



SundayLife: On Poetry

By JoANN BALINGIT, Special to The News Journal
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On Poetry: Bees reflect a cautionary tale of isolation - and loss

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*To make a prairie it takes a clover and one
bee*

*One clover, and a bee,
And revery.*

*The revery alone will do
If bees are few.*

— Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

On a warm day this spring, I saw a single honeybee grappling with a bloom of grape hyacinth. The lone bee was having a hard time hanging onto the bell-like blossom, one of dozens of miniscule flowers that make up the purple stalk. It lost its clumsy grip on flower after tiny flower, unable to get inside. It tumbled to the dirt and rose again to grab the nearest stalk.

In my yard I did not see any honeybees at all last year. I knelt to check this one out. The bee shot away, and I haven't seen another. "Revery alone" will have to do. In my reverie, I recall my mother's zinnia garden swarming with honeybees, loud enough to hear from our back porch.

The honeybees we are familiar with came from Europe, imported, like many Americans. The bees that live in hollow trees in the forest are actually escaped swarms, and not wild or native. From my reading, I learned that bees have been kept for thousands of years by humans, perhaps 5,000 years. Aristotle and Virgil kept bees.

In Virginia two years ago, I met an artist and activist, film maker Richard Knox Robinson, who is also a bee keeper. He screened his documentary "The Bee Keepers" (2009), and passed around spoons and big jar of his homemade honey to accompany his film.

The honey glowed amber and was delicious. But the story in Robinson's film made the honey taste bittersweet.

The Bee Keepers is a 28-minute film about the threat of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD). Since 2006, this epidemic has resulted in millions of worker bees abruptly vanishing from hives. Colony collapse is significant because many crops worldwide are pollinated by bees. If bees are few, food crops may fail. And honeybees have been disappearing at alarming rates.

“So we open up these boxes and there's no bees,” says a beekeeper interviewed in Robinson's film. “The brood is left behind. The boxes are full of honey. These are things you just don't see happen. And no beetles, no wax moths, no other bees stealing the honey – it's like a ghost town ...”

How do whole colonies of bees disappear so suddenly? Where do they go? “No bees in the hive. No bees on the ground,” the man marvels.

Like the behavior of honeybees themselves, Colony Collapse Disorder is highly mysterious. After six years, the complex disorder is not fully understood by researchers. They speculate that a combination of environmental factors are stressing honeybees, making them susceptible to infections. On April 5, CBS reported a study by the Harvard School of Public Health which points to a pesticide as the likely culprit behind CCD.

“*The Bee Keepers*” is a highly lyrical film, a poetic homage to bees. But the filmmaker's goal is to expose a potential disaster, extinction, and to question the history and use of pesticides. Thus the film's transporting beauty and mesmerizing images have a dark underside. This dark cloud radiates questions.

How badly have we mistreated our environment, and can the damage be undone?

How will agriculture cope if we lose honeybees, a critical part of our food supply?

Bees are better than NASA satellites at detecting global warming, say scientists, and better than just about any creature at detecting toxins at a site. They have been used to monitor pollutants at strip mines, as Robinson's film points out. Their hairs pick up minute particles of dust, and the chemical contents can then be read like a book.

*THE murmur of a bee
A witchcraft yieldeth me.
If any ask me why,
'Twere easier to die
Than tell.*

— Emily Dickinson

Like Emily Dickinson, I find bees potent and mysterious and telling. Along with ants and termites, and some wasps, they are the true social insects. They don't just live together at certain times; they live as a group all the time, with their brothers and sisters in the hive. If a bee gets separated from its group, it dies.

When I saw the single worker bee struggling on a blossom, I thought of “The Bee

Keepers,” and I thought of this favorite poem by Osip Mandelstam. Like bees, humans struggle if alone. The speaker in this poem seems to be struggling with his own isolation: “You can't untie a boat that was never moored.”

One of the most beautiful and mysterious poems I know, it is clearly focused on a loved one. It performs, for me, an incredible alchemy in the odd image at the end: the dry necklace. I find this “dead bees” image inexplicably beautiful and moving. It somehow embodies the profound gratefulness of love, an avowal based on the knowledge that love will be gone. Or that love cannot prevent death. There are bees humming mysteriously through every stanza.

*Take from my palms, to soothe your heart,
a little honey, a little sun,
in obedience to Persephone's bees.*

*You can't untie a boat that was never moored,
nor hear a shadow in its furs,
nor move through thick life without fear.*

*For us, all that's left is kisses
tattered as the little bees
that die when they leave the hive.*

*Deep in the transparent night they're still humming,
at home in the dark wood on the mountain,
in the mint and lungwort and the past.*

*But lay to your heart my rough gift,
this unlovely dry necklace of dead bees
that once made a sun out of honey.*

— Osip Mandelstam, *Selected Poems*, translated by Clarence Brown and W.S. Merwin, (New York Review Books Classics, 2004)

IF YOU GO: National Poetry Month in Delaware

What: The Tenth Muse-a Poetry Workshop for All Skill Levels sponsored by The Delaware Literary Connection. Participants read their work and receive feedback, facilitated by Diane Sahms-Guarnieri.

When: Saturday, 10:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Where: Hockessin Public Library, 1023 Valley Road, Hockessin

Information: To register, e-mail graybeg@comcast.net

JoAnn Balingit, Delaware's poet laureate, is the author of "Forage" (Wings Press, 2011), winner of the Whitebird Chapbook Prize. She writes "On Poetry" to celebrate National Poetry Month. For more information on readings and workshops, go to <http://joannbalingit.org>. To enroll in her summer poetry camps at Cab Calloway Summer School of the Arts, go to www.cabsummer.org/blog/category/interest/literary-arts.