



On Poetry: Retreat Turned Mom into Poet--Again

SundayLife: On Poetry

By JoANN BALINGIT, Special to The News Journal
Posted Sunday, May 13, 2012

In 2002 my three-year-old son, youngest of my four children, ruled my world. I had recently resigned my job. Although boxes of hard-sought data and artifacts cluttered my study, my doctoral research drifted out of my head. I was entering a new territory of learning, about the complexities of educating a gifted special-needs child, and the puzzles of autism spectrum.

I enjoyed full days with my preschooler, realizing how many milestones I had missed with my older kids. Yet the new label Homemaker chafed me. That euphemism. I wasn't building a house—I would have loved that specific labor! I was not even decorating. I was barely keeping up with dishes, laundry and food.

What do you do? people asked. Housewife seemed more honest and exact, if a little brutally old-fashioned. I was married to home, bound to home, felt isolated, missed my colleagues.

My son's bright personality delighted me. His profound oddness challenged me. At home we dealt with his differences. Outside our home, I felt myself and my son not quite welcomed in the mother-circles I encountered at the pool, the park and Gymboree.

From the age of fourteen I had worked--ice cream dipper, department store clerk, librarian, writing instructor. I felt unmoored without a paying job. And I had deep doubts about my poetry. What poetry? I was not writing, I was fretting. I had been mothering for 20 years, teaching for 20 years. But now I was not sure who I was—

Then also in 2002, I was fortunate to be chosen as one of 12 poets to attend the inaugural Writers' Retreat at Cape Henlopen, a four-day get-away that revived me and my writing. I got to work with Fleda Brown, who was Delaware's poet laureate at the time. I loved her poetry. She was creating this retreat with the support of The Division of the Arts as one of her first projects.

Having four days away to write felt like rebirth. I was air-lifted out of distraction and stress into a pristine sea-side sanctuary—with a room of my own, gourmet meals that appeared fully-formed, and three quiet days to sit and write. It was September, sunny, gorgeous. I wrote well.

In the evenings, our mentor Fleda encouraged us to dig more deeply into our work and learn new ways of reading each other's poems. After the first evening workshop, the poets bonded into a warm, trusting tribe.

I realized, rereading my first day's poem with excitement, that my forces needed this gift of time and encouragement. Once gathered, my energies had to be spent. I wrote. I wrote. I have continued to write.

That long weekend was my first residency. It was short yet luxuriously long and miraculously productive. Writers have periods of doubt. Being chosen for a competitive opportunity gives a boost, a renewed belief in one's powers.

Having contemplative time away from daily full-time devotions to family, home, job—from all who depend on you—is a spiritual necessity. A new environment shifts the mind into exploratory mode and gives a writer adrenaline to plunge into new work.

A benefit of being among writers, even if you are not collaborating directly, is artistic exchange. On Friday night one poet, also a mom at her first writing residency, gave me a book of poems by Li-Young Lee. *Book of My Nights* (BOA, 2001) is a meditative collection about family love, personal history, immigration and selfhood. It was just what I needed. I read alone in my room late into the night.

I was smitten by Li-Young Lee's poem "Words for Worry":

Another word for son is *delight*,
Another word, *hidden*.

And another is *One-Who-Goes-Away*.
Yet another, *One-Who>Returns*.

I had to write a poem like that. Morning light grew brighter in my room. Employing random dictionary words, loose autobiography, imagined characters and imitation, I concocted a first draft of "Words for House Story" before breakfast.

My renewed confidence in my creative work helped my with my academic writing, too. I did get back to those boxes of papers and hours of student interviews. I earned my doctorate at UD in 2008.

If you are a Delaware writer, I can't encourage you strongly enough to apply to this retreat. It's so important to give yourself and your work the gift of time, support, expert feedback and camaraderie.

To Apply:

The 2012 Poets and Writers Retreat at Cape Henlopen will take place September 27 – 30th in The Biden Center at Cape Henlopen State Park in Lewes. Writers at all levels of experience are invited to apply. Deadline: June 4, 2012. The poetry workshop will be led by JoAnn Balingit; the fiction/memoir workshop by Alice Elliott Dark, award-winning short story writer and novelist. Information and applications are at Delaware Division of the Arts, <http://www.artsdel.org>.

Words for House Story

after Li-Young Lee

So another word for *mother* is *narrate*.

Listen, thinks *Narrate*, as she sweeps
light into corners. She sees that
the windows are open. *Narrate*
likes to nest her hands
at the kitchen window for comfort.
She likes the bird that rings like a telephone.

Narrate needs the wind to feel at ease
again. She decides to leave the sand
on the floor. She looks high and low,
helps curtains relax, doors
to swing open. Lays hands on
their shoulders. Says, "Breathe."

Sashay is another word for *child*. *Sashay*
darts around a corner. *Narrate* holds
some underwear. Books are falling.
Sashay is tumbling head first
down stairs and says, "It's fun."

Narrate says, "Listen, this is driving me crazy!"
Another word for *listen* is *I-don't-have-time*.
Her secret word for *husband* is also *listen*,
yet again, *I-do-not-understand*.

Sashay persuades the neighbor dog to ride
the bucket of his mini-backhoe. Dares
the sweet turtle into sleeping on the roof!
Sashay does a slow, inscrutable dance
round the bare corners of *karate chop*

another way of saying *a-daughter's-empty-room*.
“What happened in karate chop?” Sashay wants to know.
Narrate leaves the vacuum in the middle
of karate chop, tapes a lavender story
of paint chips down the center of one wall.

But it's hard for her in karate chop. Depressions
left in the carpet hit like fists. Suddenly, Listen
is downstairs saying, “I should change my name
to *Emphasize*. Do you know every light
in the house is on? I just don't understand.”

Oh, Narrate knows: Listen spells out *decoy*
when he means the words for *need-you*.
But she worries. Some days, she cries out
“Decoy!” when she stumbles on his love.

Acknowledgement: “Words for House Story” from *Your Heart and How It Works* (Spire Press, 2009).
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JoAnn Balingit has served as Delaware's poet laureate since 2008, and is the author most recently of *Forage* (Wings Press, 2011), a collection of poems available at the Delaware Art Museum shop and at <http://www.wingspress.com>. For upcoming dates of workshops and readings in the area, go to <http://joannbalingit.org>