseball, aunts crooning, White Castles and coffee at dawn, harsh fathers, children, grandchildren, Top 40 and life on the Delaware coast dwell together in her spectrum.

"I thought I always had to be factual," Dolan says, "but then I learned to make up the truth to get my point across."

In *"My Sister Steals My Story,"* the poem justly asks "Whose truth is true?" In *"Grievous Loss ... "*, an elegy, the stoic speaker mourns for loved ones while in a dentist's chair. In *"Nine Lives,"* "a bare light bulb

swings/like a pear" on the porch of a man who has orphaned his children "with light's speed." Together, the ripeness and bleakness of the moment.

Also a fiction writer and essayist, Dolan has been writing poetry since 2001 and has received numerous recognitions.

Her poetry outlines the past to render the present visible.

My favorite poems in "They Abide" are "The Holy Grail," "Chickie, Chickie," "After Grievous Loss, Except for Stunning Dreams -- For three who died together" and the one below.

•IF YOU GO:
POETRY READING, Delaware Art Museum
Dolan will read at the Delaware Art Museum at 1 p.m. April 17 with the 2009-2010 Delaware Division of the Arts poetry fellows and Delaware poet laureate JoAnn Balingit. The 2010 Poetry Out Loud student winners also will recite. An open-mic session concludes the program.

Take Me Out

*My father checked the stats in the Daily News, glasses askew
on his slender nose, listening to Red Barber's Southern thrum,
rich with magnolia's scent and Mississippi raft lollin',
They're tearin' up the pea patch, bases are F.O.B., full of Brooklyns.
I never paid much mind but there was peace in the house
those loamy summer afternoons, when you could sizzle pizza
on pavement. Momma's noiseless laundry drooped
like willow branches from our first floor line, until one day
my father's hardscrabble voice drowned out Red and Mel Allen
and even the cheers and groans for Bobby Thompson's
shot heard round the world. Was it then I sensed my father
blamed my mother for my brother's death? And so the Niagara
of words: the strikes, the fouls and errors cluttered my life
as though blame could be written on a forehead.*

---Elizabeth Dolan, from *They Abide* (March Street Press, 2009)

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