Poetry Archive: Part I

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Section 2: Emerging Poet, Failing Health (1993-1996)

A wise man should consider that health is the greatest of human blessings,
and learn how by his own thought to derive benefit from his illnesses. – Hippocrates

In 1993, something much more poetic was stirring inside me, as the years I had been spending working on the craft were starting to bear fruit. There were many poems that year, including this little black piece about the urban jungle:

The City's Dark Side

Pale adolescent males
haunt the magazine racks of corner drug stores,
as contrived young girls cower inside their precious fantasies,
afraid to walk the shadowy streets of reality.

Neighbourhoods,
where people speak in blood-curdling screams.
Neighbourhoods devoid of neighbours,
only hoods.

Nature tries desperately
to cleanse the unnatural products of waste,
where one season's trash is bequeathed to the next.
An endless sequence of paved futility.

The rich huddle
in one or two unabashedly affluent corners of urban sprawl.
The poor scream out for parity in many abject corners.
And nobody listens.

All hopes and dreams

subject to the dubious objective of progress.
Morality a bit player in a decadent drama.
And everyone bound by a common desire to escape.
Perhaps, sadly, to another city.
Different, but just the same.

* * *

Another somber piece was written to express the feeling of being trapped together, in love, looking to the future with hope. Written at the window looking out over the slum we had no choice but to call home, it was a satisfying poem to write. I didn't know it at the time, but I can see now that this period was the strongest foreshadowing to date of what I would know seven years later as my own poetic voice:

This Morning

The winter's first snowfall romanticizes the project.
Everything old is new again, or seems new again,
for less than an hour.
A flock of crows take flight across the rooftops,
as if to say: "It's the last straw".
Two stay for a few extra minutes.
One last look around from atop the streetlight,
then, too, they are gone.

Me, I'm staying.
I can't fly and neither can she.
Who can say when?
For now, it's enough to know we will,
someday, some way.

Already the blanket of snow seems a shroud
to mourn the loss of another year.
Despair wrapped in the warmth of hope.
It would surely be cold without it.
Just think, and it is.

Already the snow has lost its charm,
a further complication,

an impediment to movement.
Thank God for hope.

Free at last from the shackles of rhyme, so free to fully express, this was my first decent attempt at blank verse. Until **This Morning**, I didn't think my abilities as a poet were refined enough to permit me to get away with blank verse. It was written one morning at dawn, and Calliope was palpably with me.

* * *

A few jaunty love poems were also written around this time in 1993, while we were still living in that 'project'. One short poem, another venture into blank verse, continues with the theme of feeling trapped – of desperate love in a desperate situation:

In A Nutshell

We're trapped,
with nothing but each other.
Only each other.
Only each other's love.
Alone to care for one another,
cut off from the world.
Each with just the other to desire.
Nothing but the other to care for.
Cut adrift
on a raft of devotion we fashioned for ourselves.
Nowhere to turn but to each other.

We're trapped.
What a beautiful place to be.

Another short piece was slightly more optimistic:

Who?

Who can say where we'll be ten years from now?
Who's to say we won't find even greater treasures?

But who can stand our present condition?
Who can weather this storm,
break free of necessity and duty,
to die little by little,
until we truly live?

We can.

Yet another was obviously inspired by my newfound poeticism and love for my new wife:

Two Poets

Two poets,
writing a life together.
Thought becomes you, my dear.
Words give way to lines,
each season a verse,
each year a piece of living art.
Our hearts set the meter,
with a lovely commitment to the bond.
A literate love to live and learn,
to spend like ink upon the sheets.
You are my rhyme and I am yours.
I long to compose with you again.

* * *

By now I was well on the way to finding my voice. Though I was still to some extent "wearing" different poetic approaches to write poetry, my style and choice of language were now further from the influence of other poets than ever before, and a more sophisticated maturity was evolving. Calliope was stopping by more often now, for longer periods of time.

In early 1994, my wife flew to Ontario to visit her daughter. It was to be the first time we spent even one night apart, and it was to be five nights. I missed her very soon after she left, and by now my mood disorder was becoming more and more onerous. Nevertheless, missing her produced a clever little ode:

A Way to Say

It just went away.
Thousands of miles in darkness,
perhaps to stoically stand
with others of its kind.
Not mine. Others.

Oh, I'm sure it fulfilled its purpose,
expunging and exploring that most sacred chamber.
But selfishly I say that purpose has a place.
How could it pretend it belonged there
as though it always had?

Finally, enough is enough.
Through the same darkness it has returned.
And now it stands,
so properly it seems to me,
lovingly next to mine.
Her toothbrush.

* * *

In the summer of 1994, we were involved in a car accident. Broadsided on her side by a man who ran a red light, my wife sustained serious injury to her neck, shoulder and arm. I was lucky enough to walk away with little more than a good shaking up, but she was damaged. This added strain brought on even harder times, and in early 1995 we decided to look for a way to Ontario. We wanted to break out of the trap and hook up with some old friends; and we were keen to make some new friends, start fresh.

Valentine's Day of 1995 was an opportunity to rally with each other about our plan. We needed to affirm our love in the face of hardship:

My Valentine

A couple does the daily job
of dealing with their changing moods.
But this is life now, is it not?
Ups and downs, vicissitudes?

Now you my love, my special treat,
while dealing with things said above,
must shoulder one more misery ---
the arm and neck, and pain thereof.

I understand my sweetest one.
I try to be aware by day.
And even night when sleep is nigh,
my lady lies a certain way.

I know you've yet to truly face
the condition you must bear.
But please, do not one moment doubt
beside you – I'll be there.

I only wish to better know
what I can do or not,
to ease and make it tolerable,
with the little we've got.

In any case, my chipmunk chops,
I pledge to you, divine,
to make sure we as two move through
this rocky road of time.

Okay, admittedly, this one is a bit sappy. But the writing was starting to feel a lot better, and I felt more in control of what I was doing.

Before leaving the province, our relationship inspired two more poems, and love for my parents brought about a third. The first represents a time in my life when I had to be determined to be happy. It sounds strange but grappling with an ever more complicated case of depression meant I had to work to keep up my natural optimism.

In a deep clinical depression over an extended period, the future looks hopeless. I've always been a cheerful person, but in a severely depressed state the inability to be this way naturally was most unsettling, making my very identity questionable. This poem is painful for me to read, as through it I see life with that desperate hoping-against-hope vision again that warps and confuses the effort to live. Yet I still possessed a determined faith in love itself:

The Difference

You may be just a woman,
and I may be just a man.
Life may be just a bowl of cherries.
Who knows how this all began?

And it may be just our job to fill
the spaces between our sleep,
whether space be a day or lifetime.
What if memories are all we keep?

God may be nothing but a figment,
and belief may be just a lie;
we may be only fooling ourselves.
Are we simply waiting around to die?

NO!

Every word I've said here is wrong.
For you are my loving wife.
I steadfastly remain your husband,
and this has made all the difference in my life.

Her birthday came in August, and I decided to employ my now exciting albeit searching facility with verse. Despite a building sense of facility with blank verse, I was also discovering new respect for rhyme. This poem was an effort to allay her concerns about aging, with a change in rhyme scheme:

How Old is She Today?

Like things unseen and sounds unheard,
you so confound the written word.
Yet I must try to tell you here,
just what I mean.

Common terms like 'young' and 'old',
they don't apply as you unfold,
for this is what you do each day.

You surely do not age.

And I don't care for numbers, dear,
as they are used to mark the years,
for such a use your life defies,
and I defy it with you.

A lust to love, a child-like joy,
makes you a girl, so I'm a boy.
You teach me every day is new,
so it is.

So have no fear of forty-five,
or other years when they arrive,
`cause time is truly on your side.
Unfailingly, you show it.

So this happy birthday, made in prose,
is meant to be, God surely knows,
a love-filled blessing of the day,
that you were born!

Thankfully, this poem had the desired effect, and helped me feel much better about striking out with my wife and son in Ontario. Hope is a powerful thing, and at this point it was buoying my spirits. I was looking forward to the trip, whatever form it took, and the thought of a new life in a new city on the mainland was heartening, even exciting.

The last thing written before leaving Newfoundland was a poem for my parents. It came following a farewell get-together, and the feeling that I was already missing them. It appeared while I was thinking about the importance of all they had taught me, how their ethic had been passed on to me, and how indispensable it would be as I faced this new challenge:

Paragons

Amid the changing tides of daily life,
of spatio-temporal human existence,
the viscious variations of a violent world,
and against uncertainty and global doubt.

There they were, young and unsure,
wielding an ethic and willing to work.
A future envisioned, a mission in life:
to teach by example and willing it fun.

And throughout the years, and many they be,
consistently and without deviation,
even today and for years to come,
a model of peace, of learning, and love.

* * *

The trip to London was horrendous. Money was very scarce, and with our limited resources we decided my wife and son would go on ahead by bus and train. I would hitchhike, and I promised to be in London by September 20th, my son's twelfth birthday. With less than twenty dollars in my pocket, a heavily loaded knapsack and my jumbo model Takamine guitar and case on my back, I set out for London.

Hitchhiking is not at all like it used to be, so I ended up walking a lot of the miles along the way, and I still have a knot in my upper back from the uneven load. Walking across the Quebec border into Ontario at dawn on the morning of my son's birthday, I could see no conceivable way for me to make it to London in time to see him off to bed, let alone spend his special day with him. I was dirty, tired, hungry and miserable about not making it in time as I had promised.

I trudged into the Wendy's restaurant just across the border on the TCH. Incredibly, a friendly trucker struck up a conversation with me and bought me breakfast. He asked and I told him my story. Then he went out to his rig, got on the radio and arranged with some other truckers for a tag-team arrangement to get me as far as Mississauga. Once in Mississauga, I looked up a couple of friends from Newfoundland. They let me shower and change clothes and drove me to London by suppertime – just in time to help him blow out the candles!

We came to London to seek better fortune and find better treatment for my condition. We found neither. And though I felt my marriage was strong and a constant source of strength, I was steadily slipping further into a more disabling depressive state. Love was the only pleasure amid my pain. But I'm sure it all felt very different from her perspective.

* * *

In January of 1996, my condition was even more debilitating, and I stepped up my intensive search for treatment. I was seeing a psychiatrist and a psychologist; and a

lady who, though not a social worker, was helping me with such things.

She worked in concert with the doctors, and quite compassionate. I loved her for her manner, and my memories of that time without her there are unimaginable. At this crucial time, I realized this lady would always be a vital person who played a pivotal role in my life, no matter how long I lived, and even if I never saw her again:

Don't Burn Them

Troubled waters demand a bridge.
Yet with the future eyed,
that bridge is no less vital
once you've reached the other side.

For no matter what you gain or lose,
a future big or small,
that bridge has made it possible
to follow dreams at all.

This poem was originally seven verses long, but on closer examination it became clear that these two verses said it all. I was pleased with the process whereby I distilled the piece down to its essential elements; and I can still see now how much I learned from writing this one poem.

I still think of that wonderful lady often, and I can picture her, but I would be hard pressed to remember her name.

* * *

Walking one dreary afternoon in London, depressed and unconsciously looking for a diversion, I was passing a downtown strip bar and decided to go in for a beer. There I met a beautiful young exotic dancer going by the name of Suzie, and a brief chat told me she was anything but your stereotypical stripper. I was there for about an hour or two, and she was so honest and genuine I believed her when she said Suzie was her real name. It seemed that by the time I left we had discussed everything under the sun, but walking home I realized we never talked much about who she is and why she was stripping, engrossed as I was in her thoughts and feelings. Her thoughts and feelings were oddly special, though I cannot say why. Later that night I was reflecting on the time I spent there, and trying to be realistic about this young lady's enchanting effect on me:

Interlude

He wandered from the action.
A way to find distraction.
And not without attraction,
came in.

Unkempt, he bought refreshment.
His eyes made the adjustment.
Her face said "life", "intelligence".
They met.

How soon he felt her lift his heart,
with spirit, beauty, tender art,
her cheerful wisdom to impart.
They talked.

They spoke of life and love sublime,
children and all things divine.
Then, without warning, it was time.
She danced.

While child-like feet and fingers played,
a total woman she betrayed,
with eyes like midnight pools displayed.
He watched.

Intoxicating innocence,
her understated confidence,
and Eastern-flavoured elegance.
He was moved.

She left the stage with dignity.
He wished them both alone to be,
some little scrap of privacy.
She agreed.

She knew he was a kindred soul.
Unveiled her own for him to hold.
He gave his own and truth be told,

she danced for him alone.

A moment he will treasure e'er.
Her breath fell gently on his ear.
And, oh, her soft sweet-smelling hair.
He fell.

He told her: "I will think of you",
and left her in a cloud of blue,
for he knew more they could not do.
He almost wept.

But fear not, Suzie, I accept
the way two lives can intersect.
I'm glad it let our worlds connect,
for we are friends.

In late January of 1996, my mood was plummeting, everything was worsening; and then along came my first poem about depression:

Depths

You don't know at all.
You don't know of aching soul,
of pain at spirit's very core.
You don't know.

Waves of dread abound.
Every detail sickens so.
And now my ship is all awash.
Waves of dread.

Please don't judge my life.
You've your shoes and I have mine.
It's hard enough to make a smile.
Please don't judge.

Full of fear I try
to keep my fear from winning,

to keep a scrap of confidence.
Full of fear.

Fighting flight deforms.
It twists the heart and face thereby.
Composure is a daily struggle.
Fighting flight.

Mostly sad am I.
Overcome with aimless grief,
wrapped in overwhelming despair.
Mostly sad.

I don't know how long;
how long I'll have to tolerate,
or even if I'll win at all.
I don't know.

* * *

A year after landing in London, I began to experience a phenomenon known as 'cycling'. What I didn't know then was that I had been misdiagnosed at the outset, years before as a teenager, and that kicked off twenty solid years of improper, ineffective medication. I would find out later that I was in truth bipolar, and the medications I had been taking were making it worse, hence the cycling.

My mood swung rapidly from the depths of despair to the heights of elation. This had been happening to me for years, but the period between swings was always several months, sometimes years, and so gradual they were difficult to pick up on. Now they were coming in a matter of minutes. Soon I would be having what was known as a mixed state, whereby both extremes are experienced and felt at the same time – a feeling so new and strange it begins to warp perception. Frankly, it was a terrifying ride.

Finally, I had to consciously admit that I was mentally disabled, which presented me with a tough decision and one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. I checked myself into the London Psychiatric Hospital and applied for a CPP Disability pension. Here I was accurately diagnosed; and for the next few years, as I searched for the right medication for what I knew now to be a bipolar mood disorder, my income would be little more than $500.00/month.

There are two types of bipolar. I am blessed with the one that's more on the depressed side than manic; while the other type is marked by extreme manic episodes and can even cause bouts of psychosis. Even without the psychotic episodes, it was all

I could do to bear it and continue moving forward. What I had yet to learn was that I was suffering from a very treatment-resistant case, so the usual medications like Lithium were ineffective. It would be five frustrating years before I found one that worked.

* * *

The hospital was my home for five long months. Words are wholly inadequate, even for a writer, to convey what my life was like living with this condition before finding medication that worked for me; and especially the unprecedented experience of living in a psychiatric hospital. The decision to admit myself ultimately saved my life, but I would not wish it on anybody.

Sometimes we write to get across to others how we feel. But there are times when writing is a way to converse and commune with yourself, and many writers will tell you that this is what being a poet is all about. I needed to do this soon after I was admitted, just to get a grip:

Inside

Private pain pervades this place,
my own lost in a sea of sorrow.
Swirling eddies of confusion pick me up,
depositing me at some point.
But what is the point?

As twilight's veil descends I find
'tis not outside, but inside the darkness comes,
like an angry friend I cannot appease.
Oh, to end this strange relation.
Unimaginable right now.

Empty, lonely, shut up tight.
Black and blue without a bruise.
The present held hostage to a broken past,
threatened by a blackened future.
All seems lost.

You speak with me so fleetingly,
yet merciful manner does seem to relieve.
Your soul reaches out through crystal panes,
and truly strikes the precarious balance that I am.

Come back and guide me…
…out of this terror I cannot shake.

Please.

It provides a mere slice of my feelings during this period, but it does express well the existential pain under the circumstances.

The dialoguing with oneself that writing is was indeed crucial to my getting through. But now I know that, more than anything else, my writing served as a constant reassurance that my mind was still intact, despite what was happening with my mood. This has been my saving grace, not just in the hospital, but throughout my life.

There is much more to living on a unit in a psychiatric hospital than dealing with your disabling condition. There are many aspects (e.g. loss of basic personal freedoms, the food, Xmas, etc.), and they are all a tremendous drain on one's spirit and pride. With years of experience living with a treatment-resistant mood disorder, and all it entails, I have lost all the pride one should lose anyway and retained more of a durable dignity instead. But to say it was a character-building experience would be a huge understatement. In the end, it has had to become part of who I am and, though I would never wish to experience it ever again, I am so much the better for it. I found out the hard way – it is true that what doesn't break you makes you stronger.

One aspect of living in a psychiatric institution that's hard to deal with is your interaction with other people being treated there. Hearing so many sad stories, bleak outlooks and desperate circumstances every day, it is a marvel that anyone emerges from depression under such circumstances. But they do. Explaining how such a seemingly contradictory atmosphere leads to the successful treatment of depression and good mental health is not within the purview of this archive, and I'm not even sure I could. Suffice it to say, the interpersonal relationships on the 'inside', with patients and staff, end up playing a major role in one's recovery.

One such relationship was with a Middle Eastern woman who was being treated for severe depression. We met soon after my admission and she told me she was depressed from years of emotional, verbal, physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her man. From the Middle East himself, he was steeped in the misogynist tradition still observed in many religio-cultural corners in that part of the world.

I was moved to write a love poem for her in the broadest sense of the term. I don't know if it helped her very much in the long run, but I know it meant a lot to her to receive it when she did. I believed at the time it was important she feel some kindness from a man:

For Jolanta (name changed)

Why is common sense so uncommon?
Where are the values of family and faith?
What will it take before people can see beyond themselves?

There is so much private pain
invisible to the naked eye.
Good people suffering,
compounded by so-called families
who sit in judgement instead of standing by them.

At one time her spouse believed her when she said she loved him.
Now he won't believe her when she says she's in pain.
What happened to his love? Or was it ever true?
What hurts more, the pain or the unfeeling lack of faith?

As one with undying family support,
I can only try to imagine your personal hell.
If there be any power in prayer and positive thinking,
I hope mine will give you strength.

You are beautiful, and you are loved unconditionally.
Please don't lose sight of your self-worth.
You are entitled to feel good.
I hope with all my heart that someday you do.

Certainly not my best work, but it was tailored as a follow-up response to my conversations with Jolanta. Considering this, where I was and what I was going through myself at the time, and the gratitude in Jolanta's face after she read it, I can live with it.

* * *

Three good pieces came to be in the two months inside that followed: a poem arising out of a love for humanity that I had rediscovered within myself in the hospital; another out of my love for children; and another inspired by love for my wife. Reflection on the plight of Jolanta and the people on the ward, no less the staff with whom I was becoming close, brought me to write this short piece:

One Way or the Other:

What folly men and women make,
pleasure, love, and charge to take.
Pain and heartbreak,
bloodshed, death.
Pointless.

What joy when men and women live,
knowing how these things to give.
Freedom, Beauty,
Happiness,
Heaven.

Continuing the minimalist trend, an even pithier poem was written after a time pondering the innocence of youth, and my own youth. And I couldn't help longing for those simple and innocent times as I wrote:

Days of Future Past (with apologies to the Moody Blues)

Our future is our children.
We know it less than they.
I beg you, let them have their day.

In past days we were children.
We knew the future then.
Our children's future's ours again.

I remember being particularly proud of that last line. So much said in the fewest possible words, so dense with meaning. And it is utterly amazing what you can learn about yourself, about your world and what you believe under such trying circumstances.

The next poem I wrote is indicative of how much an anchor our love was for me during this time, and how vital the promise of a loving sanctuary at the end of this would be to me. It was spiritual fuel, keeping me going when things were at their worst – this cannot be overstated. No matter what transpired between us later, and whatever her true feelings were then or at any time, it was necessary for this man to have the promise of a love to come home to. I simply would not have made it through those five months without it:

A Lover's Plea

Take me from here.
Take me home.
Take me for your very own.
Take me into cherished deep,
`til free at last in arms asleep.

Love me ever.
Love me more.
Love me like the sea the shore.
Love me morning, noon and eve,
and always, pray, my love receive.

Keep me happy.
Keep me whole.
Keep me youthful when I'm old.
And keep me always in your thought,
even when my fight is fought.

* * *

I am at a complete loss to explain where a person finds the strength to carry on at times like this, let alone be productive. But somehow, I did. I got down to the business of my recovery in earnest and went to work on everything that would help me get better. I used medication, meditation, group therapy, one-on-one psychiatric and psychological counseling. The head nurse told me she had never met a patient more motivated to work on his recovery, and my resilience and ability to bounce back amazed even me.

For a writer, everything is relevant. My experiences with illness and poverty, and all the trials it has put me through, like long-term hospitalization, become valuable resources going forward. As with all human experiences I have enjoyed or endured, it has given me insights into issues like disability, stigma, marginalization, incarceration, the medical system and a host of other things. They inform my understanding and, therefore, my writing; which means I can draw on personal experience for so many of the things I write about, instead of imagining what it is like or taking someone else's word for it.

I also absorbed a good deal of valuable health information and learned a lot of coping skills during my stint in the hospital. This would prove instrumental in getting me through the even worse years I had yet to face.

So, where does a person find strength at a time like that? I don't know, but I think not being able to know what ups and downs you will be dealing with in the future has a lot to do with it.