

Poetry Archive: Part III

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Section 2: Family, Love, and Life (2006 - 2017)

*They were cutting from stone
some dreams of their own,
but they listened to mine anyway.*

*Jackson Browne, **Farther On***

At this point, my writing in all genres was ramping up significantly, leaving less time for pure poetics. I was also enjoying a little more success in quality songwriting, so many of my poems were, or became, song lyrics. The story of the next eleven years is one of ups and downs, good times and tough times, and the vicissitudes of life, as with any couple who are in it for the long haul. As a result, the poems and lyrics from this stretch came about in response to what was happening to us, how this or that impacted me, and who we were spending time with.

As 2006 was winding down life was good for us, and never better for yours truly. There was a lot going right for me since hitching my wagon to Tina's star. But the most serendipitous result of my coming together with her, and the biggest influences on my poetry and song lyrics over the last eighteen years or so, have been the various personal communications and interactions with all the people who came into my life when I started up with Tina – primarily, members of her immediate and extended family, as well as her circle of friends.

After her family overcame the initial shock of our sudden coupling, they quickly came to embrace our relationship, and soon they were showing us that they could appreciate why we were together, and why we needed to be. It was undeniable, after all. In any event, the addition of Tina's family circle to my world was an unexpected joy that enriches me to this day.

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Of course, nothing says family like Christmas; and with all the drinking and singing, I got to know Tina's family well at the countless special event house parties

over the years. These get-togethers have been some of the best times I have known, and my best memories are filled with these people.

Tina enjoys her Christmas more than any woman I've ever known. In sharp contrast, however, I came to detest Christmas as the years went by. It was more than everything festooned with glitter and tacky decorations, and the pasted-on smiles of people who wouldn't give you the time of day during the year. The whole production was a blatant reminder to me of the empty promise Christianity had revealed itself to be. My problem with yuletide came almost immediately after my rejection of organized religion generally in my teens, which was verified for me later with my studies in philosophy, theology and history.

The difference in our feelings about the holiday season was stark, and we butted heads over it during the first week of our first Christmas together. But soon Tina wore me down with how adorably she took pleasure in her holiday preparations and festive activities, and by the end of that first holiday season I was simply enjoying her enjoyment. I've been getting the Christmas spirit vicariously through her ever since.

During Christmas of 2006, I was reflecting on when this had dawned on me, when first I felt my love for her transforming Christmas for me, and I was moved to capture it in verse. It was my first poem in a couple of years:

The Best Noel

*All our window boxes glow,
festive windows above and below,
as they await the falling snow.
Christmastime with Baby.*

*The dining room a Yuletide dream,
the plates and glasses truly gleam,
and everything so very clean.
Christmastime with Baby.*

*Ribbons, gold and silver laid,
in just the right amount displayed,
and all the food that she has made.
Christmastime with Baby.*

*The smell of chutney wafting through,
and warming thoughts of love ensue,
all of this, and romance too.
Christmastime with Baby.*

*A woman's touch gives me a lift.
She looks like a Christmas gift,
and now my heart is running swift.
Christmastime with Baby.*

*All is just as it should be,
a tastefully decorated Christmas tree,
and there'll be friends and family.
Christmastime with Baby.*

I presented it to her on Christmas morning, typed out in a fancy font on a sheet of sepia-toned parchment, rolled up and tied with a red ribbon, with the following added at the bottom:

I know you don't feel I participate or enjoy the preparations much for the season, Tina. But I want you to know that I've never enjoyed it more, and it grows with each year. To me, you are Christmas... the way you get ready for it, the way you celebrate it, and just the way you are during the season.

*I love you.
Merry Christmas, Baby.*

Now, every year she carefully places that same sheet of rolled up parchment and red ribbon on our Christmas tree when we are decorating it, as if to prove the is true.

* * *

I never learned to read music, and I have no formal training on the piano. But I enjoyed fooling around with my ear and an old upright we bought for our family room in St. John's. It always seemed to me to be a good instrument for writing songs, as all the notes were strung before you in a row; to the left the notes got lower, and to the right higher. Simple. Not at all like the guitar. And with a chord on the piano, you can easily alter one note at a time and tinker, very often discovering how this or that famous tune was discovered. I ended up writing a nice classical piece for Tina on that piano (see "Tunes"), an instrumental using the notes and chords to represent her different moods as a woman.

One day, we were talking about Maria, and when Tina went for a nap I sat down to the piano. I was noodling around and happened on a nice hook that sounded pretty and profound all at once. Traces of our conversation were lingering, and it was another

one of those rare and wonderful songwriting sessions when the lyrics just seem to fall in around the notes of a new melody as it was coming to be:

Maria

*If I tried to tell you just what you mean to me,
there's a chance that I could scare you, inadvertently.
Please believe I only want to help you grow to be
all that you decide yourself, to suit you perfectly.*

*There's life in your love.
Maria. Maria.*

*Such a lovely little lady, this I've said before.
Now if you don't mind sweet child, I'm trying to say more.
When I fell in love this time, how could I have known
such an unexpected joy would also be my own?*

*There's love in your life.
Maria. Maria.*

*Stay pretty angel and just play.
Save your growing up for some other day.
See yourself the way you want to see.
Pretty soon we'll see what you can be.*

*If you wonder why this song has such a lonely tune,
maybe it's because I missed the first nine years with you.
But that's okay, I'm grateful for the life we've left to love,
and I promise I will always thank the stars above*

*for you in my heart.
Maria. Maria.*

It would take more than seven years, a full five years after it was recorded, for me to find the courage to play it for her. Even then, I'm not sure I was able to be in the room as she listened. It was a tender tune; and, like her mother, her self-conscious, quiet reaction told me it meant a lot to her.

But I think it meant as much or more to me. It was one of those times I felt humbled and grateful for having the wherewithal to express well the feelings I had for another human being. That she was so special, made the song special for me. At times like this I am sometimes moved to tears, to know that my feelings will outlive me in the song and continue to say “I love you” to her long after I am gone.

* * *

Growing up in a house of full music, and house parties filled with laughing, singing and drinking every weekend, I came by my life as an entertainer quite honestly. Then, after more than thirty years on stage, in clubs and pubs with all manner of the famous Newfoundland party spirit, I came by a serious problem with alcohol just as honestly. Steeped in such a festive and indulgent culture since early childhood, however, it took some time to realize there was a problem and to do something about it.

For years, like my father modeled for me every weekend, I was the musical life of the party. And, also like my father, I could hold my drinks quite well and evolved over time into a very functional drunk. My drinking was never a problem for me or anyone else until well into my forties. Certainly, no more of a problem than my peers, friends and family were having with it.

But in 2006, a couple of cracks were beginning to show. To be clear, aside from a couple of fistfights with guys during the wild years of my youth, I never struck anyone while I was drunk in any context, domestic or public. In my mid-forties, however, I would sometimes become passionate enough about something or other to significantly raise my voice, and when my voice is raised it is inescapable. One place this impassioned voice was starting to appear more frequently was right in the middle of some of my marital disagreements with Tina.

A quiet and gentle soul like Tina’s is particularly ill-suited to deal with a voice like mine when it’s anywhere near full throttle, and a recent bout of it during an argument had left her shaken. A song was my apology, but I look back at it now as the first time I began to suspect that I might be developing a problem with drinking. The chorus line is a country music hook (see “Tunes”), and I think it holds up well as a poem too. But I can say I was honestly contrite when I wrote it:

The Very Best

*I've been wrong
for oh so long,
and kept the best of me from you.
But you've been loving me,
the 'me' you thought I could be,*

trusting I would someday come along.

But, oh, Baby.

At long last I am here.

And your faith in me is what has seen us through.

Oh, Baby.

The very best of us is you.

I let myself be sad,

overlooking what I had,

and I indulged my pain.

I guess I lost my way.

But you loved me anyway.

And I let you down to my eternal shame.

But, oh, Baby.

Our love is everything.

And from your quiet strength I take my cue.

Oh, Baby.

The very best of us is you.

And, oh, Baby.

From my point of view,

I stand in awe of everything you do.

Oh, Baby.

The very best of us is you.

In years to come,

with a future won,

we might make it after all.

And I may well succeed,

and all your hopes exceed.

And I may lead us straight into the sun.

But, oh, Baby.

What could I have done,

if I didn't have your dreams to live up to?

Oh, Baby.

The very best of us is you

I'm in relation to

my Baby.

The very best of us is you.

I didn't fully realize it at the time, but this was a significant statement I was making to myself, and it would need revisiting and further development as our lives and my relationship with alcohol unfolded over the next few years.

* * *

Tina is a self-made, self-sufficient woman who had started and built up her own successful thriving business long before we met. So, fortunately, my skills as a provider were hardly necessary, and I now enjoyed a standard of living I dared not dream of just a few short years ago. Even so, with my newfound health and Tina in my life, you may be sure that I wanted to redouble my efforts to have a career, or as they are fond of pejoratively saying to us artists – get a real job.

During the first few years of our cohabitation in St. John's, I did everything I could to become gainfully employed. After all the illness and poverty of my first forty years, I was eager to pull my own weight and make a contribution to the household income, beyond the errands and miscellaneous tasks I had taken on to support Tina's sole proprietorship. It would prove to be far more challenging than I expected.

Over the course of earning a two-year diploma in Applied Ethics (with a specialty in mental health ethics) in the evenings at Memorial, I spent the days applying for jobs I thought suited me. Among other things, I did extensive training in insurance, real estate, industrial health and safety, and earned high marks and diplomas for each. But I was completely ill-suited for insurance sales, so that didn't last more than a year. I was in residential real estate for three years, and set records for listings on the Irish Loop, but the hours were ridiculous, and I wasn't bringing home much at all after expenses. And I couldn't find work at all in health and safety, even with a two-year diploma earned online from the University of New Brunswick.

The problem, I was forced to conclude, was a two-sided handicap: my middle age, and the gaping hole in my resume from 1980 to 2000. The jobs I was able to take during this period were sporadic due to my illness, and there was nothing that would look any good on a resume. All my education and training, my certificates and diplomas, were of no use in terms of seeking employment, as the two strikes against me were enough to keep me out of contention. It was terribly frustrating, having waited so long to feel well enough to achieve gainful employment.

Finally, I went back to university full-time as a graduate student, and came away two years later with a Masters in Community Health from the School of Medicine at Memorial. Therewith, I published a ground-breaking thesis that uncovered the disproportionately low funding of mental health and illness research in the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. With this, and my applied ethics diploma, I secured a

contract position with Caregivers, the largest home care agency in the province, to design and set up a new set of ethics policies and procedures in advance of their application for accreditation. But once this six-month job was done, I could find no more work in this area. I ended up starting an executive level cleaning company, and I believe it would have done well if we could have found more than two workers capable of providing the level of cleaning we were advertising. So, this also came to naught.

It was becoming clear that I was fighting a losing battle. Soon thereafter, we came to a joint decision. Given my efforts to find a worthwhile career had fallen flat, the reasons for this failure would not change, and what it was doing to my mental health, we felt it would be best for my sanity and fulfillment if I were to cease all “career” efforts and turn my attention to my artwork fulltime.

This was the starting point that set everything in motion for me; and now I have reached the point where this website has become necessary as a place to promote and sell my art in three genres, and a permanent home for a life’s work that will someday constitute a legacy for my family, no less for my ABOTA tribe. I haven’t looked back since, and I never will. Thank you, Tina.

The day I found out that I had successfully fulfilled the requirements for my MSc, it had been only a few years since my father’s passing. From the moment he died, my mother couldn’t seem to stop mourning him, no matter how much we encouraged her to get back to some kind of life. Knowing how close they were, we could understand her inability to live without him or be comforted by his memory, but it was hard to take. Eventually, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, and to this day I believe that, somehow, in some way, she contracted it in self-defence – her soul could never forget him, so it disposed of her memory. I cannot explain it, and it may lie in that realm between the mind and body we don’t fully appreciate or understand yet, but I believe this to be so.

Naturally, all this put a new and totally unfamiliar strain on my sisters and I, as well as our spouses. It wouldn’t be until after my mother’s death a few years later that we would learn how loved ones handle this kind of personal stress in their own individual ways, and that each of us must respect this and give each other the time and space to do so. For this reason, on the day I learned about my second degree, my sisters and I were in the middle of a temporary falling out.

It was nobody’s fault. We all know that now. But when I got the news from the university, I was feeling a bit lonely in the familial sense, with only Tina to celebrate it with me. I was proud and sad at the same time. After dark that evening, Tina’s sister Rose (who they affectionately call Ree) called but asked to speak with me instead of Tina. She said she had heard about my news earlier in the day from Tina, and she had been thinking about it during supper so she thought she would call to congratulate me.

After the call, knowing that I appreciated it more than she could know, I set about the business of thanking her in a special way. It was another case of the words and melody coming into existence together, and the song was finished that night:

Ree-percussions

*We all need a family to love and depend upon.
And if you don't have a family, you're just going to have to make one.
But if you chance to find one already loving you,
you're as blessed as a little baby blue.*

*We all need supporting when we succeed as well as fall.
And I had not a family to share my fortune with a call.
Just then she reached out to me, to help me celebrate my day,
to show me I had family, anyway.*

*Rosie, you're my sister.
Rosie, you're my friend.
You help me bring my broken heart to mend.
Rosie, can I thank you?
Hey, Rosie, don't you know?
You have helped me have a family, even though.*

*She's a sister to the ladies. An enduring flower child.
She's certainly a character, and I bet that she's a lover wild.
But she's mostly like a mother as she calls them all by name.
Yet she's making me feel special, just the same.*

*Rosie, you're my sister.
Rosie, you're my friend.
You help me bring my broken heart to mend.
Rosie, can I thank you?
Hey, Rosie, don't you know?
You have helped me have a family, even though.
You have helped me have a family, even though.*

Rosie, I'm your brother....

* * *

Sometimes a poem can be a way to come to terms with a loss, to make peace with it that you may move on. This was the case when Tina and Maria's beloved dog, Patch, became sick and passed away of natural causes in 2007. Almost thirteen, he had been the family dog since Maria was a toddler, and they were overcome with grief.

Tina was unable to take him to the vet to have him put down when it became necessary, so that task fell to me. Patch and I spent a tender five minutes or so alone with him in my arms, as we waited for the medication to take effect. Patch was a fixture for the first five years of our relationship, and he and I had become very close, but the depth of my grief driving home from the vet surprised me all the same.

At home, writing a poem in tribute gave me some closure. There are a couple of personal references in it that only we understand, but I think pet lovers will be able to identify to some degree:

Dog Gone

*Domestic life is not the same as it always was before.
There's no 'tinkle' from another room as we come through the door.
Not anymore.*

*The morning comes and he's not there, panting for the day.
And bedtime he no longer on his Mommy's housecoat lays.
He's gone away.*

*No barking when somebody knocks, unexpectedly.
No "Tubby" and no cookies; no stopping by a tree.
No more to be.*

*No knowing looks, no shifting eyes, as if he gets the gist.
And of all the nicest people I have known – he makes the list.
He will be missed.*

*"All dogs go to heaven," I whispered as he passed.
And peacefully he drifted on and we are left. Alas!
The die is cast.*

*We love you, Buddy.
For us,*

there will never be another one like...

*Daddy's Guy,
Sissy's Pup,
Mommy's Baby...
Patch...he was the best!*

To this day, neither Tina nor Maria can even look at the poem, much less read it. He really was a special dog.

* * *

All her life my mother was in excellent physical health with a strong heart. I can only remember once during my entire childhood when she was sick in bed with the flu, and that didn't last long, with her up and making us lunch before noon. However, as much of a plus as this was for her all her life, it started working against her with the onset of Alzheimer's.

If you have Alzheimer's, perfect physical health and a strong heart are big disadvantages. It means a long slow deterioration of the mind and the longest possible time of suffering until death, because the disease doesn't get around to affecting the bodily systems until it has completely ravaged the mind, and even then the physical systems are shut down gradually, agonizingly, one by one.

As her inevitable death approached, however, I was thinking a lot about my late father and his suffering onto death as well. He died with ALS, so his brilliant mind was imprisoned in a deteriorating body that took an excruciatingly long time to expire. It is indeed an horrific way to die; and a cruel fate, devoid of any justice or the slightest redeeming feature, for a man among men to have to meet. I have thought about it a lot, and how torturous it must have been for him. Now my mother was suffering from a terrifying disease that presented her with a prognosis the opposite of my father's, but no less terrible – a mind deteriorating ever so slowly in an utterly health body, ensuring the longest possible time before the release of death.

Around this time, we were also getting some signals from members of my father's family that he may have witnessed or was in some way privy to some event that traumatized him as a child. Considering his neurotic nature and the psychological issues that emerged in him with aging, and some things I just couldn't put a finger on, this seemed to explain a lot. It was weighing heavily on my mind, even as I sat at my mother's bedside with pad and pen in hand, and I fell back on a familiar rhyme scheme, as I am wont to do:

The Eyes Have It (Reflections)

*Whene'er I looked into my father's eyes, and he looked into mine,
how much love they gave to me; yet how they suffered, how resigned.*

*I cannot say what they beheld so many years ago.
But I've a sense of what it was, and it was horrid – this I know.*

*He may have witnessed an awful deed, or a deed was done to him.
But I am sure it shook his soul, right up until those eyes grew dim.*

*I saw them apprehend his Truth as he was passing on;
I saw him go relieved, released; he blinked, then he was gone.*

*These days, and the years without him, now I realize
his pain was real, but his love was true. I see it in my mother's eyes.*

A couple of years after my mother's hell came to an end, finally delivered from the cruel and unusual, I was contacted by a graduate student friend of mine who was doing some qualitative research on loss and death. She asked me, among many others, to write a poem about what it was like after my mother's passing, and about how I deal with missing her.

My first thought was that I wasn't sure I was really missing her, given she is with me always. Though I know I can't be with her physically, the unmistakable impression she left on me is such that I don't feel she is altogether gone, and I made this the theme of the poem:

How Can I Miss Her?

*Sure,
I miss being with my mother.
But I really don't miss her.
How can I?*

*She and my father never leave me,
and their love was such
that I cannot think of them
separately.
(So, this poem's title is incomplete).*

*How can you miss someone
who is always there
every time you laugh,
every time you dance,
every time you sing,
every time you do someone a kindness?*

*My mother and father
have both left this earth,
but they have left behind
everything –
how to feel joy in life,
and how to give
and feel
the joy in people.*

*For this is their legacy of parental love:
a childhood of laughter,
music and goodness,
giving an adulthood of laughter,
music and goodness.
This was their way.
And this is, and shall always be,
my way.*

*My ethic is their ethic.
Whatever life holds,
it is well worth living.
How ever people end up,
they start out good.
Kindness reminds us of this.
From us,
through them,
to all others.*

*Sure,
I miss being with my mother.
But I really don't miss her.
How can I?*

It was, and still is, extremely hard to accept that two people who were exemplary in every way, who had not one enemy, were decent, kind and truly Christian, who raised and provided for three children and worked hard their whole lives, could meet such an ignominious and brutal end. Again, there is nothing redeemable in it. I had disposed of all religion in my life and found the atheist/agnostic position most tenable long before anything befell my parents, so I had no problem adding the suffering and deaths of my parents to the list of reasons for not believing in the existence of any kind of personal or merciful God. I'm afraid that list is getting longer all the time.

* * *

So often in life, when one door closes another opens. And very often the door closing is the death of a cherished senior in the family, and the door opening is the birth of a new member of the family.

Early in 2010, Tina's daughter Pam was about to bring her first child into the world. They knew it would be a boy and would name him Adam, and a turn of phrase gave me an idea for a title to capture our anticipation. It was the last pure poem I have written to date:

On the Eve of Adam

*For someone so small,
and "as yet",
the advent of his arrival
is changing us all.*

*Though he does not know it,
he has become our teacher,
and we have learned much
from the fact of his coming.*

*He has already shown us
the true meaning of family,
as we all wait
for the joy of gathering around him.*

*And we are grateful for him,
for his healing of our past,*

*and the innocent wisdom
he brings to our future.*

*He will proudly wear his father's skin,
carefully carry his mother's heart,
and he will take all of life's troubles
on his grandmother's chin.*

*He is precious,
he is beautiful,
but most important of all
— he is.*

* * *

In keeping with her special way of doing things, Tina didn't want us to get married until we could do it right, and in the right place. That time and place became St. Lucia in April of 2011.

We leased a stunning villa they call *Akasha*, with everything we wished for and more. Nine special people made the journey to share in our nuptials: Maria; Tina's oldest sister, Joan, and her husband, Fred; her sister Rose, her only brother, Gerald, and his wife, Beth; one of her favourite nieces, Anne, was her maid of honour; Anne's husband and my good friend Kevin was my best man; and Anne's daughter, Caitlin, came along as well. That so many people we loved came so far to celebrate our union with us meant a great deal.

As the wedding pictures and video show, it was an idyllic place and the whole affair was a dream come true for the bride and groom. The ceremony on the deck was exquisitely decorated, with everything so well-appointed. I sang Gordon Lightfoot's *Beautiful* as Tina came down and everyone took their places, and the marriage was performed by a distinguished Justice of the Peace, a native St. Lucian.

When the time came to exchange vows, I delivered a short piece I wrote that included one of my favourite love poems of all time. The piece is not a poem, and the love poem I read an excerpt from is not mine. But I include them here because I can, and because I just couldn't leave our wedding and honeymoon out of the story:

*Here in this beautiful tropical setting, before our friends and family and
under God, I would like to tell you what marrying you means to me.*

*You are a woman like no other. Loving you continues to make me a
better man, and your love for me is the highest honour I have received in this*

life. We have found over the years that we compliment and complete each other, and this only deepens with every day we love and live together.

The following excerpt from the poetry of John Donne expresses best what a special, mutually defining relationship we share:

*Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat.*

*If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the' other do.*

*And though it in the centre sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.*

*Such wilt thou be to me, who must
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begun.*

Baby, I love you. What's more, I absolutely adore you. And whatever I ultimately achieve in our name, no man will devote more to loving you than I will. This I pledge to you today and all the days of our life together.

Then, Tina stunned me by reading a poem by the iconoclast, e.e. cummings, for her vows to me. With his flaunting of conventions in writing, his playing with punctuation, spacing and all lower case, he is one of my most beloved poets, and the surprise of her reading one of his to me in this context almost brought me to tears. I reproduce it here in same form as the original:

*i carry your heart with me (i carry it in
my heart) i am never without it (anywhere
i go you go, my dear; and whatever is done
by only me is your doing, my darling)*

*i fear
no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet) i want
no world (for beautiful you are my world, my true)
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant
and whatever a sun will always sing is you*

*here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart*

i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)

* * *

Living through the 2010s, it seemed my creativity knew no bounds. My essay writing was increasing in quantity and quality, ideas for my first book were beginning to crystalize, and my poetry necessarily took the form of lyrics. My personal life was also becoming more complicated.

My drinking was still no more of a problem for most people I knew, but it was getting more unsettling for Tina, and it was giving me more trouble than ever before. I am not a violent man, and I am not one to drink and become physical, but occasionally my behaviour was more erratic, and my passionate, sonorous voice louder. And couple of episodes that can only be considered strange, both on separate vacation trips, shook us both up, and especially Tina. I remember trying to compartmentalize my drinking after that, which I now know to be just the elaborate rationalization and self-delusional denial of an alcoholic. Though I wasn't quite ready to do anything about it yet, the impact it was having on my personal life and relationships becoming harder to ignore.

In the summer of 2014, I was fortunate enough to attend Camp Copperhead, a songwriting camp at a beautiful sprawling resort in the Catskills with the inimitable Steve Earle. It was one of the best weeks I have ever spent as a songwriter/musician. Steve, famous for a life of heavy addictions as much as his musical and songwriting talents, arrived at the resort with twenty years clean under his belt, and I was inspired to revisit my own situation with alcohol.

For the first time since writing **The Very Best** for Tina, I was feeling a need to fundamentally change; I was seriously thinking about admitting to myself and others that I had a problem, and I was considering ways to tackle it. How to go about it and when wasn't clear yet at all, but I was having a harder time denying to myself that it was becoming necessary. A song I started in upstate New York that week started to explore

this with water as a metaphor for one's life, the passage of time, and going back to find the root of one's problem. I finished it soon after returning home:

Take it Down

*I'm gonna take it down to the river.
I'm gonna take it down.
The water is cold and I'm gonna shiver,
but I'm gonna take it down.
I'm gonna take it down.
I'm gonna take it down.*

*Follow the river down to the ocean.
Follow the river down.
To witness the water's total devotion.
Follow the river down.
Follow the river down.
Follow the river down.*

*Tracing my way from back where I started.
What will this journey bestow?
To understand why I'm so broken-hearted.
I'm hoping it lies in the flow.
Maybe I just need to grow.
And maybe I'll never know.*

*Sitting me down at the edge of the ocean,
taking it all the way down.
All of this water and all this emotion.
I feel like I'm gonna drown.
The water is dirty and brown.
But I'm gonna take it down
Yeah, I'm gonna take it down.
I'm gonna take it....down.*

*Take it down.
Take it down.
Down.
Down,
Yeah down.*

With this, I opened wide the question of my addiction to alcohol for myself, and I knew it was only a matter of time before I would address it.

Over the next two years, I embarrassed myself with another couple of disturbing bouts of crazy drunken talk and behaviour, and my reduced creative output during this period was another indication of the problem. Then, on a weekend in early November 2016, I caught myself doing two things I had never done, and they were both red flags – I was binge drinking and drinking alone, at the same time. Early on Sunday morning of that weekend, alone in my shed in Branch, I had an epiphany. I could suddenly see, with more clarity than ever, that alcohol wasn't doing what it used to do for me. Drinking now made me angry instead of happy, and I had completely missed this transformation, of course. I was drinking too much. The change had been coming gradually, and only now could I see the difference. As I heard one reformed alcoholic say once, it was like an old friend started stabbing me in the back.

I can shudder now at the thought of when that monumental realization hit me, and how very small and regretful I felt that morning. I returned to St. John's to tell Tina, and to be with her. I have not had a drink since, and I don't expect I ever will. Getting over all that lost time in a fog of alcohol, all the low productivity, and the waste of our precious time together took longer than the withdrawal. But once I finished crying over spilt milk, I knew I was done with it. Seeing it for what it really was, and what it was doing to me, was what I needed. Today I never think of drinking.

* * *

Soon after leaving alcohol behind, my senses started getting sharper again. I was feeling aspects of health returning, aspects I was completely unaware alcohol had taken from me. My appreciation for Nature returned, though I had become numb to its absence, and I was moved to write a song about the way Nature behaves in Branch. Considering my newly established sobriety, it was also an opportunity to appeal for a rejuvenation of our love – a rallying cry of sorts:

Listen to the Ocean

*Listen to the ocean.
Feel the motion.
I got a notion,
Baby, we'll be alright.
See the birds fly.
Hear the lambs cry.*

*Smell the grass try
to see that we're fine.*

*I know that we've had some wild and windy days,
and waves we've had to ride
Whatever happens, our love comes into play ,
and no matter what the weather, we're warm and safe inside.*

*Listen to the ocean.
Feel the motion.
I got a notion,
Baby, we'll be alright.
See the birds fly.
Hear the lambs cry.
Smell the grass try
to see that we're fine.*

*I've been thinkin',
our ship ain't close to sinkin'.
We've only been drinkin'
our rights and our wrongs
We've got a right to
a brand new debut.
And, Baby, we'll dance through the rest of our songs.*

*Can't let hard times, take us out to sea
and too far from the shore.
We'll surrender to sensuality,
and all we're needing is right outside our door.*

*Hear me, Baby.
You're my only lady.
Don't you think maybe it's true what I say
Whatever the season,
we've got every reason
to keep on pleasin' ourselves every day.*

*Whenever we want to, we can play around,
or go walking on the beach.
The rain and the sunshine, the starlight and the moon,
The dawn and sunset, it's all within our reach, so...*

*Listen to the ocean.
Feel the motion.
I got a notion,
Baby, we'll be alright.
See the birds fly.
Hear the lambs cry.
Smell the grass try
to see that we're fine, see that we're fine,
see that we're doing just fine.*

* * *

Adam was four years old when his new baby sister came along, and he was beside himself. He had been waiting for her, literally, since he was told she would be coming; and after she arrived, he was all about her. I have never seen a young boy love and care so genuinely for a baby sister like Adam did from the beginning with Aliyah; and six years later, that hasn't diminished at all. 'Aliyah' is an African name meaning 'a queen', and the music in the name helped when I wrote a song for her, soon after she was born:

Aliyah

*Pretty as a picture of a dream.
A princess asleep and so serene.
And she will surely grow to be a queen.
That's Aliyah.*

*Came into our world with such a glow.
So innocent and pure as driven snow.
And she has quietly changed the status quo.
That's Aliyah.*

*May she be happy and free.
Keeping her safe is the key.
The sweetest thing that you ever saw.
Aliyah.*

*She's tiny and perfectly complete,
from her curly black hair down to her feet.*

*As sweet as a little sugar beet.
Our Aliyah.*

*She will have all that love can bring.
She has her Pop's heart on a string.
And whomever will listen I will sing.
About Aliyah.*

*May all her wishes come true.
May she get all that she's due.
The sweetest thing that you ever saw.
Aliyah.*

*She has a brother, and he's like no other.
Holding her closely every day.
He will protect her, and never neglect her,
keeping her out of harm's way.
They're gonna be okay.*

*Who knows just what she will become,
when all of her doing is done?
But you can go tell them it's begun
for Aliyah.*

*Nana says that she's a movie star.
Pop says that she is going far.
Whatever she needs now here we are
for Aliyah.
It's up to us to be sure
that all of her ills have a cure.
The sweetest thing that you ever saw.
Aliyah.
Yeah, the sweetest thing that you ever saw.
A-li-yah.*

* * *

Meanwhile, up in Toronto, my only son Lucas was quietly building a wonderful little family of his own. Despite his behavioural difficulties in childhood, he had grown up strong and healthy, and he's a hard-working family man.

Lucas has a strapping teenaged son from a previous relationship, Jaden. He has rock star looks and has become a legitimate soccer star in the MLS system in TO. About six months before Aliyah was born, Lucas and his wife Jennifer added a lovely baby daughter, Nevaeh. I was unable to be on hand for the blessed event, so I flew up a month or so after to briefly visit and gush over her. After that, it was only the odd Skype session with them, and an occasional phone call.

Having written a song for Aliyah, I had been wanting to write one for Nevaeh since her birth. But with little or no time spent together, I didn't have much in the way of material from my memories to work with. All I had was the fact that, since she was born, I have loved her and missed her from a great distance, aside from my short visit after she was born.

Finally, in 2017, when Nevaeh was three years old, her parents decided to bring her to Newfoundland for a summer holiday, her first visit to The Rock. In the two months leading up to it, I tried desperately to write a good song, a song I would be proud to have her hear and then listen to anytime she wanted to, but to no avail. Then, about two weeks before their visit, I woke up on a Saturday morning with the phrase "far away in my heart" rattling around in my head. I scurried off to the shed after breakfast, and by lunchtime I had the song I had always wanted to write for her. It may well be my best original song (see "Tunes"):

Far Away in My Heart (Nevaeh's Song)

*Shiny and new she came to be,
a life and a world away from me.
So, I would have to wait to see
the precious one,
the child of my son.*

*After time and circumstance,
after all the coulds and can'ts,
I finally got the chance to see the light,
shining oh so bright.*

*Oh, Nevaeh.
Let me play a
song for you.
Here to stay yet apart,
far away in my heart, Nevaeh.
You know it's true.
Oh, but what can I do?*

Baby, I love you.

*Taken by her baby blue eyes,
as clear as the open skies,
I could feel the tears arise
inside of me.
Ah, but so happily.*

*Then I got to hold her tight.
I hugged her with all my might.
Then I remembered my flight.
I had to go,
and it hurt me so.*

*Oh, Nevaeh.
Let me play a
song for you.
Here to stay yet apart.
Far away in my heart, Nevaeh.
You know it's true.
But what can I do?
Baby, I love you.*

*Now you're all of three years old,
with hair like freshly spun gold.
I'm sure that they broke the mold
when you were made,
and the angels played.*

*Now it feels so good to know
you're coming here to put on a show,
with your mommy and daddy in tow.
I'll see you soon.
I'm over the moon.*

*Oh, Nevaeh.
Let me play a
song for you.
Whether together or apart,
you'll always be in my heart, Nevaeh.
Hope you know that it's true.*

*Yeah, whatever you do, little girl.
Your poppy loves you.
Neveah.*

She loved it and took it home.

* * *

Late in 2017, the United States was starting to realize what they had done in electing Donald Trump as president, and that there was no turning back, at least not until a successful impeachment or the 2020 presidential election. The world was also coming to grips with what three more years of The Donald could mean. I was more than concerned, and I felt an epic poem in blank verse was the best way to get across how I felt and why – what we were all getting legitimately worried about:

Requiem (2017)

I fear no man.
I don't fear the reaper. I have nothing to fear.
And fear itself? I'm afraid not.
Practically fearless.
And yet,
I am afraid for this world.

Something is calling, and I hearken after it.
But it is hard to hear.
The crazy are louder. The lazy prouder.
But something is surely calling. Something is surely falling. I feel it.
I am afraid for this world.

What is it? What happened? Whence came this point of no return?
When did it start? How?
Whatever, whenever, however, it did not start suddenly.
But suddenly, it is here,
and I am afraid for this world.

~~~~~

It has been coming for some time.  
Some say it was fated; the end, sown like a seed, inside the very beginning.  
Ever so slowly and silently growing, only now blooming.  
But I don't think so. It need not have turned out this way.  
We have failed ourselves.

It did start some time ago, very soon after our first chance to get it right.  
Just when we found the torch that lit the way,  
even as we held it up, it began to slip from our grasp.  
The sad few could see and warned, but went unheeded  
as they so often do.

Those few could see we were losing the torch, the light, and losing sight.  
We gazed at the torch, and straight into the light.  
Amazed, entranced and so,  
blinded by it,  
instead of seeing the way it lit.

A simple mistake, but such a tragic one.  
Doomed to be repeated, over and over, in so many ways.  
Until seeing the mistake could no longer help us.  
Until it was too late. Until now.  
I am truly afraid for this world.

~~~~~

The torch became terribly misdefined.
Its true meaning warped,
wholly misconceived,
time after time.
Each time worse than the time before.

What was supposed to mean who we are,
and elevate us to our greatest destiny,
became increasingly downgraded, cheapened.
Until finally, we made who we are into something we merely have.
Something that can be wielded.

Something some of us can own and keep others from owning.

Something particular and privileged,
instead of universal and empowering.
Reduced to a commodity.
Some thing.

That torch was called freedom.
I don't what to call it now.

In turn, the torch's light became terribly misused,
its true purpose never really achieved.
Misappropriated,
time after time,
each worse than the time before.

What was supposed to penetrate darkness,
turn ignorance to knowledge
and lead the way to wisdom,
became increasingly narrow.
Merely utile.

Until finally, we made what should help us better understand and discern
into something used to make more things.
Something used to acquire more fame and fortune.
To gain political or religious power over the masses.
An evil tool. Some thing.

That light was called reason.
I don't know what to call it now.

But among all our blindness and blunders with the torch and its light,
there was, and still is, the greatest mistake of all; the supreme error.
A dreadful error that made all other errors possible, even inevitable.
We failed to consider the hands, the hands that were to grasp the torch,
to hold up the light that we might see the way.

We failed to care enough about why we were holding it up,
why we needed to hold it up, and why we needed to see the way.
We failed to care enough about how it should be held,
what to look for with it,
and what to do with what we found.

Those hands, the hands of each and every one of us,
once holding the promise of wiser, more cultured ideas
and a civilized realization of ideals...
They were the soul and spirit, our caring heart and wondrous verve for life.
And I know what to call them now.

Call them politics and power.
Call them vain self-interest and raw avarice.
Call them whatever you want. But know this.
We are now at the mercy of what we have wrought with those hands.
We should be very afraid for this world.

~~~~~

Centuries of mutating freedom and hell-bent reason,  
of emancipation becoming enslavement,  
and the rational becoming rationale;  
of compassion and passion morphing  
into cold calculation and unbridled drive.

Until the appalling error became the only answer,  
without question.  
Ultimately elevated, edified and instantiated,  
our hopes became misplaced in the error's highest form,  
sealing our doom.

For more than a hundred years now  
we have been giving ourselves  
and our collective global future over to the "winner",  
to the self-anointed success, champion of the damned,  
in the land of the spree and home of depraved.

Lost in itself. Lost to itself.  
And we are lost with it.  
Where winning eclipses all games  
and cheating is the cardinal rule.  
Where rights are more like wrongs.

Where culture just copies  
the best of the long since defeated  
and calls it class; calls it original.

Where money shouts,  
and drowns out the impoverished and underprivileged.

Where violence is daily bred, inflicted on the innocent and evil alike,  
then repackaged as entertainment and sold back to the victims.  
Where perpetual celebration is mandated without any victory.  
All with a delicious delight in decadence reminiscent of Rome,  
but far more perilous for us all, whether inside or out.

It is a self-glorifying realm. A self-crowning kingdom.  
The kingdom's subjects are subjected to the kingdom and its hollow throne.  
The king rules without a real queen, without a shining armoured knight,  
without challengers, apology or shame.  
Self-involved. Self-serving. Selfish.

~~~~~

And just now,
right after a black prince was crowned under a banner of hope and change,
ruling beautifully and benevolently, giving us all a glimmer,
inexplicably there came a white knave.
A knave from the darkest side, and the worst of all possible bad choices.

The knave arose, uniting the lowest, all too common denominator,
looking to purchase power.
The once brave cowered, the fools empowered,
their chosen knave now towered,
so far above them and beneath us all.

The almighty dollar has finally won.
Truth is supplanted by lies and alternative facts;
democracy by despotism; substance by veneer.
Genuine advances are being cancelled,
and what's left of Nature's bounty is being trampled.

Humanity running roughshod,
in spite of all we know.
Sabers rattling louder than ever,
the deadly forces ramping up,
hungry for the rockets' red glare and the bombs bursting in air.

Cruel, despicable insects,
once hiding in shame,
now emerge boldly from their lairs and back into the light,
basking in the glow of disgraceful might.
The crying indistinguishable from the nervous laughter.

~~~~~

The torch,  
once a precious beacon of a worthy future,  
is now a forgotten principle,  
lost in the aimless shuffle toward oblivion.

The flame,  
once shedding light  
on the path through the darkness,  
has been extinguished,  
and replaced by the sickly, invented colours of neon.

And the hands,  
once the source  
of our tenderness and vigour,  
have been co-opted  
into the service of narcissism and mindless consumption.

Now the ever-positive thinker,  
the hopeless romantic, eternal optimist, dormant poet,  
takes pen in hand, one more time,  
to strangely declare that I am afraid.  
I am very afraid for this world.

As it turned out, we were right to be concerned.

\* \* \*

Since writing **Requiem (2017)**, my songwriting and poetry went into abeyance, right up until the global pandemic hit in early 2020. With everything that was going on

in the world, a book about to be released and two more in the works, there was little time for anything else but essays.

During the first few months of the Covid-19 crisis, my fellow musicians and I were happy to offer up some free online entertainment for all our friends, primarily songs recorded at home and posted on Facebook, and soon I felt the need to write a song about it all. I wrote **Going Viral** in May of 2020 to capture the spirit of what was happening around the world, but also to encourage the kinds of things we needed to be doing to stop the spread (masks, physical distancing, etc.). Eventually, when I get the opportunity to record it, **Going Viral** and its lyrics will be installed on the “Notes” page; and the lyrics will also move into the poetry archive when I have enough material to add another section.

Indeed, as I write this, I am compiling all the material and supplying the content for this website to my web designer and social media consultant, Jayne Cremesco, during the pandemic as she builds it. As I complete and send this the final section of the poetry archive to her it is August 2020, and the end of the crisis is nowhere in sight.

Peace.

A stylized signature in blue ink. The letter 'J' is large and bold, with the 'K' and 'elland' written in a cursive script to its right. The 'R' is also in a cursive script, smaller than the 'J'. The entire signature is in a vibrant blue color.