

POETRY

Strong hearts: A look at mothers

At my desk, I consider words as I listen to my household. Dishes rattle, cello music floats by. Below my feet, the furnace rumbles then sighs. My inbox chimes a new message; my cell phone vibrates papers. A territorial cardinal strikes the windowpane, a crack that has startled me several times a day ever since October. Upstairs, my husband's footsteps play a familiar gate across the bare floor. I hear a kitchen chair scuttle against tile, and my door slams open. "I forgot to have my dessert!" my youngest child announces.



JOANN
BALINGIT

I am trying to write despite the fact that we leave in 15 minutes. Is the back door locked? Should I pack up my laptop? How long will this appointment last? Inside my fragmented day, I must act quickly to transform each tiny window of time into creativity. Whack! It's that cardinal attacking the glass again. Like him, I want to protect my territory.

Seal it off. Solitude becomes a place in my daydream — an airy unpeopled room with only a polished wooden table and a chair. Into silence I gaze through tall bare windows framing the world.

In March, I attended a women's film series that included the 2008 documentary "Who Does She Think She Is?" It is an important film which begins with the question "Can mothers be artists?" Director Pamela Boll, the mother of three grown children, follows the creative lives of five mothers: an actor, a painter, two sculptors and a printmaker. While they feed their instinctual hunger to make art, the women also respond to fears and protests from their families. The film is about drive and personal sacrifice — and could be about any woman's struggle to balance work and family — except that pursuing one's art requires brave resilience in a culture where money is the bottom line.

How does an artist nurture both her passion and her family? Pamela Boll says in a recent interview in the Huffington Post that her film "is really about questioning whether we value mothering in our culture." She explains, "There is incredible value in nurturing another life ... It is training for a more empathetic and more passionate way of living." What would happen if women were free to choose both paths — to care for their children and to nurture their own self-fulfillment?

It's clearly a feminist message: To improve the lives of women improves the lives of everyone. Last Saturday, Greg Mortenson, a brave and passionate humanitarian and author, received a prestigious Common Wealth award for his work building schools for girls in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He explained why his simple aim to educate girls strikes fear in the hearts of the Taliban: "The Taliban are terrified that these girls will take up a pen." Mortenson understands that the tenacity of mothers to protect and nurture their children will effectively push peace and well-being forward in the Middle East.

The tenacity of mothers has pushed many cultural, political and social movements forward. I recently came across the work of Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880-1966), a poet and graduate of Atlanta University whose home in Washington was the scene of a great literary salon of the Harlem Renaissance. She hosted Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer, among others.

Because Johnson was expected to care for her household and children first, she began to publish after the age of 34. At 45, when Johnson was becoming a well-known African-American writer, her husband — a lawyer — died. Johnson struggled to support her writing and her two teenaged sons. For ten years, she held temporary jobs, writing and publishing with difficulty her third volume, "Autumn Love Cycle" (1928). She continued to work, began a circuit of lecture tours and eventually sent her sons to Howard University. This is a poem from her first book, "Heart of a Woman" (1918).

Heart of a Woman

THE HEART of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night
And enters some alien cage in its plight,
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

Georgia Douglas Johnson

Each year as Mother's Day approaches, I wonder what my mother, a visual artist and naturalist, would have created with time to devote to art. She died at 39. In all the endeavors my mother undertook for her kids, I now realize her talents came alive, from sewing to designing terrariums. I appreciate Franetta McMillian's bittersweet poem, "Home Economics" for the artistry its mother lavishes upon household pursuits as a way of trying to control a challenging world.

Franetta McMillian is a poet, writer and "zine" publisher in the Delaware literary scene. McMillian's recent chapbook is "Down Low" (Etidorhpa, 2006).

HOME ECONOMICS

For my mother

If you cut a chicken sandwich
perfectly in half, your daughter will
no longer be a cripple.
An expertly broiled steak
means your son might find a job.
Fresh linens on all the beds
every Saturday morning
will keep your husband's mind from fading,
make his back straight,
keep his legs strong.

But: leave too many crumbs?
The stock market crumbles.
Forget to water the plants?
Your nest egg becomes a prune.
Let the silver tarnish?
Watch the clouds slowly gather.
The mean old world keeps changing
and all you have is your broom.

Franetta McMillian

JoAnn Balingit is Delaware's poet laureate, and a mom, not necessarily in that order. Her chapbook, "Your Heart and How It Works" (Spire Press, spirepress.org, \$8) has just been published. For more, go to joannbalingit.org.