

# A Poet and How She Works

Family tragedy has fueled laureate JoAnn Balingit's work. Sharing it has earned her success. But even at peace with the past, she still longs for yesterday.

BY VICTOR GRETO



**S**he was 12 years old when she first held the gun that later killed her mother and father.

It was the same shotgun her dad had used months before to kill a dog that had gone after the chickens the family raised in Lakeland, Florida. He wounded the animal, and it crawled off to die.

She was afraid.

Afraid the kick would knock her down.

Afraid that, while she held it, her siblings who waited their turns would notice she was wearing a bra for the first time—one of her mother's old bras that had been left on her dresser without explanation.

She held her breath and squeezed the trigger.

"I remember hitting the can," says Delaware poet laureate JoAnn Balingit, 53. "But the kickback hurt."

Decades later, Balingit realized it was the same gun her father, a civil engineer 30 years older than her mother, used to kill her mother, then himself, on November 17, 1971.

Between the moments she squeezed the trigger and the time she began to write short stories and poetry about her family, Balingit had convinced herself she needed no one.

"I've always had to make my own way," she says. "My pride in that autonomy was my only way to survive the stigma of my parents' deaths. I had to convince myself that the tragedy had no effect on me, that it was a concussion, you know, no permanent damage. I don't believe that anymore."

Her features—a broad, caramel-colored face with dark, impassive eyes and straight black hair—reminded some of a Native American. It reminded others of someone Asian. Anything but American.

"When kids or adults would ask me where I was from—they were always asking me where I was from—I'd say the truth," she says. "Columbus, Ohio."

The daughter of a Filipino immigrant father and white Midwestern German-American mother, Balingit not only felt different, she was different, as strange to herself as she was to others.

"Knowing who you are is based on the solidity of your memories," Balingit says at the kitchen table of the Newark home she shares with her second husband, University of Delaware professor Fred Hofstetter, and their son, Julian.

"Memories are not solid. You keep reshaping them till someone tells you different, and then you have to do it all over again. Layers of emotion change what you want to see."

After the three children by her first marriage grew up, Balingit became more self-conscious, her memories more shape-shifting, says her sister, Maria Balingit.

"There was a shift at that point where she began to devote a lot of time to writing and making that her career," Maria says. "But, like me, there was a long time when she didn't think about that time at all."

Those shifting memories have become the stuff of JoAnn Balingit's poetry. Its power helped her attain the job of poet laureate for the state last year.

"I can't think of anyone who writes like her," says former poet laureate Fleda Brown. "She never does the expected."

Balingit's parents, Jesus "Jim" Balingit, 49, and Joan Kuntz, 19, met in 1952. The family history is fuzzy, but they may have eloped to escape the initial wrath of Joan's parents. "All was forgiven" when they took home their infant son, Alfredo, nicknamed "Butch." Butch was the first of 12 children, followed by Maria, then JoAnn.

The family moved between six states as their father drifted from job to job.

Balingit spent her elementary school years in Birmingham, Alabama, Marietta, Georgia, then in Lakeland. "Kids are cruel," she says. "They'd often pretend to machine-gun me and say I was a dirty Jap."

What startled her most, she says, is that she often forgot what she looked like, that she was "different," until a child brought it up.

But she got support from her teachers, and she found an outlet in literature. One of her earliest memories of becoming excited about the power of writing was after she read "Romeo and Juliet" in ninth grade.

The family was settled in Lakeland in 1966, when her dad, then 63, had a stroke and was laid off. "It was all downhill after that," Balingit says. "He was always silent. I wanted Dad to be like everyone else. He wasn't."

It was the death of her younger brother Armando—felled when a neighborhood child threw a spear used for catching frogs at him that punctured his skull—in 1970 that precipitated their father's fatal depression, both JoAnn and Maria now believe. "He was my father's favorite son," JoAnn says.

She tried to ignore her brother's death. "I wanted to be happy," she says. "I wanted life to be perfect."

JoAnn made big plans for college, and was happy when her mother overruled her father, who didn't want to pay for her to take the SATs. But as the first anniversary of Armando's death approached, the family suddenly came to an end.

"There's a lot of significance to memorializing someone's death at certain periods of time in Filipino culture," Maria Balingit says. "Our father might have been unable to handle the loss."

With their youngest child only five days old, Jim Balingit shot and killed his wife, then himself.

JoAnn, then 16, was in chemistry class when a school official poked his head into the room and told her to follow him right away. Outside, half her siblings sat restlessly in the car. "My oldest brother wasn't allowed to say anything to us," she says.

When they pulled up to the home across the street, they saw ambulances and police cars parked in the driveway of their home. "I knew it was bad. Mom and Dad weren't there. Was there a car wreck?"

Outside the home, standing on the lawn, Butch told his siblings, "Dad shot mom and then himself."

"Are they dead?" one asked.

"Yes."

The children were silent. No one cried. "I think I screamed," JoAnn says.

No one talked about it.

"The hardest thing about it was feeling alone," says Maria Balingit. "I don't remember having conversations about it then. I don't know how others have processed it, but I've done a lot of counseling for over 20 years."

For JoAnn Balingit, it took just as long.

When JoAnn returned to school, only one student told her she was sorry about what happened. No counselor, no teacher took her aside. Racial strife at school alienated her further.

"I didn't know what side I was on, and I hated the fighting over difference," she says. "And there was a deeper sadness, that I just didn't belong."

While her younger siblings scattered to relatives and foster homes, JoAnn and Maria stayed with a friend's family until they graduated. Both attended Florida State University in Tallahassee. JoAnn got her degree in English with a minor in French. Her parents were never far from her mind.

"I forgave my father in my heart by the time I was a freshman in college," JoAnn says. "I was an English major and writing compositions and essays, trying to work out my forgiveness as a task. I didn't know how to do it, but I wanted to."

She realized how ashamed she had been by her father's murder-suicide.

"You always read in the papers about men who kill their families and themselves," JoAnn says. "I'd read the stories, and say, 'Oh, my god, that's terrible,' and then remember I'm one of them. I became mortified."

But her feelings matured from a puzzling embarrassment to a tentative understanding of what might have driven her father.

"The desperation he must have felt is horrific, but mostly it's sorrowful," she says. "To be driven to that depth of despair—I don't believe there was evil involved."

She met her first husband, Francis Poole, now a librarian at UD, during a poetry reading in Tallahassee. He followed her to Irvine, California, where she attended graduate school at the University of California.

She dropped out after she got her master's in English, when Poole got a job as an English teacher in Tangier, Morocco. They lived there for two years, then spent four years in Portugal.

JoAnn tutored and worked as a secretary. She had her first daughter, Savannah, in Tangier and a second daughter, Bahiya, in Lisbon. Even in Europe, people still asked her where she was from.

In Portugal she began to write with a passion. Without a phone or TV, she sent long letters to siblings and American friends. "That was when I first started thinking of becoming a writer," she says.

The family returned to the United States in 1985 so their oldest daughter could go to school here. They settled in Tampa, where Poole earned a degree in library science at the University of South Florida. Balingit taught there part-time.

JoAnn began excavating her parents' past with her siblings, reshaping memories. In a short story, she wrote about shooting her father's gun. It was rejected.

"I was always writing poetry, too, but nothing came of it," she says. "All our friends were poets, but I didn't feel I was good enough."

JoAnn got a haiku published for the first time in Rolling Stone in 1981. She had two more published before the magazine stopped accepting poetry several years later.

"I knew I could do it then," she says, "but I kept putting it off. I wasn't courageous enough to put myself out there."

JoAnn Balingit worked as a librarian at Bancroft Elementary School after the family moved to Newark, where Poole had found work at UD, in 1990.

She held her first poetry reading in 1992, of a poem inspired by a children's book, "Your Heart and How it Works." She also wrote "History Textbook, America" about her father. A grant from the Delaware Division of the Arts in 1994 "legitimized" her work.

"It made me feel responsible to my craft," she says, "that I had a talent I hadn't been giving enough attention."

Over the past decade, JoAnn has had several poems published in magazines and anthologies, including "Best New Poets 2007" and "On the Mason-Dixon Line: An Anthology of Contemporary Delaware Writers." Her chapbook of poetry, "Forage," was a finalist in the 2006 Bright Hill Press Chapbook Contest.

She felt presumptuous applying for poet laureate when the call came out for nominations in October 2007, but departing poet laureate Fleda Brown suggested she apply.

Kristen Pleasanton, art and artist services coordinator with the Delaware Division of the Arts, handled the search. Pleasanton got three out-of-state poets to judge about a dozen entries.

They chose Balingit based on her community involvement, influence and ability to represent the state.

"She also had experience working with adults and children, literary education and activities, and had done programs across the state, from New Castle County and Kent and Sussex," Pleasanton says.

Brown, who now lives in Michigan, says JoAnn is on the verge of creating great work.

"She was appointed at an early stage of her career as a poet, and that's fine," Brown says. "The encouragement has been really good for her."

Since she was appointed last May, Balingit has done three residencies. Her first activity was a writer's retreat with 16 poet-fiction writers. She also has done an artist residency at Thurgood Marshall Elementary School. New York-based Spire Press will publish her chapbook, "Your Heart and How it Works," later this year.

Meanwhile, excavation of her past continues, and not only through poetry. Last summer, for the first time in nearly four decades, JoAnn saw the house where her childhood ended so abruptly in 1971.

"I went up and knocked on the door and this woman answered, and she knew who I was," JoAnn says.

The woman was a friend of friends of her parents, the wife and mother of a family who had moved in only months after the Balingits left.

The cupboards, bathroom tile, parquet floor, the layout—all were the same, Balingit says. Even the washer and dryer were in the same place.

Marching behind the woman who carried her granddaughter, Balingit got a chill of the past.

"She was real short, like my mom, 5 foot-1, and I'm behind her, at her back, and she's walking through with a child in her arms," she says. "It was bizarre."

But that feeling lasted only a moment. JoAnn imagined her family life before the tragedy. She felt preternaturally calm.

"It just felt satisfying to walk through the house and have this placid woman smiling and talking to me and to feel like the home was a restful place."

Unlike hers, this family had thrived in the very same rooms where she had once played and dreamed and talked with her mother and father.

"No family ever stays together forever," JoAnn says. "But we were scattered much earlier than we should have been. There's a longing there, I suppose."