

On Poetry: A never-ending to-do list

SundayLife: On Poetry

By JoANN BALINGIT, Special to The News Journal

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It is 4 in the afternoon and I am nowhere near the end of my work. My to-do list is long – will never be done, will never come to an end.

I have a feeling I left something behind at the foot of 8 this morning. It will come back to bite me. I forgot to put it on my list.

Very likely, the thing I forgot to do this morning, even though it bothers me, is trivial and forever lost. It's gone like the sock that travels to another dimension while spinning in the dryer.

Give it up, I tell myself. Life goes on. Life is the list.

Evidently, people love lists of things to do. You can buy books of to-do lists like the series, "1001 Things to Do before You Die." Order the boxed set of three if you need 3,003 things to do before you die.

My to-do list mixes pesky daily chores – bills, cards, calls, repairs, lizard food – with the big projects – interview family members, write a children's book on elevators, read W.G. Sebald.

Thousands of things to do before I die. In these shoes?

Most of the items on my list are tasks accomplished using language and figures,

as well as gasoline and cell phone minutes. Therefore, I long to do something with my hands: Like kneeling alone in the garden with a trowel, or working with a needle, or standing atop a ladder with a brush, lost in some long slow process I don't have time to finish.

Yesterday, my fortune cookie said, "Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding." On the back I was invited to learn the Chinese word for golf.

Your pain is the breaking of the shell. . .

My husband – who does not play golf – and I are "finishing" the basement. It's a great opportunity both to use my hands and work on our marriage. He tries to break the shell that encloses my understanding, and I try to break the shell that encloses his.

In the basement, we disagree on the boldness of paint colors, but we agree on the flooring and tiles.

We disagree on where to put an appliance switch, but we agree on the flow and orientation of the rooms.

We agree to throw out the old ping-pong table. This project requires a monumental to-do list and ease with a theory of incompleteness.

<p>In the very beginning of the project, workmen came to cut three windows through the concrete walls. New light poured in as if a shell had cracked open. The glow created new meanings in a space that used to be dark. We renamed the basement “the downstairs.”</p> <p>It has taken us years, but this huge project is approaching livability. I say “us” although my husband does the heavy lifting in time and materials.</p> <p>The project makes me further appreciate incompleteness. It was five years ago when the windows were installed. That’s OK.</p> <p>I have to be comfortable with incompleteness or I could not write poems. It is hard to write a good poem. Sometimes one must wait for the poem to decide it’s ready to be finished.</p>	<p>Paul Valery (1871-1945), French poet and critic, famously said, “A poem is never finished, only abandoned.”</p> <p>Three years ago my husband and I hung a door together, the first door of the downstairs project. This event seemed magical to me – I appreciated how a doorway consecrates a space and christens it.</p> <p>In this week’s poem, American poet Mark Doty creates a wonderful image of doors to convey how intensely an opera moved him.</p> <p>The music’s “seemingly endless chain of glorious conclusions” – its incompleteness – becomes a metaphor for the continual rapture of being alive. All of this while standing on a ladder painting trim, as I hope soon to be doing.</p>
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IF YOU GO

What: “Painted Poetry” Poets Barbara Crooker & Elizabeth Seydel Morgan read poems inspired by works in the exhibit “Painted Poetry: The Art of Mary Page Evans”

Where: Delaware Art Museum, 2301 Kentmere Parkway, Wilmington

When: May 9, 2:30 p.m.

Tickets: Included in admission

Information: www.delart.org; 571-9590

Theory of Incompletion

I’m painting the apartment, elaborate project,
edging doorways and bookcases,

two coats at least, and on the radio
– the cable opera station – something
I don’t know, Handel’s *Semele*

and either it’s the latex fumes or the music itself
but I seem never to have heard anything so radiant,

gorgeous rising tiers of it
ceasing briefly then cascading again,
as if Baroque music were a series of waterfalls

pouring in the wrong direction, perpetually up
and up, twisting toward the empyrean.

When a tenor – playing the role of a god,
perhaps the god of art? – calls for unbridled joy
the golden form of his outburst

matches the solar confidence of its content
and I involuntarily say, ah,

I am so swept up by the splendor,
on my ladder, edging the trim
along the crown molding, up where

the fumes concentrate. I am stroking
the paint onto every formerly white inch,

and of course I know *Semele* will end,
but it doesn't seem it ever has to:
this seemingly endless chain of glorious conclusions,

writhing stacked superb filigree
– let it open out endlessly,

let door after door be slid back
to reveal the next cadence,
the new phrasing, onward and on.

I am stilled now, atop my ladder,
leaning back onto the rungs, am the rapture

of denied closure, no need to go anywhere,
entirety forming and asserting itself, an endless
– self-enfolding, self-devouring –

of which Handel constructs a model
in music's intricate apportionment

of minutes. And then there's barely a beat
of a pause before we move on the Hayden,
and I am nowhere near the end of my work.

(From *Fire to Fire: New and Selected Poems* by Mark Doty. Reprinted courtesy of
Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.)