

Poetry Archive: Part II

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Section 1: At Long Last (2000)

*Beyond talent lie all the usual words: discipline, love, luck
– but, most of all, endurance. - James Baldwin*

Late winter in early 2000, I was feeling a complete failure. One self-defeating thought among many was inescapable: how many times I have had to pick myself up after giving it everything I had, and the likelihood that this vicious cycle was also going to be the story of my entire life. There was every reason to believe, given my track record and the now five years I had spent looking for an efficacious treatment, that this would be a life-long fight I could never win. As bad as my health was at the time, an overarching thought like this can make it much worse, thwarting recovery from the very start. With the distinct possibility that I may never find treatment that works for me, I was beginning to resign myself to a life of depression and bitter obscurity.

At this point, the medications I was taking were no longer tolerable. There were five, two of which were supposedly controlling the side effects from the other three. But the side effects were terrible anyway: sweating, rashes, irritability, constipation, edema, insomnia, fatigue, etc. Frustrated, I informed my psychiatrist on my next visit that I was ceasing all medications for one month, and I requested he start me on something radically new when I returned.

My desperate intention was to flush all these chemicals out and try something with a completely different chemical structure. It seemed that all the conventional bipolar medications I had tried were somehow incompatible with my system, and it was time to instinctively take a fresh approach. Fortunately, I had a fine doctor, John Angel, who is still my specialist. He always made me feel I was a full partner in my treatment and drive for recovery, and so was amenable to the idea.

My main concern was to eliminate the side effects at all costs, and the month without medication was predictable. The deep depression slowly lifted, but it continued to rise and approach the manic end of the scale. After two weeks I felt close to 'level', and after four weeks I had moved into the preliminary lower levels of mania in feeling and behaviour. Had I gone on for much longer I would have become more and more speedy and fidgety, much like a cocaine addict. Eventually, I would have gotten so high that a crash would be unavoidable, and then the severity of the sudden descent into

deep depression would start a phase of rapid cycling. I knew from painful personal experience that this can only be stopped in a hospital, and I couldn't brook the idea of going through all that again.

Based on Dr. Angel's research, we decided to try me on Wellbutrin, also known as Bupropion. It was first marketed under the name Zyban, designed to help cigarette smokers kick the habit. Originally an anti-depressant, testing resulted in a sharp decrease in many subjects' smoking, so it was repackaged and sold as a smoke cessation aid. Subsequently it was found to be better for bipolar than for depression. He told me to take one 150 mg slow-release tablet in the morning and one at suppertime.

I went home and took the first dose. After a week or so, the tendency towards mania came under control. I began to feel a bit lighter and started taking my 274-pound frame for a walk occasionally. After two weeks things looked even better, and so the walks were taken once every day. Three weeks on my spirit was considerably brighter. Incredibly, I began entertaining thoughts of giving it one more good effort, and a cautious optimism began make itself known. It was hard to believe.

I decided to support how I was now feeling with some productive and therapeutic activities. I started walking twice a day, every day, for a total of four miles; and I did two hundred sit-ups right after every walk. Drinking Pepsi, using salt and eating after eight were completely discontinued; I drank copious amounts of water; and eating was confined to a half-meal at around ten in the morning, and one good helping of whatever was on the menu for supper. Reading became my favourite pastime again and the public library became a regular stop. Every opportunity to move and burn energy was taken, every opportunity to avoid effort denied, my will now fully engaged.

One of the symptoms of manic-depression is obsessive-compulsiveness. I found it was best to redirect the need to obsess into positive productive activities; in effect, to make it work for me instead of against me, and I find this still works well. My ongoing recovery and self-improvement program had been instituted with a will to support the efficacy of the Wellbutrin. Now it was really working, and six months from the day I took my first walk I was just one hundred eighty pounds – ninety-four pounds lighter! My waist size was down from forty-six to thirty-two inches, and my cholesterol level went from a critical 12.3 to a perfectly safe 4.7. It was miraculous.

So much more happened during those six months, the least of which was not the discovery of the literary voice I recognized as all my own. After about five months of calming down, slimming down and feeling up, I began to socialize a little again. I was on top of the world and I made some new friends, including Tom Moore.

Tom was the president elect of the Writer's Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador at the time. We met at the bar one night and, of course, started to talk about writing. I asked him if he would mind reading a sampling of my poetry, as sometimes it's hard to be objective about your own work and having the opinion of a serious published writer was very appealing to me. When he emailed back his reaction to the half-dozen or so pieces I had sent him, I was very pleasantly surprised. He said that he

enjoyed all of them, and I handled dark subjects very well with an economy of words; among some other kind words and heady praise, he said my work reminded him of an early Wordsworth.

For several days I walked around high on Tom's review. This was a level of validation I had never enjoyed. It was not so much that it was Tom Moore; different people have different tastes, and Tom's opinion shouldn't carry any more weight than any other writer's opinion. But he was one of the few people I knew to be a published author and a heck of a nice guy, and a positive review from him could only be encouraging.

Poetically enough, Tom would join Indie Publishers of Newfoundland and Labrador twenty years later, a new organization I co-founded in 2019 with fellow indie Herb Hopkins, and I served as its president for the first year. We may say it has all come full circle, but those few days back in early September of 2000 were quite special for me. It was a defining moment. If you're reading this, Tom – sincerely, I thank you.

Finally, for the first time in almost two years, I produced a poem – the first written with my own voice, a voice I hear coming back to me today in my novels. The writing was as a brilliant revelation to me, and it spoke clearly about how it felt to write such a poem after all this time struggling to get there. It flowed like never before and determined its own length:

Awakenings

*Oh, I get it. I'm different.
All my life it has felt as though
I am swimming against the tide.
Now I know why.
I am swimming against the tide.*

*Not simply different
in that we are all individuals,
unique and autonomous.
I mean this in a different way.
Different the way a small minority is different.
Against the grain.
Unwilling or unable to submit
to the common sense,
to be lost to the amorphous mass.*

There is little tolerance for talent,

unless it is popular.
True talent grinds on, feeding on itself.
Doing. Being.
It knows no adulation.
It is different.

There is little tolerance for intelligence,
unless it is freakish "genius".
True intelligence grinds on,
producing, contributing, coping, adapting.
Doing. Being.

It is scorned as haughty or self-involved.
It is different.
It has always been so.

I am different.
My heart is for wearing.
My mind for sharing.
Doing. Being.
I get it now.
It's starting to come to me.

Crafting. Giving shape.
Breathing life into an arrangement of letters,
to manifest thought,
feeling,
idea.

The word an obvious metaphor.
Too obvious.
It represents.
Merely stands for
the elusive mist that is of the mind.
The word a bridge
between notion and act.
Thought-word-deed.
But the word is not the point.
Thoth be damned.

*To live here inside the house of being.
To dwell within the lair of language
is not the point.
It is not static.
It must flow
as a river transports the buoyed
to reach a point
further along the stream of thought.*

*Silky prose,
passing the concept
from transcended analogy to a better expression,
itself to be transcended by the next.
Bergson.
He knew what it is to write a nebulous conduit.
The better to reproduce the spirit
inside another mind,
precisely as it was inside the first.
Transfer successfully completed.*

*It is now coming clear.
This is the place to be,
to be carried downstream.
To let go and let happen.
To accept the challenge that freedom is.
To revel in it.
I have come at last to the river.
I must be swept away.*

*It is to recognize
the inescapable license that drives the poetic.
But the thought-picture must not be developed.
Rather it is to be preserved
as one imagined frame of many,
in succession,
to lead us further on.*

*A liberating love
of understanding the dance,
and to dance,*

*to love and understand.
I live here.*

It was written as it is here, without any corrections, in about five minutes.

As I read it now, it is as though I am sitting right there on that couch at about quarter to four on a sunny afternoon, my thinking and writing as one. As my recovery was beginning to reveal, everything I had ever learned was now available to me. The boost from Tom Moore gave me the confidence and courage to hearken after, to hear and then follow my own voice. I was ecstatic.

Fifteen minutes later I began writing again. Now ideas for pieces were pouring into my mind, as almost everything could be redefined and recast in the light of my new health and poeticism. It was time to look back over my life with this new creative vision; to reassess and come to terms with it all as never before. This one was written in less than ten minutes:

Through Me

*I have seen
the dawn's light steal up
and overthrow the nocturnal gloom,
to inhabit the land and animate
as it threatens to bedizen
by revealing itself in sparkling dew.*

*I have heard
the sound of beauty:
the determined air of the bird,
the ambient choir that is the wind,
the merry melody in children's laughter,
and the music of a woman
bringing her love to voice.*

*I have smelled
the change coming
on the waft of public opinion and appetite.
No less nose the recurring memory of home cooking and antiseptics,
of babies, new leather,
books and fragrant flower,
and the acrid stench of ill-will and evil intent.*

*I have touched,
and been touched,
by the wisps of almost-hair
on the back of her neck;
by loving caress and angry blow;
by the smooth, the coarse,
the wet, the tacky and the airy.
I have touched a heart or two,
and sometimes out of touch.*

*I have tasted
life and love in all measures:
the bitter scraps of need and the luxury of excess;
the tang of a woman's unbridled lust;
the vengeful acrimony of one I have hurt in some way.
I have tasted,
sometimes swallowing,
sometimes spitting,*

*I have beheld
the son coming out
from behind a cloud of uncertain anticipation,
to hold me rapt in the spell of the miracle,
oblivious to the blatancy of flesh and blood
as the sunshine aggrandizes the event
through the operating room window.*

*I have experienced
the love of Woman.
I have seen her triumph and shared her pain.
I have watched her care, feel for and comfort.
I see her eyes shine with surprise and devotion,
and to know I am for whom they shine.*

*The Great Question stalks me as I sojourn on.
I see the design,
the ineffable Idea which creation is.
I have faith in the principle,
but I am doubting the personal.
I have believed, practised,*

*refuted, renounced and redefined.
I have learned not to expect the Great Answer,
but I suspect it has all the characteristics of Love.*

*I have drunk in my senses,
considered and reflected,
and cast it all in the light of my heart.*

Now, I was cooking with gas! For the first time in my life I genuinely considered myself a writer – a poet – in every sense of the word.

In the next couple of days two more pieces came to light. The first was a way to put the experiences of my two marriages into perspective. For me, I succeeded:

Closure

Twice upon a time I was married.

*With the first ---
She did not love. I loved.
She loved. I loved.
She tried to keep loving. I loved.
She could not love. I tried to keep loving.
She did not love. I did not love.
We could not love.
We parted.*

*With the second ---
She loved! I loved!
She loved! I loved!
Then, poor in spirit,
I could only love with my heart.
She still loved.
Frozen by ever-advancing darkness, she loved.
Outward manifestations are utterly thwarted.
She tried to keep loving.
Then she did not love,
as I loved with all my heart.
She did not love.
I never stopped loving her with all my heart.*

*She departed,
and I collapsed
under the sheer weight of my love.
And I died, for a very long time.*

*Then...
Rescued by Providence,
I return to hale spirit.
I blame no one.
The best is enshrined in sweet memory.
The willful dream.
It is this that I now love.
And when we did love,
we really loved.
'Tis better to have loved and lost...
It shall never die.
It lives on in fantasy.
Ah yes. Fantasy.
I was there! It happened, and...*

*"What are you smiling about, dear?"
"Hub? What? Oh....uh, nothing, dear. Nothing at all."*

It had become so much easier to write; and, oddly enough, it no longer mattered what anyone else thought of my writing. After all, it was my own voice I was hearing, and that had to be good for my craft. Most of all, I was now able to "...recognize the inescapable license that drives the poetic". While compiling this archive, I could see it more clearly than ever before – the gradual change in facility and flair; a marriage of style and substance efficiently fed by everything I ever learned and was learning.

All this allowed me to be more philosophical, relaxed, and playfully cynical about things that had bothered me too much before. In this one I dealt with the illusive concept of happiness:

Come Now

*Are you happy?
What? Are you serious?
A hateful question.
A useless question.*

*No one is happy, really.
Happiness is the Great Myth.
An ideal, and,
like all ideals,
unattainable.*

*We snatch mere glimpses of "happiness",
but not happiness.
Just a direction.
An instinctive direction.
Nothing more.
We may pursue,
but we may never have.
This pursuit
the very soul of empty promise.
Quixotic at best.
Get used to it.*

*Rephrasing is in order.
How unhappy are you?
Well, now that you put it like that...
Not too bad, thanks for asking.*

Up to that point in my life, I had never felt happy enough to even take a position on happiness. Now all that was changed.

* * *

Inevitably, I turned my newly discovered voice on all matters political, and current affairs in general. What's wrong with the United States and the world, one of my most well-worn hobby horses, became my first target:

Land of the Free

*What is this place? America?
The United States of America?
Oh. That explains a lot.*

The arrant decadence,

*the instantiated rule of anarchy
dressed in quasi-democracy.
The mere semblance of law and order.*

*It is the Roman Empire of recent history,
slowly but surely
destroying itself
with its corruption and situational ethics.*

*Outdated statutes, redundant amendments
thwart the struggle for peace and harmony.
Frustrated by these fundamental flaws,
freedom and security are sought in steel and powder.*

*The siege mentality sets in,
and a society
largely composed of innocent bystanders
is held hostage to an aggressive frontier mindset.
Women and children,
to say nothing of men,
are routine victims.*

*What insult added to this injury?
The whole sordid mess
repackaged in Hollywood,
sold back to the victims as entertainment,
to generate still more money.
Land of the free?
Where people are free to kill each other,
and to glorify that killing.*

*My father was right.
It was born of violence,
and it will die of violence.
It is dying as we speak.
One citizen at a time.*

* * *

Around the same time, I had been cultivating a friendship with well-known Newfoundland broadcaster and writer, Ron Pumphrey. Ron had been an acquaintance of mine since childhood, having met him first at one of my parents' house parties, and he had become a closer friend of late. On his seventieth birthday, following a get-together for him at a friend's house in Quidi Vidi Village, where he loved living, I wrote a tribute and presented it to him:

Captured (for Ron)

*Serendipity has spoken.
Across the road from a friend of mine
lives culture.
Newfoundland culture.
And I know him.*

*He is seventy today,
and this makes me think
about seventy years in Newfoundland,
from Harbour Grace in '31 to here and now,
and the role in this place that he has come to play.*

*I thank him
for being himself.
For being himself and giving himself
to us.*

*No one is more misunderstood
than one who everyone thinks
they understand.
They tend to encapsulate.
Unaware he cannot be categorized.
But I know.*

*He gives of himself,
for he is prepared (and always has been)
to risk surrendering all that he is
in the service of others,
knowing they may pigeon-hole him
and see him as something simpler
than he really is.*

*It takes a complex man
fiercely to be
just himself.
To risk the appearance of simplicity
to give them what they want,
and what they need.*

*I have watched and listened
as a distant admirer.
And I have called you
consistently eccentric.
You are.
I hope you always will be.
We need you to be that way.
You know.*

*I look back.
I see and hear you
from my childhood until now.
“I minds da time”
when you were the voice
of the common man.
And you,
such an uncommon man
with the common touch.*

*I laughed at your jokes.
Listened to your counsel.
Heard your well-read, heart-forged wisdom.
Heard it as you informed.
Heard it as you entertained.
Heard it as you defended another.
Heard it as you championed a cause.*

*I remember hearing you speak to them
as one of the great unwashed.
I marvelled as you managed
to speak to them with their own words,
as you elevated them closer
to a higher vision.*

*Such a delicate line to walk.
You have made a life of walking that line.*

*But most of all
I remember hearing it on many occasions,
when she called out to you in all her pain,
and you soothed her pain,
and at the same time educated her
about that which was hurting her at the time.
'She' is at once Newfoundland
and Newfoundlander.
You have been this to us.*

*And now I hear it across a table,
sharing libations, appreciating art,
exchanging viewpoints.
For I now number you among my friends.
You have honoured me
by dubbing me a fellow intellectual.
I hope to live up to this someday,
with the same dignity and courage
as I have seen in you.*

*You see,
there is such a thing as courage.
You are courage.
And now I honour you
on this your seventieth.
And I would like to think that with these words
I have captured the essence of the man.
The man who captures essences.
To know that I have captured the Capturer.
This would honour us both.*

*I know, kind Sir,
that you can be counted on
to resist to the last
any gentle passing into That Good Night.
This place needs
seventy more years of you.*

*Please, give us as many as possible.
And thank you, my friend,
for the first seventy.*

Ron was reticent and awkward in his reaction, and it made me wonder if he liked it. But I needn't have worried. A year or two later, his lovely wife, Marilyn, told me that he went home that night and placed it in the strong box where he kept all his most prized possessions. Mission accomplished.

* * *

How can I possibly describe my pride for having even reached this point in my life, to say nothing of the joy in the achievement of better health than I've ever enjoyed as an adult? The program of medication, exercise and sensible eating, of my own design, had given me a lift in confidence and spirit. "New man" doesn't do justice to it – not even close.

Just six months before I had all but resigned myself to a life spent doing little more than dying. The depression, the weight, my history of failed attempts to attain and maintain health, and my chronic lack of prosperity had all conspired to leave me in a deep well of despair.

Now the cloud of depression was gone, and the anxiety became positive energy. I weighed the same as when in high school, and I knew my health was as permanent now as anybody's. Everything I had ever noticed, took an interest in, learned, or experienced was retained and available, so I figured relative prosperity couldn't be far off. The added bonus, the best thing of all, was the emergence of my own literary voice.

By October of 2000, my voice was flourishing in every genre, from editorials to short stories, essays to poems. I was as sharp as a tack in every way, and very much ready to consider romance again. Just a few months ago it was inconceivable that there would ever be another intimate relationship in my future. Now it was inevitable. It was an exciting time in my life, and I had more to give someone else than ever before.

The lack of immediate prosperity, however, meant a severely narrow range of social opportunities. The neighbourhood bar saw me for a few hours once or twice a week for a chat and a little modest indulgence, and I continued to maintain an Internet account. My lean wardrobe, guitar and a 486 PC were everything I owned. All the same, even these circumstances didn't discourage me as they would have before. My life was very much on the upswing and it felt like romance was just around the corner.

Sometimes people with bipolar conditions can become addicted to sex and be reckless about where and with whom they have it. Though sex is an especially important part of life for me, it must be said that my sex drives were not and are not a threat to

me or anyone else. But it is undeniable that, in terms of romance and lust, I was pretty fired up at this time.

It must be remembered that I was like a mentally and physically fit man who had just climbed out of a grossly unhealthy body and mind; a body and mind in which he had been imprisoned for what felt like forever. Released, relieved and ready to love, my appetite was voracious. Completely under my control, my desire for companionship and intimacy was a powerful source of vitality and creativity. It was a feeling I had given up on, and one I was grateful to be having again.

* * *

I became friends with a young couple at the local bar, and we ended up getting close. We decided that she could benefit from a little informal counseling with me to deal with some bothersome neurotic issues and a chronic phobia she was dealing with.

It really started as innocent as that, but soon there were complications. Debbie (name changed) became taken with my counseling manner, while her face and sense of humour were busy captivating me. We ended up spending more and more time talking to each other alone, only meeting in public briefly and infrequently. Whether on the phone or the Internet, we would spend hours talking about everything imaginable, with lots of pregnant pauses along the way, and we got to know each other well. This only deepened the attraction.

One day we spent a few minutes in playful banter at her place of work, and her eyes had me rapt. Arriving home, and still entranced by them, poetry offered a way to express the effect those eyes were having on me:

Eyes East

*I saw the Orient in your eyes.
Such a pleasant surprise.
Though I am at a loss as to why.*

*Those eyes.
They spoke of Asian beauty,
of ancient custom,
culture unparalleled.*

*I can see verdant vistas.
Unfamiliar exotic creatures abound.
Strange and lovely flora,
and fragrant trees of cherry blossom.*

*There are many signs
of dynasties and kingdoms past.
A graceful progress.
Tradition bred in the modern bone.
Reticent elders walk by
in plain and timeless garb.
Decidedly peaceful,
at once proud and humble.*

*Tea imbibed like prayer.
The ubiquitous roots and herbs,
giving balance and remedy,
underscoring the daily fare.*

*Mind in harmony with body,
body in agreement with its world.
And a world transcended
by the mind.*

*The mystery of life suspended,
preserved with common sense philosophies.
The present married to the past,
and divorced from the temporal.*

*I am unable to explain.
You know nothing of these people.
You do not resemble them, and yet....
I saw the Orient in your eyes.*

It was inappropriate for me to be perfectly up front about my feelings, and we became skilled at talking around it, “sending out vibes”. This only added to the excitement, as desire became a need. My poetry responded accordingly, and seconds after **Eyes East** was written it was in her email inbox.

Soon the emails became more frequent and more daring. She refused to discourage my advances, even when I reminded her that she was attached, and her eyes and face continued to draw me in. She was leading me to believe there was something there, that she wasn’t happy, and I was what she had always wanted. We spent even more time together and tried to grab any opportunity we could to laugh, talk, and gaze at each other. Resistance became difficult, and my need for a full relationship with a

lady was becoming undeniable, as were her feelings for me. Finally, resistance was utterly impossible, and I began to give in. But I had only poetry with which to court a married woman:

Face Facts

*It can only be articulated
with words, expressions, attitude.*

At least for now.

*There are other ways,
if and when real intimacy is achieved.
But for now, this is all I have.*

*And I will use these things
to convince you of your beauty.
To help you see the blossom that you are,
that you may blossom.
To give you the confidence that is rightfully yours,
that you may be confident.
For then,
anything is possible.*

*I use my words to give voice
to the effects of your manner.
A manner that elicits delight
in the heart of one who knows.
I find my words
in the service of what you need to hear.
And you are a wonderful person.*

*I use my expression to show
how you animate this man's spirit
when you are near.
I was surprised and heartened
when you turned to look my way
and you were already smiling.
I wasn't ready for it,
and I was caught
in the light of that beam.*

I think of you now, and I smile.

*I use my attitude to embody
the kind of person you may warm to.
Perhaps you may even catch the feeling
and be free enough
to dare to be yourself.
For this would be a blessing to you,
no less those who adore you.
Though my attitude and I
would soon be left to carry on
without you.*

*I am no more than anyone,
but I see more.
And I see a face like no other.
Penetrating eyes to dazzle,
the smile of a precious porcelain doll,
and a perfect nose
sitting so contentedly
at the center of the universe.*

*Behind that face I have found
a beauty that makes a mockery of words.
Unknown to you,
you are unknown.
A head and heart that draws my own.
Passion simmers just below the surface.
An eternal well-spring if tapped.
I know.*

*I simply wish to spend more time
showing you to yourself.
Such an honour,
that you permit me to have the pleasure
of trying to meet this challenge.
You must become fully realized,
but take your time.
For each minute you remain unconvinced
is another minute I may bask
in the curious glow that you are.*

This poem demonstrates how the counseling sessions had quickly evolved into genuine mutual affection, and I was becoming more convinced by the day that I was the best thing for her. As I hopped up about it as I was, her husband was a concern. I don't think I would have continued if she hadn't given me the impression and a lot of clear signals that she felt the same way.

* * *

At about the same time, I was developing a relationship with a local young woman over the Internet. Before it got too close, however, she moved away. Then a young friend of hers with whom she had been sharing my messages began emailing me. She talked about how much she liked the way I wrote and asked me to be her email friend. But she was much too young for anything remotely intimate with a man, so I redirected her feelings, and we communicated for a couple of weeks about her schoolwork, hobbies and friends.

The night after I wrote **Eyes East**, however, an email came in from this young girl. Clearly, she was becoming too attached, hinting strongly at romance. I thought long and hard about how best to handle it. While it was important to set her straight, her fragile self-esteem was also at stake. Deciding to deal with it in a poem, I made an attempt to let her down and build her up at the same time:

For a Flower

She is a flower.

Yes, indeed.

*With her stem firmly rooted,
soft but strong.*

*She holds her head high,
inclined towards the sunshine,
and puts her back to the wind and rain.*

She bends but does not break.

She is growing.

If she is a flower,

and she surely is,

then what am I?

How do I fit into a flower's life?

*Am I the sun,
giving her life and light?
I would like to be, but I am not.
Am I the water,
nourishing and refreshing her?
I would like to be, but I am not.
Am I a gardener,
clearing weeds and tending to her?
I would like to be, but I am not.*

*I am the one waiting.
Waiting to catch
the sweet scent of her bloom.
The one who stoops
to appreciate her bouquet,
to drink her into my senses.
I am a lover of Nature.
Her nature.*

*But alas,
I must wait.
For she is yet a tender bud.
This flower will flower,
one day,
and proclaim herself
and her natural beauty
to the world and me.*

*And this will happen,
for the tender bud grows and unfolds herself
simply because she is convinced
that she already is a flower.
She is right.*

*May you have all the sunshine you need.
May you drink the water, be full and encouraged.
May all your gardeners along the way,
treasure you and let you grow,
and not pick you before your time.*

*It is my hope
that on that day of blooming,
when first you open up,
proud and precious petals smiling upward,
I may be happening by.*

There were one or two emails after this, then she broke off contact. I think she understood. Hopefully, she continues to grow and blossom.

* * *

The end of November 2000 saw me employed with Elections Canada as a revisions officer for the weeks leading up to and including election day. The voter turnout for most of the day was light, with plenty of time to kill as we waited for the peak periods. I was reflecting on the nuts and bolts of the democratic process; and with pen and paper at the ready, I decided to write about its benefits.

As I was mentally laying aside the many things that irk me about the democratic system, that I may accentuate the positive, a middle-aged arrogant woman could be heard at a table across the way, loudly complaining about having to get sworn in before she could vote. The last straw for her was hearing she would have to go home and bring back a piece of mail with her address on it, and she left in a huff, never to return and vote. Her mink and gaudy jewelry told me she was quite well off, and the whole business of voting was obviously just a complete bother to her. I decided to write an impassioned response to her attitude:

Vapid Voter

*You. Comfortable complainer.
You know who you are.
Or do you?*

*This is the best of all possible worlds.
But to listen to you,
it is the worst.*

*You should know better.
You take for granted the fortunes of freedom,
and resent the responsibility.*

*You bitch
about that for which you would fight
if denied you in another land,
another life.*

*Do you not know
how you would wish to be you
if you were one of them
that have not the franchise?*

*There, but for the grace of God,
go all us fortunates.
Our liberty is not a gift,
but a reward already earned for us.*

*We have the right to participate
in this process in progress.
But it is also a duty,
to make it the realized dream of history.*

*You have the luxury of petty complaint.
You are cozy in your ingratitude.
Unable or unwilling
to appreciate the treasure that is democracy.*

*Wake up and realize
that a new day has long since dawned.
Now that the sun is overhead,
Have you forgotten the blessing of its rising?*

For all my criticism and social commentary on Canada and its shortcomings, I do love my country, and I know very well why.

* * *

In the polling booth that day my love for youth, no less my love of language, reappeared together as the inspiration for verse. A young woman, hired for the day by one of the parties as an observer, was set up a couple of tables away, and we chatted between our duties. When I handed her **Vapid Voter** to read, she became visibly intimidated and began to shrink away without even reading a word. “Is that a poem?”

she asked, and before I could answer she quickly added. “Oh, I can’t read poems.” When I asked her why, she said that she was almost always told that her understanding or interpretations of poetry in school were wrong. Then she told me about some of her English teachers and the kinds of experiences she had with them. I had heard this sort of thing from far too many people before over the years, and I scurried back to my table to write:

The English Lesson

*English teachers.
The bane of English language and literature.
Destroyers of budding imaginations!
Eliminators of word-consciousness!*

*How sad
that so many
charged with instilling the spirit
of linguistic art and classic expression,
are stifling, even discouraging,
the youth’s natural desire
for the best of native tongue.*

*How wrong
that those who should be kindling
the innate need to give voice
to idea and feeling,
instead extinguish the flame
which burns to convey, explain,
ask, and express love.*

*To be sure,
I have had good English teachers
who gave me confidence
to speak and write what I had to say,
and what I have to say,
still.
But they are the exception,
not the rule.*

Most fail miserably.

*The student says white, the teacher says black.
Had the student said black, it would have been white.
Nobody wins
and every single one of us loses.
Oh, festival of pedagogical error!*

*And what is being lost?
How many people
have missed a life of enrichment
because they have been taught to hate reading?
How many ideas
have died inside a mind?
How many misunderstandings
for want of the right words?
How much love
has not been conveyed?*

*Don't let them win!
Don't let them take
what is rightfully yours.
Don't relinquish your love of language.
It has only been suppressed.*

*There is no right or wrong way
to see,
or to feel.
For what you see
is yours to feel.
You have the power.
It is your language.
Trust your own understanding.*

I wrote the poem out again to keep a copy for myself, then presented her with the original and she took it shyly. I encouraged her to take the poem to heart, that she may enjoy her own language again, or maybe for the first time. She did seem to appreciate the gesture.

Later that day, my love of language lead me to play around with a few synonyms, just for fun:

Synonymous

*They're there in their palaces.
They know no need,
as they access their excess.*

*We're where we always were.
We know no affluence.
Excepted, never accepted.*

*Two lives too distant to relate.
Similar, with different meanings.*

While writing this, I couldn't help remembering times in school when they'd give us a list of words to put in sentences to demonstrate we knew their meanings, and I'd have fun finding a way to put them all in one long sentence. Teachers didn't usually like it when I did this, but they could never say I didn't know what the words meant.

* * *

Things were definitely looking up for me, and my heart was actively looking for another. But it was about to get much more complicated. As the Christmas season approached, I was a free agent wanting to be attached. There was Debbie, but even though she assured me we would end up together, something deep inside kept telling me we would not. But I wasn't listening. The courting and the poetry would continue in the extreme, but a relationship with a physical element was becoming necessary, as the love and lust awakened by Debbie was not being satisfied. My body was, in effect, screaming at me. I knew I would need to do something about that soon.

Shut down sexually for so long, never expecting to have another opportunity to express my sexuality, I was now ready. I was feeling like my sexuality was pressuring me, and I was carrying a distinct hunger for intimacy, touch, and sexual activity. Sometimes it felt like something so exciting it could make me sick. The sheer power of my pent-up passion had me lit up, and it drove me to write this jaunty little piece:

Lustfulness

*Sex is feelin' goood-lookin'!
Real goood-lookin'!
Not good-looking,
But goood-lookin'!*

*Thought gives rise to feeling.
Feeling gives rise to passion.
Passion gives rise to lust.
And lust simply gives rise!*

*How to say it?
How does one say a feeling?
But this is poetry.
Saying feeling.*

*Yet feeling says,
all by itself.
It needs not words to speak.
It is speaking.*

*So why do I use words?
Why, indeed.*

Leading up to the holiday season and on through it, I had a few nice dates and encounters. On one occasion, I spent an evening with a particularly lovely lady, a single mother with an infant girl, and I ended up sleeping over. I woke the next morning before she did, and I was moved by what I saw. I tried to capture the sight and the feeling it was giving me:

It Is to Gaze Upon

*Nothing in this world
is as beautiful or divine
as a sleeping woman.*

*So that I may gaze upon her,
I stayed awake after she drifted off,
and woke before she did.
It is my favourite thing to do.*

*To see her sleep,
her exquisite repose,
is to be privileged.*

*Privileged to behold
the most beautiful sight in the world.*

*Her angelic face,
usually quite animated in consciousness,
alive with her active interest in the topic of conversation,
her enchanting reactions to change,
or her delight in one of the memories
that women hold so dear,
is now very still.*

*Such peace.
Her caring heart and fertile mind
at peace.
Her verve for life and for love
now in slumber.*

*The compassionate mother,
passionate lover,
playful little girl,
all at rest.
Her perfect stillness,
her radiant quietude,
excites me so.*

*Sleep, Little One.
You have earned these hours of calm.
You earn it with every waking minute.
Rest, dear angel.
I await your return.
And I wait with gratitude.
So happy to be here
to wonder at your placid escape,
and to be on hand when once again
you open your eyes upon the world.*

We soon found we shared few interests and decided against going further with it. Even so, the evening we shared was special for me, and I can still see her sleeping when I read that poem.

Still, thoughts of Debbie were frequent, and I wondered how she was doing over Christmas. She had intimated to me once that, when it comes to special occasions, a card means more to her than a gift. Just before Christmas I emailed her and attached:

In Lieu Of

*I wish I could give You
the Christmas card I want to give You.
But I can't.
It would say too much.*

*It wouldn't be a store-bought card,
with manufactured verses, mass-produced.
It would be of my own invention.
An elegant parchment, antiqued,
conjuring up Christmas of old.
The real Christmas.*

*The words would express
my deepest feelings for You.
They would seek to convey warmth and tenderness
from my heart to yours.
Words with only one intent.
To tell You of the Christmas gift
that You are.*

*It would try to tell You
that Christmas came early for me this year.
That it began the moment we met.*

*It would say that your heart,
your cherub-like face,
your perfect smile,
and your eyes,
your deep captivating eyes,
have all conspired to turn me
once again
into an awkward schoolboy.
Smitten. Confused.
And alone.*

*The card would be laced
with a great and cherished love for You,
but unable to hide the void
that is within me this Christmas.
A void that could only be filled
by You as mine,
and me as yours.
By us.*

*It would be
your favourite Christmas card.
You would treasure it always,
and I would know
that I am in your heart.
And all of what Christmas can mean,
to a man and a woman who feel
like a boy and girl
together,
would dwell forever in that card.*

*But, of course,
I could never give You such a card.
It would say too much.*

She was very moved by this one, and that was all that I needed to continue the pursuit on into the new year.

Jeff R. Kelland