



Introduction to the Poetry Archives

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For what is a poem but a hazardous attempt at self-understanding: it is the deepest part of autobiography. - Robert Penn Warren

Most of my expression in childhood, as a teenager and young adult, found voice in the various forms of writing afforded by prose. I worked in essays, editorials, all manner of decidedly non-fiction writing. Life itself almost always struck me as more interesting than fiction. Reality has held more pathos, comedy, horror, drama, surprise, fascination, and entertainment for me than anything anyone could ever make up.

As the old saw goes: “Write what you know”. So, the bulk of my written work in the early periods consisted of impressions of how the world was affecting me, how it seemed to be treating my fellow human beings, and the state of Nature in general. Even later, and on up to the present, my forays into novel writing and short fiction have always needed to have a strong social commentary, with a thrust greater than the fictional plot into which it is built.

Then came verse.

Poetry came at a relatively late point in my development as a writer, first coming to light in the form of songs. During my early years as a young adult musician, I tried my hand at musical composition. As is usually the case, a wannabe rock star’s attempted relationships with members of the opposite sex inspired them; and fledgling efforts to express myself in love songs produced my first expressions in verse. In retrospect, the all too obvious juvenile lyrics with their sugary phrases and strained rhymes can make me cringe today. Still, everyone has to start somewhere; and it is comforting to know

that the only copies of these naïve little endeavors that still exist are safely tucked away in my possession.

After a great many attempts ended up in the circular file, my efforts eventually made me a better songwriter, and many of those written after the age of thirty I believe are fine. But you still couldn't call me a very prolific songwriter. Melodies that are original enough for me have always been hard to come by. The two dozen or so that have survived are original and, in most cases, were recorded (see "Tunes"). But for every one that survived, at least ten others never saw the light of day.

Writing lyrics can be difficult because the musical structure within which they must lie sometimes dictates the length of the lines, and often makes it impossible to use certain words. It is poetry in a musical box, if you will, which can take away some of the unbridled freedom that is most characteristic of poetry as the *Gay Science*. With a few notable exceptions, like Jackson Browne and Bob Dylan (easily two of the greatest, most prolific of American poet-lyricists), most lyrics are essentially captive poetry enslaved in a tune.

Even when you read Dylan's pure poetry you can see the difference from his lyrics. For as clever a craftsman as he is with a lyric, his poems are able to more consistently typify the genre of poetry from the writer's point of view – complete control and freedom in terms of form, permitting the greatest possible command in terms of content. Jackson Browne seems to have completely bridged the gap between poetry and lyrics, which is what *Rolling Stone* must have meant when they once said that he is "probably the most accomplished lyricist of our time". Then there's Elton John, who receives Bernie Taupin's pure poetry in the mail on a wide range of subjects and applies his considerable genius with melody and phrasing to turn them into song lyrics. As far as we know, Bernie has yet to send Elton a poem that he couldn't turn into a lyric. It is a thoroughly unique brand songwriting that is truly remarkable.

In any event, the work of exceptional songwriters aside, all lyrics may be deemed a special form of poetry; and this archive includes lyrics from some of my more poetic musical compositions. Their inclusion here is important because they show the genesis and early growth of my poeticism, giving a more complete picture of my development as a poet, and providing insights that may not otherwise come to light.

I do not subscribe to the notion that poetry must be cryptic or obscure to be good, a tendency that seems to be in vogue these days in some literary circles. To write poetry or anything else with the intention of making it any more difficult to interpret than necessary is counterproductive at best, and a bizarre form of self-censorship at worst. It's like calling people over to see your new painting hanging in the gallery, then standing in front of it to block or somehow intrude on people's efforts to view it. It simply makes no sense; and the notion that there is a right or wrong way to write poetry is equally ludicrous. Poetry, by nature, gives the writer more freedom and latitude, and if it is done well it imparts some of that free spirit to the reader.

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My first poem *qua* poem written outside my activity as a songwriter did not appear until 1986 when I was twenty-eight. It was an artistic reaction to a philosophy course on contemporary issues, and my professor liked it enough to ask me for a copy to have on file as part of his course notes. I thought the continuous juxtaposition of opposites would be a good way to convey the contemporary confusion and malaise in society, the symptoms thereof, and to hint at possible cause(s):

But Seriously (Christianity and Existentialism?)

*In spite of life, the theme is death.
Eternal sleepers wake.
There has to be a Hell, you know,
if just for Heaven's sake.*

*At any rate, we must speed up.
The difference is the same,
when never is forever,
and the guiltless are to blame.*

*Separated in a group
the many are as one.
Endless talk of action,
after all is said and done.*

*And when mere will becomes a right
we dance to freedom's song,
unaware we've over-stepped,
and right is now a wrong.*

*Well, I won't stand for sitting back,
for now, we're lost and find
the key to life is not our death,
but somewhere in the mind.*

*And if you search that human mind
you should, for all it's worth,
find opposite to death, not life,
but rather human birth.*

It was conceived purely as a poem, but ended up becoming a song a year later when I put it to music. And to these verses a chorus was added:

*Oh, Oh, time will show.
It's not a simple case of 'yes' or 'no'.
And what is true and real,
we can only feel.
It's not the kind of thing that we can know.
Oh, Oh, time will show.*

Eventually it appeared on my first recorded attempt to market my songs on cassette (before CDs) a couple of years after that, but still stands as my first pure poem.

A year later came my second, and my first pure love poem. I was in Germany on a summer scholarship from the German government on the strength of my German course marks at Memorial. Having completed two months at the University of Freiburg in the Black Forest, I hitchhiked to Marbach to study Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Schiller at the Schiller Institute, on my own time and at my own expense.

By now it had been well over two months since my wife and three-year-old son saw me off at the airport in Newfoundland. On the evening of my second day in Marbach, I picked up some loose bottles of hearty German beer at the local market. Tossing back a few in my student pension, it wasn't long before I started to feel the alcohol, and soon thereafter homesickness rushed into my heart, filling my chest. I sat despairingly at the desk, and looking out over the lush manicured grounds of the Institute I wrote:

At Home...In Germany

*A rhyming couplet lends a way
to conjure up the words to say:
How far afield I've had to roam
to find that I'm remaining home.*

*Not half a man puts down these lines.
The better half for which he pines
lies far away, yet oh so near,
for I am there while I am here.*

*And so divided here I sit,
just trying to make sense of it.
I guess that I'll just have to wait
until reunion sets me straight.*

*But if I should not make it home,
I only wish that it be known:
a smiling lad and dainty love
are all that I've consisted of.*

* * *

Experimenting with different styles, for years I listened for my own poetic voice. As is usually the case, you cut your teeth on the work and styles of others, anticipating the emergence of your own distinctive style someday. For me, however, someday didn't come for fourteen years, and I am pleased with most of the different kinds of poems I produced over that time. But the satisfaction and fulfillment from finding one's own distinct voice is undeniable, and I had yet to be blessed with this joy.

When it did happen, precipitated by a positive review of my work to date by a respected and published writer, it gave birth to a new and exciting poeticism. My experience of writing poetry changed dramatically that pivotal day, as much as the poetry itself did, and the process became much more enjoyable. Writing poetry after finding my voice felt like a better reflection of my flow of consciousness, and the two became as one. Nowadays, all I require to write a poem is an idea; and editing after the first draft has become minimal.

Something else became clear with the discovery of my own poetic voice – a better appreciation of poetry itself. As a genre, poetry could now reveal to me its ability to grant the writer more freedom than is possible with any other kind of writing. Before my coming of age, it seemed content was governed by form, like the way lyrics are governed to some extent by the form of the music. The style that was “tried on” at any given time tended to dictate some of the content.

I know now that this was a terribly narrow approach. With the appearance of my own voice came a genuine epiphany. Suddenly I could see, right there in my own work, that form had become completely bound up with content, and they were co-existing for me as each line was written. It was the first significant change for the better in my adult life, and one of the happiest times of my life as a writer and a human being.

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This poetry archive is presented chronologically in three parts, marking my life according to the two major turning points in my journey: 1) all the best poetry written before hearing my own literary voice (1986-2000); 2) the best poetry written in the year or two after hearing it, up to and including the courting of my wife, Tina (2000-2002); and 3) the best poetry written since starting to build a happily-ever-after with Tina, on up my first conceptualization of this website (2002-2018).

But Seriously, though found here in the introduction, should be considered the first pure poem; and **At Home...In Germany** would be the second. And all three parts of the poetry archive will include song lyrics written before and after I began writing pure poetry. The second part starts with **Awakenings**, the poem that proved a watershed. Appropriately enough it expresses my love of writing, and reading it now takes me back to when first I felt the sheer excitement of becoming a full-fledged, original poet. This section also contains particularly poetic lyrics from this period, as these also betray an advance in style and clarity in the craft of writing verse.

Not all the poems are love poems, and not all the love poems are about romantic love. Some express love for life, writing, children, etc. My first, **But Seriously**, emerged as a poetic reaction to issues in the world raised in a philosophy course, one of many I took in my successful pursuit of a degree in philosophy. The poem is an expression of some aspects of my own personal philosophy, and so is firmly grounded in love in the broadest sense and conceptualization. It is, therefore, a love poem of a special kind.

Most of them are love poems, and most are indeed expressions of romantic love. Some are about the subjective experience of romantic love, some of love lost. The names have been changed and personal references are kept to a minimum to protect the identity of the then beloved, that people may be discouraged from referring these poems to specific individuals. The reader is respectfully asked to resist any such reference. The point here is not to give a tell-all account of my private 'affairs', or dish on other people involved. Rather it is to show subjective expressions of love that speak to the experience that love is, whatever or whomever we are loving.

Poets most often try to find ever-newer ways to express thoughts and feelings we share universally, and this is accomplished through, as opposed to in, the subject matter (i.e. the poet's own love). For the most part, a poet doesn't believe that her/his own peculiar life is the issue. The poet's personal situations and relationships, in and of themselves, may not be what she/he is trying to reveal with the piece; and I can assure my readers it is not what this semi-autobiographical poetry archive is about.

While it is true that poets deal with universal themes like love and loneliness, in all humility, this archive comes with the hope that you may find the life and corresponding poetic development of this writer worth reading about. Many would only reveal works written after they found their voice, embarrassed to show their early work. I have no such reservations. With the big picture in mind, I wish to use my complete poetry archive to illustrate my development and gradual maturation as a poet. I see the archive as a way to give ABOTA tribe members insights into the parallel development

of writer and self, which I have done by providing the works chronologically, with the course of my life as a common autobiographical thread running through them.

Details are necessary to a full appreciation of the poems, and achievement of a measure of autobiography/memoir. I ask readers to look past the people involved to see the poetic expressions. You may find some identification with what is expressed and/or enlightenment a heightened awareness of love and its expression; or both.

Of course, if poetry comes from a deep enough place in the poet, it cannot help but be autobiographical, and intimately so. The narrative throughout is to help readers appreciate the context in which the pieces were written, and provide reference points with a minimum of reference to other persons. I have tried to give enough information about my experiences, and the thoughts and feelings that arose therefrom, to achieve my objective; disclosing as little as possible about the other people involved.

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Those who do not know me personally may be surprised by how forthcoming I am with personal/private information about myself, especially my protracted battle with a disabling mood disorder. This requires a few words of explanation.

Illness took my first twenty-five years of adulthood. The first part of this archive covers all that. As you read the first part, you'll find periods of darkness, despair. Please take heart when you do – it's a battle I ultimately won and continue to win, so it has a happy ending. And consider that after finding therapeutic treatment in 2000, and finally getting on the road to a successful and sustained recovery, I immediately embarked on a public advocacy campaign for mental health and illness awareness. It was all about sharing my story for the benefit of others and the advancement of these issues.

We often hear people say how they overcame a big challenge and never looked back. Well, I looked back and saw a lot of people still suffering, unable to speak for themselves. Realizing I understood their pain intimately and possessed the necessary communication skills, advocacy was a calling. I spoke to nursing students and medical interns; and was a keynote speaker at various conferences and professional gatherings across the country. My personal history and experience, which I could only ever see as a sad waste of life before coming to health and starting the campaign, suddenly became a valuable resource I could use in service of the cause. I did so for ten years, and I am still happy to speak on occasion whenever I'm called upon and my schedule permits.

So, though advocacy means necessarily revisiting troubling times and unsettling memories, writing about it here is old hat to me. Including the hardest times is necessary if this website is to be truly authentic. Artistic depictions of struggles and inner conflicts are usually compelling, none more so than those written from personal experience. Artists will often say they create some of their best work when they're feeling at their worst, when they're intensely lonely and depressed. Steve Earle was asked about this during one of his songwriting camps I was fortunate enough to be part of one summer

in the Catskills. “Sometimes people say: ‘Cheer up, Steve,’” he said. “And I’ll say: ‘No. I’m not ready yet.’ Does that answer your question?”

Aside from how it informs my art on multiple levels, and the lifestyle I am required to maintain for my ongoing recovery, my disorder is a non-issue for me these days, under control for over twenty years and counting. When coming to health has been hard fought for more than two decades, you come to treasure and fiercely protect your health, and you learn recovery is not an event – it must become a way of life.

Any genuine semi-autobiographical account of my life and development as a poet and person could hardly avoid my long struggle with this complex disability. It is inexorably connected to who I am, woven into the fabric of my life as an artist, fused with my very soul; and it is inseparable from the works I have created across three artistic genres over the years. I have found that embracing and sharing one’s personal pain to help people breeds empathy in oneself and others. It is the essence of what an advocate does and unquestionably one of the keys to being an authentic artist. Advocacy has also taught me that revealing your weakness shows you who your real friends are, but that’s a story for another time and place.

These are the things that drive me to create, and to create all the works you will find on this website, whether it be writing, music, or visual art. Those who choose to take this poetry archive as it is intended will be those who enjoy it most. Again, for what it’s worth, the main objective is to provide my complete body of poetic work in such a way as to document and reveal the gradual development of a poet’s craft, this poet, and to show how closely it is bound up with his life course and personal development.

Thank you for your time and attention to the opening remarks of the poetry archive, and to everything else I have to offer my members across the full ***A Branch of the Arts*** website. Please visit often and enjoy. I look forward to any questions or comments you may have by email, Facebook Messenger, or in the blog on the main page of this site.

Peace.

A stylized signature logo for Jeff R. Kelland. The letter 'J' is large and blue, with the name 'Jeff R. Kelland' written in a cursive script across it.