



## SundayLife: On Poetry

By JoANN BALINGIT, Special to The News Journal  
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# On Poetry: Laws of bedtime and beartime

I am getting old. Rather I am old, especially in the eyes of the elementary **school** children I am (not often enough!) invited to visit. Very old, in the matters-of-fact department they administer.

I remember a roomful of summer campers laughing out loud when our guest, a Beatles expert, described a vinyl record. It was when he said that every 20 minutes he had to flip the album over with his hands, so that he could listen to the six other songs.

As with this reaction to turntables, when **students** write creatively, they respond to the world with immediacy and delight. Thoughts pop fully formed from their brows.

Not mature thoughts in the kind, crotchety or even wise adult sense. I am talking about visions that are rich and magical because of their clarity. Images that don't wear too much makeup. Eager questions that rattle along behind, like a flotilla of tin cans.

I work hard to kindle in my own poems such joy in language as I witness in the classroom. Doggedly I revise my poems for energy, for freshness, for ease of **reading**. I love teaching poetry to children -- even though they often resist the process of revision. Their excitement in their own beliefs is exhilarating. They will have time for revision.

But speaking of revision and being old, I could do without -- I quote -- "Wow, Ms. Balingit, You're 20 years older than my mom!" Or whatever. One day my youngest son made sure to inform me that his English **teacher** and his big sister were the same age.

"Please don't tell me that," I snapped. Time inescapable.

When he was 4, the same son asked me with dead seriousness, "How long does it take for people's bedtimes to change?"

The Law of Bedtime is complex. I used mommy logic to provide the requisite timetable, that the boy might grasp Truth as it relates to Bedtime. He wanted more; he wanted The Supersymmetry of Bedtime.

For every passing day, he felt, some increment of time must be added to, or subtracted from I guess, his biology --from the hour, minute and second he would have to retire.

As if bedtime were a part of the body that came in like teeth, or grew like hair. Or fell out like those eventually do. As if bedtime were not to be declared by me, a foolish mortal.

Can a Bedtime get split-ends? Cavities? Does a 6-year-old lose his first bedtime in the same way he loses his first tooth? Soundlessly it falls to the pillow, white, perfect -- with the root dissolved away. My dentist has a chart called "Schedule of Eruptions." Do kids follow such a trajectory for Bedtimes?

In poetry, a bedtime may thicken with age like a waist or an ankle. Or a bedtime may weaken with age, like skin and hair and bones. The simple question, "How long does it take for people's bedtimes to change?" held a wonder for me in its odd and earnest wording that lifted it out of the world of everyday speech and into the realm of poetic language.

My oldest daughter, the one I mentioned earlier, once expressed her view of time. It too captivated me poetically. A dreamer then and now, she loves personification and make-believe. I kept her work, a hand-scribed, mimeographed sheet of reading comprehension questions for first graders. Question one:

**"What things can be red?"**

*turtle book pencil today*

She circled "book" and "pencil."

**"What things can you do in school?"**

*think fly book read*

She circled "think" and "read." Hmm.

**"What things can a turtle do?"**

*read eat see fly*

She circled "eat" and "see" only.

And so on. But "Circle two answers" was getting to her, evidently. On the last question, she broke the rule.

**"What things do bears have?"**

*nose word tail time*

She circled "tail" and "nose" -- and "time." She got "-1" and an S+. I hope she felt making her point was worth that point. I certainly agree with her that a bear has time.

In the poem that follows, the speaker questions truth, authority and the laws of perception. Jane Kenyon is a poet of the New England farm fields, whose language is crystal clear and whose humor is tinged with an almost mystical sense of loss. This poem is from a favorite book of mine, wonderful for April or any time of year: "Let Evening Come" (Graywolf Press, 1990).

#### LEARNING IN THE FIRST GRADE

"The cup is red. The drop of rain  
is blue. The clam is brown."  
So said the sheet of exercises--  
purple mimeos, still heady  
from the fluid in the rolling  
silver drum. But the cup was  
not red. It was white,  
or had no color of its own.  
Oh, but my mind was finical.  
It put the teacher perpetually  
in the wrong. Called on, however,  
I said aloud: "The cup is red."  
"But it's not," I thought,  
like Galileo Galilei  
muttering under his beard....

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#### **NATIONAL POETRY MONTH IN DELAWARE**

**What:** Poetry Reading & Writing Workshop: Art of Time. In celebration of [National](#) Poetry Month, state poet laureate JoAnn Balingit will read and then offer a writing workshop for adults about time in poetry, and revising poems.

**Where:** Lewes Public Library, 111 Adams Ave.

**When:** 7 p.m. Thursday.

**Admission:** Free; registration is requested.

**Information:** 645-4633.

**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 her 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](http://www.cabsummer.org/blog/category/interest/literary-arts).**