



Relating to family and friends (Part 2)

Family and friends, Part 2, is a wider ranging set of poems compared to Part 1, because it strays way beyond the family fold and confronts more diverse emotions, including loving, but unrequited relationships and the untimely death of a best friend. But we begin with a poem that recalls the start of a long-lasting love affair.

A feel for Love

*A coastal scene
In a fascinating sense,
Has an aura so compelling
For those who sample her charms.*

*A sunlit day
On the causeway bench,
With the island in the distance,
Waiting to hide us from view.*

*A touch of love
By the cliff-top fence,
Before descending to the boulders
And being splashed by the sea.*

*A feel for love,
But a feeling so intense,
That it almost masks the passion
Of the magic that surrounds.*

October 1983

'A feel for love' (above) was written in 1983, three weeks after I first met the person who would become my partner for the next twenty-two years ... and the mother of our two cherished daughters. The poem recalls those feelings of first love in a complementing setting: the beautiful causeway across to Granite Island, Victor Harbor, South Australia (pictured).

Harmony worth holding

***Over, almost before it began:
Missed opportunities squandered.
But then,
They found with each other
A common chord,
As fish glide in unison
Through fragments of time:
This way and that,
Linked then dispersed.
A moment together,
Then lost to this Earth.***

***They couldn't see how close they had come
Till looking back through time,
From afar:
Their days spent together,
A wondrous thing.
Walking and talking,
Feeling often as one:
Grasping the moment,
But afraid to prolong.
Two beings in time:
A chord, not a song.***

Singapore, 1996

Harmony worth holding is a personal favourite because it carries so much meaning and shade in just a few flowing lines. The prose version would be much longer and even then, might miss some of the feelings that this poem conveys. As an itinerant teacher in Singapore I lived for three months at *Waffles*, a backpacker's haven near the centre. Whilst there I got to know a young German girl, a deep-sea diver by profession. We had similar interests and would go together to an exhibition or a concert, or a picnic in the park. There was an attraction, but the relationship was platonic; the first time we kissed was when I said goodbye at Changi airport, as she departed for Sulawesi. The poem asks the question: 'what if either one of us had stepped across the line?'

If I would write a Love song

*If I would write a love song,
I would write of peace and joy.
For love is the hope that people do show
To overcome conflict and fear.*

*If I should speak a love song,
I should talk to those without love,
To give and to take of this abstract goal
And so broaden the horizon it holds.*

*If I would bring a love song
To this world in all its despair,
It should nurture the feelings of all those who care
For brother and sister and friend.*

*But a truly meaningful love song
Is sung to those people you love,
And they in turn will give their love back
To encompass these feelings above.
... and more.*

South Australia 1987

This poem grew from a close friendship with a beautiful person, to something that transcended friendship. Though she was younger than me I was in awe of her talents, as a speaker and a writer. We joined together in support of worldly causes, which the poem reflects, but the final verse gives the game away to some extent, when it brings the focus back to the singular.

Back in Time

*Back in time to unite with family,
Back to see familiar sites.
Back in time to past endeavours
And back in time to thought-filled nights.*

*Flying home from distant parts
Holds a bag of two-edged tricks:*

***Fixes the yearning for loved ones,
But skittles the freedom apart in bits.
Rehearsal time is here once again,
Consolidating blocks of future life.***

Adelaide, 1996

This poem (above) reflects a difficult time in my life, when I had undergone invasive surgery and permanent employment was not guaranteed. Travels to Europe and Asia in the 1980s and early 90s had opened new horizons and tended to make me view life in Australia as quite privileged and sometimes uneventful. Yet I loved my family and the comforts of home. It was a thorny and challenging conundrum that was hard to deal with.

On the occasion of Aunty Jane's wedding

***From Gundagai to Yarrawonga,
Moonee Ponds to Mona Vale,
The cornets are sounding shrill,
For as the sun sets on Ulluru,
Australia knows your time has come (too).***

***So draw back the sheets on a new chapter
And have youz a you-beaut time.
Throw a snag on the backyard barbie
And down a few tinnies to boot.
It's bonza news – we'll drink to that.***

***But remember the old Aussie saying:
"When your bed wears out in a clap of thunder,
Or you happen to make an incredible blunder,
Just pull up sticks and move on, you bet,
For there's always another down under."
(bed, that is).***

Adelaide 1994

Twenty years younger than me, (and an accomplished cornet player), Jane was a person whom I identified with perhaps more than any other in my extended family. She had also lived in Australia from time to time and was well aware of the country's idiosyncrasies. When news came that she was about to wed I was in Australia and unable to attend the ceremony in Britain. In lieu of my attendance I put pen to paper in somewhat tongue-in-cheek fashion (perhaps the only way I knew in such circumstances), with the result being the poem above. I presume my offering was read out at the wedding; how well it was received was never revealed.

Electrical Master

Hope you're doing well, you old bugger.

Doing well like you used to do ...

*When you were down on the ground,
Helping all-comers cope with life,
Or the pleasures they have found.
It's a hard life at times you knew,
Yet good times could always abound.*

Hope you're doing well, true 'Master'.

You taught all those close to you ...

*How to do a good job that stays,
Nurturing their particular skills
So they shine out with different rays.
The African way of doing things
Enriched by your German ways.*

Hope you're doing well, young 'Nagel'.

I miss seeing you at six ...

*On the terrace in the dimming light.
With noisy matatus roaring by,
We'd drink and smoke to the night.
And you would talk about technical things
To make your day seem right.*

Hope you're doing well, my dear friend.

You didn't have to die you know ...

*We could have helped if you'd said,
You had no cash to support your cause,
Or your shit was stained with red.
I saw you crying for these things
On your pristine hospital bed.*

Hope you're doing well, up above,

Looking down on us all left below ...

*And all the work we still have to do;
While you develop those great ideas
With that big broad smile we knew.*

Written for my best friend Norbert Balve,
Who died at the Aga Khan Hospital, Nairobi,
On June 2nd, 2017. R.I.P. Master.

*Electrical master and man with a soul,
Sadly missed by your earthly crew.*

I had been living in Kenya for about five years, when one day, this tall, gangly man, with a mop of unruly greying hair, turned up at my door. “*Hello, my name is Norbert ...NOT Robert... Norbert!*” He leaned forward to shake my hand. He had a smile that stretched from ear to ear and a glint in his eye, which spoke of many things. I liked him immediately and we became best friends.

Five years later, I sat beside his hospital bed. He was a shadow of the man I had first met: hollow cheeks, eyes like black holes and paper-thin skin stretched over bone. He weighed half his normal skinny frame; I know, because I carried him out of his house. Norbert was such a loss to me - we did so many things together. I watched him perform that same introductory ‘*Norbert, not Robert*’ line for many other people ... a line which was often followed by: “*I am Electrical Master, from Germany!*”. He was extremely proud of both his ability as a craftsman and his German origins.

Norbert had exited Germany under a cloud - broken marriage and bankruptcy - after the 2008 recession. He lived hand-to-mouth in Kenya, sometimes without legal status. Underneath all the charisma I came to know a person troubled by the way his world had been turned upside down. He was one to be trusted and delighted in helping people whichever way he could, which included passing on his many skills to young Kenyans who worked with him. They all appreciated this.

He chain-smoked through all his waking hours and drank with a vengeance from six in the evening. We were neighbours, so I would often join him on the back veranda, as daytime turned to night, when he would talk about the detail of his working day. It was during such a whisky-driven discussion that he confided in me that as a schoolboy he was nicknamed *Nagel* - or ‘nail’ in German, because of his tall, thin frame, topped off with an extra-large head.

He loved new ideas and together we would sometimes come up with an innovative design or a novel project, so I could imagine him somewhere after death, smiling broadly as he became carried away with yet another grand scheme. If only I could experience once again that essence of unbowed and infectious enthusiasm. I blame myself for not acting earlier. Norbert, my friend, was sick, very sick, for six months, and I did nothing, until doing something meant doing it too late. He refused assistance, but I now see that beneath the veneer-loving man, was crying out for help!

Just by Chance

*It was a meeting by chance
In the dim, glowing light
Of a place familiar to each
They had come there to drink*

***To their sorrows that night:
And forget a troublesome past.***

***So they came close together,
Memories cast out of sight,
In an instant of greeting by chance.
A strange kind of bond,
Perhaps flawed by their plight,
But delightful to hold nonetheless.***

***And that bond quickly grew
To a love that seemed right.
“Too quickly”, the onlookers said.
As it hovered above,
But then fell like a kite
When those troublesome winds failed to blow.***

***Though that time was still there:
A moment in flight,
Important for both to discover.
Could they rekindle the feel
Of a love that seemed right,
In the dimly lit glow of that bar?***

***It's doubtful to say
Only time can shed light:
Is this lover's tryst here for to stay?
Do they build on the base
Of the love from that night,
Or squander the chance that was theirs?***

Mombasa, Kenya 2018

A dalliance in the dark and a love that grew from chance meeting, was then dashed in despair, but still there remained some hope of it being rekindled for the longer term. This brief love was born in Africa and perhaps reflects the hopes of a continent searching for long-term fulfilment. If the outcome of this brief affair is to be any guidance, then Africa's hopes will stay unfulfilled.