

SundayLife: On Poetry

By JoANN BALINGIT, Special to The News Journal

Posted Sunday, April 8, 2012

On poetry: Poems are best appreciated out loud

A poem "taps you on the shoulder, gets all inside of you and says, See me. Hear me. I'm here. I will not be ignored. That's what a poem does and, if you open up your heart and accept it, it will change you."

-- Shamsuddin Abdul-Hamid, 2010 Poetry Out Loud champion, New Jersey

People often think of a poem as a sort of emotional documentary. I like to think of a poem as an ongoing investigation -- an opening of the heart, as this student says.

Wesley McNair says, "Ultimately, all poems are love poems" -- including poems of sorrow. A friend of mine maintains that every poem written in the last hundred years is an elegy, a poem about death and loss.

A poet I enjoy, David Kirby, combines all these impulses in his funny, wrenching love-elegy, "My Dead Dad." In it, the son imagines a "little service technician" living inside his hot water heater:

*...I wonder if he
is not a relative of the equally little man
in the refrigerator whose job it was, according to my dad,

to turn the light on whenever anyone opened the refrigerator
door and off when they closed it
and who, in my child's mind, bore a striking resemblance
to my dad not only in appearance
but also in patience and love of word games and other nonsense.*

Whatever its impulse, a poem needs an audience to complete it. "A poem is not complete," declared the late Adrienne Rich, "until it has been witnessed." A poem is meant to be heard -- experienced in its community, both on and off the page.

Hearing live poetry readings as an undergraduate taught me how to read poems on the page, I realize. The New York Times, for example, has described Kirby's poems as "landscapes for the voice."

Because great poems deserve to be heard, The Poetry Foundation sponsors Poetry Out Loud. This national recitation contest begins in classrooms, where high school students across the country memorize and give voice to great poems. They compete in all 50 states, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Then state winners gather at a national competition in Washington to recite the classic and contemporary poems they have rehearsed.

Joining them this year will be Elizabeth Landon of Wilmington Christian School, Delaware's representative for Poetry Out Loud. The students will compete at The Harman Center for the Arts, home of our nation's **Shakespeare** Theatre Company.

"It's thrilling to see these youth bring life to the poets' words, modern and ancient, as if from the depth of their beings for the first time," says Allyson Good, Delaware's state coordinator for Poetry Out Loud, who has been working with Landon.

The Poetry Out Loud program builds on the spoken word as an art form, blending the dynamic aspects of slam poetry, spoken word, and theater in the classroom. Students master public speaking skills, build self-confidence and learn about their literary heritage.



Elizabeth Landon, Poetry Out Loud Delaware state champion
Kathleen Buckalew Photography

"Four years ago, when I first learned about the Poetry Out Loud contest, I decided it was something that the English department should get involved in," says Elle Straley, Elizabeth Landon's teacher at Wilmington Christian.

Wilmington Christian School has sent a state winner to Washington two years in a row. According to Straley, all the school's students are required to compete in Poetry Out Loud beginning in ninth grade. This year the English department held a "Pep Rally for Poetry" to kick off the contest.

"By the time they graduate, Wilmington Christian students have memorized eight great poems for recitation," adds Straley proudly.

Landon says when she picks a poems, it is because "I understand what the poet is describing."

One of her three poems, Phillis Wheatley's "On Virtue," showed her skill and understanding of the poet -- it is a difficult poem to recite.

"On Virtue" is an 18th century poem written in formal language and meter, about an

abstract concept. In the poem, Wheatley addresses Virtue, and desperately begs for guidance:

*I cease to wonder, and no more attempt
Thine height t' explore, nor fathom thy profound.
But, Oh my soul, sink not into despair*

Hearing "On Virtue" aloud, I remember scanning blank verse (iambic pentameter lines) as a student in high school. The natural rhythms of the English language are, in part, what listeners recognize and respond to in poetry. As my teacher pointed out, we speak in iambic pentameter every day. It's not just for Shakespeare. Often we write in rhythms natural to our ear, as in this excerpt from President Lyndon Johnson's famous 1968 speech, arranged in "five-foot" lines.

*I shall not seek, and I will not accept,
the nomination of my party for
another term as your [rest] President*

Though the words were written 200 years apart, the poet's and the president's emotional lines echo each other in sound, rhythm and tone. Wheatley's language is more conversational than it might at first seem.

For exemplary performances on video by previous Poetry Out Loud contestants, and information on attending the national contest in Washington DC, go to www.poetryoutloud.org and search "tips on reciting." You can click "Find Poems" and read the other two poems that Elizabeth will perform in Washington DC: "Ah, Why Because the Dazzling Sun" by Emily Bronte; and "Golden Retrievals" by Mark Doty. At poetryoutloud.org, you can also read "Broken Promises," a dark and funny poem by contemporary poet David Kirby.

IF YOU GO: National Poetry Month in Delaware

What: Poetry readings by JoAnn Balingit and Phillip Bannowsky. "2nd Saturday Poets," Delaware's longest-running reading series and open mic. Sign-up begins at 5.

Where: The Jackson Inn, 101 N. DuPont Road, Wilmington

When: Saturday. Featured readers at 5; open mic at 6

Admission: Free, suggested donation \$5.

Information: 652-9972; www.delitco.com

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.