

JAMAICA PLAIN

In city and country, seeking a sense of place

By Carin Zissis
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To poet Maggie Dietz, Franklin Park is a haunted place, the kind of place she haunts for her muse, from the abandoned bear pits to a neglected 1912 stone facade.

"A sense of place is significant," says Dietz, 29, in the middle of her first collection of poems. "These are poems about real physical places, and what those places can mean for the people that inhabit them."

Yet it's a change of place — far from Franklin Park and her Jamaica Plain three-decker — that's allowing Dietz to write her first complete book of poems.

Winning a fellowship and a one-year residence at Phillips Exeter Academy, Dietz moved with her husband in August to a Colonial house across the street from the famous Exeter, N.H., prep school.

Dietz returns to Boston every few weeks to remain active in the Favorite Poem Project, which she's directed since 1997. At that time, BU professor Robert Pinsky was named US poet laureate, and he initiated an open invitation for Americans to send him letters



PHOTO/MEGHAN KRIGEL

Maggie Dietz: "I miss something about urban observations."

about the poems they love most. Dietz started helping out by handling his correspondence while finishing her master's degree at BU's writing program.

"I gradually got involved in the idea, and very soon it became clear that it was going to become a real project," says Dietz, who worked as co-editor with Pinsky on two anthologies, "Americans' Favorite Poems" and "Poems to Read." The collections include works by a range of poets, from Garcia Lorca to Frost to Ginsberg, accompanied by comments from the readers who chose them.

Although her poetry has appeared in several journals and received awards, the Bennett Fellowship provides time and space for Dietz to finally

concentrate on her own work.

"There's a feeling of calm here," says Dietz, whose office sits near the poetry stacks of Phillips Academy's library. "I definitely have a feeling of solitude that's not at all unpleasant. It's productive."

Instead of fall in New Hampshire, however, Dietz recently found herself imagining a different place: writing about a jungle village in the Dominican Republic.

But she also looks forward to moving back to Jamaica Plain, where she sublet an apartment for the year. "I miss something about urban observations," says Dietz, "and the details of what have become my life and my place."

For inspiration, Dietz often walked from her Glade Avenue

7 a.m., Jamaica Pond

"Collector" is a new poem by Maggie Dietz that will be included in the first complete book of her own poetry:

COLLECTOR

The Chinese master of balance rides his balance-machine, each morning, along Jamaica Pond. The morning traffic can witness his trembling determination as he moves toward the Center for Redemption, where he trades the contents of his magnificent balloons for food, rent and equipment: rolls of twine, blue translucent bags, and cotton gardening gloves if they come cheap. His hands must dive night in and out of trash barrels, like seals after glistening fish. He needs the moon, unfolds and fills bag after bag, the plastic bottles not thrown, but wound neatly into spiral rows like bales then tied in the particular order of balance to the bicycle, first to the back fender, then to the seat, falling left, until by 7:00 a.m. the bicycle is invisible beneath the layers of gigantic bags, piled taller than the man and broader than the path along the pond, which he has reached, now close to rest. He launches there at the eastern edge, tilting the bicycle up that had leaned against him as he went, then down to mount, the right foot on its pedal, the left slowly revving along the walk. Like a child first learning to ride, he wobbles as he begins, his legs bowed out, leaning too far right, then, the handlebars violently wobbling, gripping tight, the knees straightening, body striving forward instead of side to side. He challenges the air, steering the vessel, letting the wind in his hair tell him which way to pull and where to put his weight. On blustery days, it seems he might take flight, the bags puffing out like massive lungs. When he brings them out of the Center, they are skins, stretched and flimsy. He folds them on the ground, one by one, corner to corner, then ties the bundle, empty, to the fender. Then he goes, also empty, ready for sleep, riding to ride, no longer guiding the ship.

home to visit Franklin Park's bear pits, hidden near the Schoolboy Stadium. Walking up a stone staircase, through weeds and broken bars, she found a cage with a 1912 stone facade of two huge bears surrounding and

swatting at the buildings of Boston.

"It's sort of decayed and frightening, but what you fear now is the human element," says Dietz. "It's lovely in a way, and spooky."