

## Couperin's Kingly Courts: The Poetry of Mary Jo Balistreri

by Neil Leadbeater

*Wisconsin poet and former musician, Mary Jo Balistreri, came to poetry through desperate need at a time when her life and that of her family endured unimaginable tragedy. Balistreri spent her life in music as a classical concert pianist and harpsichordist. It wasn't until the death of two of her grandsons from mitochondrial disease, followed by her own cancer diagnosis and loss of hearing, that Balistreri found strength and consolation from some patient friends and the power of words. This was the moment when she turned, in her grief, to another art – that of writing poetry. Her stoicism and bravery is a testament to the healing power of poetry.*

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A few miles from where I live there is a rather unprepossessing building that sits between two streets called Niddrie's Wynd and the Cowgate in an area known as the Old Town in the city of Edinburgh, Scotland. The building, which has served many different purposes in its time, is now known as St. Cecilia's Hall. Step inside and you will discover the Sybert Concert Room, an elegant room with a distinct elliptical shape. It is the oldest concert hall in Scotland. The same building houses the Raymond Russell Collection of early keyboard instruments. I have visited it several times and now know what technically distinguishes a spinet and a virginal from a harpsichord. On one occasion I was fortunate enough to hear someone play one of the harpsichords while I was present in the room. Why am I telling you this? The answer is because Mary Jo Balistreri, before she started to write poetry, was a professional harpsichordist. She was also a professional concert pianist but it is the harpsichord rather than the piano that she seems to recall more often in her poems. In 'Walking Toward Sunset' she writes:

I take out the story of my hands,  
veined and gnarled with arthritis,  
hands that flew over keyboards  
from the time I was three.  
With limited movement they no longer  
perform, but they remember fugues  
on my harpsichord's black keys, the colors  
of Rameau on the double keyboard,  
Couperin's kingly courts and child-like songs.

This is where her story begins. To use a musical analogy, it is cast in four movements.

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### *First Movement*

In 2008, Bellowing Ark Press published Balistreri's first full-length collection, 'Joy in the Morning'. The initial impetus for the poems in this collection was caused by the tragic death of her grandson, Sam. She began writing by giving witness to his life and it provided a

pathway that allowed her to see the world differently, perhaps through his eyes. As one would expect, there are many references to art and to music as well as some very moving poems concerning her grandson. Many of the titles bear witness to Balistreri's lifelong love of art and music. There are several ekphrastic poems based on paintings by Edward Hopper and Pierre Bonnard, George Braque and Georgia O'Keefe. Titles such as 'Jam Session,' 'Canticle to the Setting Sun,' 'Prelude in E minor,' and 'At a Jazz Bar in Denver with My Son and His Friends' speak volumes about a lifetime spent in music. What I find most interesting about her work, however, is her eternal optimism and the way joy manifests itself so clearly in her writing. Indeed, it is one of her key signatures and it is this aspect that I want to concentrate on in this section.

In '*Spring Comes to Saylesville Pond*' Balistreri is the grateful recipient of the gift of Spring. Saylesville, for those who are unsure of its location, is situated in Waukesha County, Wisconsin. Here are the opening lines:

Late April, and Spring opens her easel. She paints  
maple leaves unfurling, then turns them to the sun,  
oaks swelling in earthy rich breezes.

Spring is personified as an artist, one who paints *en plein air*. She is female and the mother of a rich birthing that is about to unfold. Leaves are responding to the light and the sun, the sap is beginning to rise. In the next three lines a real woman appears in the picture that Spring is painting for us, a woman that is 'basking in the quickening' of it all. To add to this atmosphere of fecundity, Balistreri refers to a young sapling protected by a wire surround as if it were a baby in its pen: 'a baby gingko struggles / to see above its wire playpen.' After the stanza break, the scene widens and shifts to the other side of the water to take in more plants and trees and the evidence of Spring's abundance. The exuberant descriptions always surpass the commonplace. The forsythia blossom is not just 'yellow' but 'yellow organdy' – organdy being a type of cloth that is commonly used to make summer dresses, and the sky is not just 'pale' but 'winter pale'. In addition to this, both the forsythia and the sky are imbued with human characteristics: the forsythia is 'showing off' its blooms and the sky is 'shy'. This is Spring and it has some catching up to do. Both sky and forsythia look at each other in the pond's clear mirror. Trees and birds are also given human characteristics: 'The weeping willow stretches / its long limbs in green warmth, and the red-wings whistle / in admiration. Love, as they say, is in the air. The woman mentioned earlier suddenly comes alive, she takes off her straw hat and lifts her face to the skies, enjoys the sensation of the breeze ruffling her fine red hair and then raises her arms to Spring. The last line suggests that it is not only Spring but also the woman who is 'luminous, alive and spilling with gifts.'

'*Harmony in Four Parts*' is set in summer. It is a poem cast in four stanzas of fairly short lines. The opening stanza sets the scene in terms of time and place. More than anything else, the musical reference grounds it in a specific era:

A long ago summer  
in the middle of a field,  
John's red pick-up sits  
idling, the radio high  
with Crosby, Stills, Nash  
and Young.

That word ‘idling’ is a keyword here. ‘Resting’ could easily have been used instead but it would not have had the same resonance. ‘Idling’ suggests ‘ticking over’ and is used with reference to the truck in the sense of ‘to make an engine idle’ as well as with reference to the four people who are mentioned in the next stanza and who are marking time. The deliberate placing of the name ‘Young’ separated out from the ‘Crosby, Stills, Nash’ also serves to remind us that these four people are youngsters. In the second stanza, the atmosphere is captured in terms of the onset of dusk and darkness and the night scents that fill the hay field. We quickly deduce that it is early autumn. There is a crescent moon, a half moon or a sickle of a moon which is in itself a symbol of fertility related to life and death. The harmony achieved by the hushed field at this late evening hour is swapped by a different harmony in the third stanza when a certain song comes on the radio: ‘we pile into the front seat, squashed / together in harmony, sing loud / to the hushed field’. The song is in direct contrast to the disharmony of the ‘new music’ that is ‘acid’ in ‘a decade turned violent / with civil rights, with Vietnam’. Balistreri’s music is the better, more peaceful way.

Another outpouring of joy can be found in *Moments of Light* which is the final poem in this collection. The poem is inspired by Joyce Sutphen’s poem *The Book of Hours*. In it, Balistreri employs the same idea as Sutphen did – she ‘catalogues’ a series of joyful things that have happened to her throughout her life. The hours inhabit very specific time-frames and / or places: ‘an hour in late August, almost 5.30 p.m.,’ ‘an hour on Christmas Day,’ ‘an hour in New York City,’ and ‘that hour this morning’. and in Balistreri’s case they all relate to gifts: the gift of hearing the laughter of children, of watching a sunset, of receiving a gift from her family, the gift of amazement, of being in awe, and the gift of flowers given in friendship and love. Two of these moments have references to art. In the first one, the sunset puts her in mind of Monet’s haystacks, ‘the way he painted / tabernacles of light, how this moment was like that, and I / memorized that fire as if it were a prayer.’ The second one references the correspondence of Van Gogh.

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### *Second Movement*

After the publication of ‘Joy in the Morning’ a major shift took place in Balistreri’s life. In November 2008 she was diagnosed with cancer and in January 2009 she lost her hearing as a result of radiation therapy. Although the same interests persisted, poetry became even more of a lifeline. In this section, with illustrations taken from three poems contained in her second collection: ‘Gathering the Harvest’ (Bellowing Ark Press, 2012), I want to hone in more on Balestrini’s technique and approach to poetry.

We begin with *Rehoboth*. Rehoboth Beach is a city on the Atlantic seacoast in Delaware. It is worth bearing in mind that the source for the name is found in Genesis 26 v 22. In early Hebrew the name meant ‘broad places’ or ‘open spaces’. It is the name given to a well in Gerar about 20 miles south of Beersheba. Because the herdsman of Gerar did not this time quarrel with Isaac’s herdsmen, Isaac named the well ‘Rehoboth’ saying ‘Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land.’ This little aside gives added depth to the poem for reasons that I will explain later on.

The poem begins with a single figure:

A woman shuffles onto the sand in a black coat,  
back hunched, eyes on the ground.  
She carries a bag of bread crumbs,  
scatters them back and forth  
for the gulls. They home in on the bundled figure,  
wreath her ancient body in white feathers.

In the next stanza we learn that it is late afternoon and that this scene, and all that follows, is being observed by Balistreri who is seated in a chair by a window. She describes the scene as being ‘a blank page of possibility’. By a process of accumulation, she builds up the scene. More human figures appear. There is a man writing in the sand. This in itself has a certain Biblical resonance. There are two children in school uniforms, a baby, someone meditating, a dog and, looking upwards, kites that ‘whisk the egg-white sky’. As if this isn’t enough, gulls fly in to complete the picture. Remember the meaning of ‘reboth’? There is enough expanse on this broad beach to accommodate all these humans, from the very young to the very old. They cohabit the poem without quarrelling with each other. ‘Thoughts expand’ as Balistreri draws inspiration out of the wellspring of her imagination and the poem builds in its intensity. The message that the man carves into the sand is one of love. They unite the observer with the scene. The observer knows, in another context, that these words are also meant for her. Love is the flame that burns in the heart.

Eleven poems in this collection centre on Balistreri’s personal battle with cancer. One of these poems, ‘*After the C Scan*’ yields some clues about her own survival strategy. The emphasis is on external things. The poem is outward-looking: it is more about an oak tree than computed tomography. Here are the opening lines:

The branches of an enormous oak sweep across  
the window where morning crawls like a slug.  
At the hospital café, a bowl of vegetable soup  
comforts me.

*Calm yourself* I think.

*You won’t know for days whether it’s spread.*

I stare at the tree wanting diversion. Not even  
a squirrel, songbirds, a memory.

*Why throat cancer? I never smoked.*

Windows are for looking out of, for day-dreaming, for broadening one’s horizons. They bring light into a room and put a different perspective on things. There are three windows in this poem: the window in the hospital café, Balistreri’s car window and a window at her home. Through each window she sees different things: ‘an enormous oak’, ‘starlings’ and ‘the scattered pinpoints of ebony stars’ and ‘ducks’ who paddle furiously in a pond. By immersing herself completely in each scene, (she even stops the car to contemplate the night sky) she reaps the rewards of distraction which takes her mind off the cancer.

The final poem that I want to comment on in this collection is called ‘*I Believe*’. It is a list poem in 13 lines and short enough to quote in full:

I Believe

in legacies- Limoge dinnerware, black pot-bellied love cups,  
sweaters, hand-knit; jewelry, real and costume,  
Hopi kachinas, Sioux arrowheads, stones, oaks and shagbark  
hickories, holly, sharp-edged, blood-red berries. Hawks,  
and the plains ironed flat, fields scored with the history of wind,  
blizzards and black ice, days of whiteout, prairie silence,  
its ever present music; quiet refrains of the soil, inner landscapes  
and seasonal moods. I believe in grasshopper plagues, a murder  
of crows, conversations among the dead and the living.  
I believe in the oracular, the secretive, cerulean blue  
gentians, their bright trefoil, the arc of memory  
and the stardust we're made from, - gods, all of us,  
in the womb of time.

An astonishing variety of subjects whose scope takes in jewelry, clothing, geography, meteorology, landscapes, moods, animals and plants is included here. In some cases, fascinating connections can be made between them – in other words, the list is not necessarily something that has been created at random. Kachinas, doll-like figures carved typically from cottonwood root, are known to be the spirits of deities, natural elements or animals, or the deceased ancestors of the Hopi. The figures are passed on to the daughters as a means of education and as a decorative article or gift for the home. They are a type of legacy. Sioux Indians used stone, bone and sinew arrowheads to make their Sioux arrows and hard shagbark hickory wood has often been employed in the making of axe handles and other tools and implements.

Part of the magic of this poem is the way in which the commas divide the words into short phrases whose alliteration and letter patterning make the syllables sing. The unusual vocabulary and its surprising scope give to the poem a certain authoritative and majestic air that far exceeds its short length.

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### *Third Movement*

The title of Mary Jo Balistreri's third collection, *Still*, which was published in 2018, attracts attention because it stands on its own as a single word. That word has to do a lot to earn its keep which is why its meaning is expanded upon in terms of its deployment as an adjective, a noun and an adverb. In each case, these different grammatical categories are backed up by examples featuring the word "still" and its many synonyms. This is before we even reach the table of contents. The expectation is that this collection will explore the word "still" to the full.

The titles of some of the poems from this phase of her writing continue to document her interest in painting either directly or indirectly while others betray a preoccupation with light and color). Poems with titles, such as *Tomorrow You Go Up in Smoke* and *Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground* beg to be read almost immediately. Other poems speak of domesticity or reveal an interest in outdoor activities which are often tied to a particular time and place.

In the opening poem, *I Say Yes*, Balistreri references Gerard Manley Hopkins and his concept of “inscape”: that intrinsic feeling for describing the rich and revealing “oneness” of any natural object or landscape. For Hopkins it was always associated with God’s presence in the world, revealed in energy, beauty, pattern and design. Balistreri describes the process of penetrating through to the true inscape of a scene as “living into / the thing” as she writes about the visual effect of sunlight on an ocean surface, of how even the wind “cannot erase / the diamond-dazzle or sheen of light /swallowing sailboats in its maw.” The concept of “inscape” is never far from *Waiting for the Light Rail*, a poem that features much later in the collection. Here, Balistreri writes about the importance of being in the “now of now”, of being receptive in the act of waiting, waiting for the train and waiting for the word. Here, on the cusp of summer, it is the wind that ruffles the waiting woman’s hair, it is the wind that will carry the sound of the approaching train and, most importantly, it is the wind that “is the breath that writes the living poem”.

A key word that keeps appearing in the book is “color”. The word is present in at least fourteen of the poems and individual colors are present in abundance in poems such as *You’ve Never Seen Blue Like This* and *Woman Wrapped in Orange*. In *Self-Portrait with Masks*, Balistreri explains how one color can mask another when other combinations of colors are added to it.

*Draw yourself*, she said. *Pick a primary color.*  
What is primary, I wondered as my first-grade  
teacher handed out manila paper.

She gave instructions in red, yellow and blue.  
I chose the yellow crayon, the yellow of buttercups,  
the *gold drops* Dad called Mother’s curls...

At one stage, the child in the poem looks back as if she is already adult, to ask

What happened to the yellow of me?

References to artists continue. Balistreri is a poet who likes spending time with art.

In these poems we find the stillness of a family photograph, the stillness of reflection and contemplation, the stillness of discovering her mother in a painting by Mary Cassatt and the stillness of death. The most powerful poems in the book are undoubtedly those dealing with crisis and loss. The sequence of poems written for her father are very moving indeed. *How to Deal with the Dead* is remarkably upbeat and full of good advice:

Expect to feel a rollercoaster of emotion. Intensity.  
Numbness isn’t rare. A flood of tears after coming upon  
that chocolate chip cookie mix in the grocery is common.  
Despair and lethargy creep up like kudzu. Curse.  
The dead are used to cursing. It brings unabated release.

The dark humour of the closing lines show how far Balistreri has managed to travel in coming to terms with grief:

The dead

are fiercely independent. Give them room to breathe.

In an interview published in *Poppy Road Review* (July 25, 2014) Balistreri was asked to sum up her personality in five words. The answer she gave was “enthusiasm, tenacity, spontaneity, determination and compassion.” The words were well-chosen for her poetry displays all of these qualities in abundance.

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#### *Fourth Movement*

The fourth movement is still a work in progress. It is chiefly marked by Balistreri’s emergence as a writer of various forms of haiku. These range from the traditional forms which tend to be written in three lines with a set number of syllables per line to a form known as monoku, (a hybrid originating from the fusion of a Greek prefix with a Japanese suffix) which consists of a single line. Other forms include senryu (similar to haiku but more concerned with human nature than the natural world), and tanka (31 syllable poems or ‘short songs’ consisting of five lines of 5,7,5,7 and 7 syllables each). She also enjoys the challenges of writing haibun (a combination of prose and haiku).

Balistreri clearly relishes the art of getting to the essence of poetry while at the same time taking up the challenge of working with a few words. The brevity of this minimalistic art form is part of its appeal and helps us to understand the true value of every word.

Balistreri imports other techniques into her short poems which adds to their strength of appeal. In ‘among the wings’ the soundscape is immediately evident, and the last line introduces a new element as the imagination soars:

among the wings  
of monarchs  
I migrate

In ‘harmonizing’ the alliteration of the letters ‘h’ and ‘w’ provide all the harmony that is needed to make this piece ‘sing’:

harmonizing  
with the hemlock wind...  
the winter wren.

The next piece, ‘the open lids’ is a monoku that turns the original objects, by means of shadows cast on a wall, into the sails of a yacht. It is a wonderful example of the power of the imagination:

the open lids of grand pianos sailing a sun-struck wall

In the final example, ‘junkyard cars’, the driving force of nature works its way through discarded inanimate objects in a striking juxtaposition of junk and beauty which can also be seen from the perspective of something old, something new and something dead and something living.

junkyard cars the red rods of peonies pushing through

The multifaceted interpretation of this monoku is testament to Balistreri's strength as a writer. There will be many more riches to come.

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All the extracts in this article have been reprinted with the author's permission and have been taken from the following publications: *Joy in the Morning* (Bellowing Ark Press, 2008), *Gathering the Harvest* (Bellowing Ark Press, 2012), *Still* (FutureCycle Press, 2018) and *A New Resonance 12: Emerging Voices in English Language Haiku*, edited by Jim Kacian and Julie Warther (Red Moon Press, 2021).