

Words and Music

A night full of talking that hurts,
my worst held-back secrets. Everything
has to do with loving and not loving.
This night will pass.
Then we have work to do.
-Rumi

Her tears were bitter and deep. Her breath came in gasps that should have rattled me.

“Men don’t read poetry. You don’t feel beauty the way women do.”

She uttered this with an almost practiced assuredness. As if she was commenting on the color of the clear blue sky. I was, at turns, amused, puzzled, and saddened by both her choice of words and the conviction behind them.

I wondered who had hurt her so deeply.

We were parked at the dock on Brick Kiln Road in Crisfield, Maryland. The place has a different name now, but I still call it as we knew it then. The two of us sitting in my battered old Mercury Marquis as a stormy night sky swirled the now ink black waters of Janes Island Sound out into the Chesapeake and beyond.

She had just shared with me her darkest secret. My attempts to discuss what she had revealed were met with anger and frustration. In her mind, I would not, and could not, begin to understand.

I leaned close to kiss her on the cheek and whispered a question. “How can you say that? Don’t you see the way I look at you?”

She turned away from me and stared out into the rain. I gave her a moment to elaborate on her thoughts. When she remained silent, I reached out to take her hand and softly but clearly began to recite Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 from memory.

It seems to me that individuals often have a tendency to overemphasize the articulation of sonnets. They rush through the poetic language as if it were a monologue, neglecting its intricate beauty. As I gave voice to the poem, I allowed my voice to carry the longing and wisdom of these beautiful words.

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

She was far more educated than I, but I could tell from the tightening grip of her hand and sharp intake of breath that these old and wise words were new to her. I could feel her eyes searching for mine in the low light.

She murmured quietly, almost too soft for me to understand. "Is that. . .?"

I sighed. "Shakespeare. Sonnet twenty-nine. One of my favorites."

Her voice carried a note of surprise, even shock. "You? You read poetry?"

A wry smile danced across my lips. “The first adult book I ever read, when I was around six, was a Poe anthology. Mom introduced it to me along with the works of Robert Frost.”

She squeezed my hand. “But. . . You were a martial artist. A karate guy.”

I couldn’t help but grimace and shake my head. “A karate guy. . . I was teaching adults how to fight before I could drive. Did I tell you that I always threw up after a fight? The greatest warriors are poets. You cannot know what to fight for, without guidance from wise men and women. Sometimes you strike with the fist, and others, you strike with the heart.”

I let my words flow into Poe’s childlike rhythms. Intensifying my voice as the poem wove its dark magic.

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and she was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love—
I and my Annabel Lee—
With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven
Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
My beautiful Annabel Lee;
So that her highborn kinsmen came

And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulchre
In this kingdom by the sea.

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
Went envying her and me—
Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we—
Of many far wiser than we—
And neither the angels in Heaven above
Nor the demons down under the sea
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,
In her sepulchre there by the sea—
In her tomb by the sounding sea.

We sat quietly, the rain the only sound, a texture to our thoughts. The storm inside Amy that night mirrored the one outside. It was a tempest that only poetry could calm. But as the words of 'Annabel Lee' faded into the silence; another voice echoed in my mind, that of Robert Frost.

“When I was a boy, I would carry armloads of books deep into the forest of my hometown. The woods of Chester County, Pennsylvania were too beautiful for my heart to process. Poets were my guide.”

Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

“Poetry is the music of the spoken word,” I said quietly. “Before I understood what music was, losing my hearing at an early age, I fell in love with the rhythm of poetry. If you stay with me long enough, I’ll share my own poems with you.”

“The first time I saw you, on YouTube, I told my friends, ‘I think I’m going to marry that banjo guy.’ I will go wherever you go.”

I kissed her hand. “Then, we will have time for poetry, and other things.”

“I want it all.”

“As you wish.”

In the snug confines of the Mercury's spacious bench seat, she nestled close to me, her arms enveloping me in a comforting embrace, and her head finding a resting place on my chest. I held her tightly, my voice softly crooning an old Randy Travis melody, "Deeper Than The Holler."

That night, on the banks of a stormy Chesapeake, I discovered that sharing with her, of poetry, of myself, and other things, was one of the great joys in my life.

Not showing off how much I had read, but what I felt. Our journey of discovery had begun.

The storm eventually cleared. As the sun rose, I noticed she had turned the Claddagh ring I had given her. Now, the heart pointed inwards.

One of the interesting and damning things about the Internet is that it gives us the entire body of human knowledge in a portable format. This is a blessing, in that there is beauty and power available to us at our fingertips. This is a curse, in that we tend to take this wisdom on tap for granted. There is no effort required, and that lack of struggle can make us lazy, or worse, incurious.

I taught banjo and guitar online in a free and open format from 1997 up until this year. When the last of my hearing failed and arthritis crippled my left hand, it was easy, downright convenient to assume that my work was over. Since the death of my wife and parents, along with the loss of my home, I tried to tell myself there was nothing left to share.

Remembering that night with Amy, forcing myself to set my rough hands to work on the keyboard and sharing this very private moment with you, has set something in motion within me. There is still much left to share and discuss.

So, this post will be the first in a series where I share words, images, music, and even the occasional music review with you, much in the manner I once shared with my bride.

Poems in this essay:

A Night Full of Talking

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī 13th century, translated by Coleman Barks

Sonnet 29

William Shakespeare 1609

Annabelle Lee

Edgar Allan Poe 1849

Nothing Gold Can Stay

Robert Frost 1923