

Preface

There is always something exciting, and at the same time a bit scary, in venturing into something new. Like many people, I had played before with rhymes, just for the fun of it. This time, my motivation was different. I wanted to write poetry to express emotions and feelings. This desire happened at short notice. I was not thinking about poetry at all, but an unexpected and sad event brought some change.

A former member of the team that I had put in place when I came for work to British Columbia, Canada, passed away. He died at the still young age of 65 from a rare form of cancer, within a couple of weeks. His name was Joe Collins. We had a great, very dynamic and effective relationship. My mandate coming to Canada in 1999 was to transform and turn around the Canadian salmon farming activities of the Dutch multinational for which I used to work. As a salesman, he was a pure talent and he played an essential role in the success of my assignment. We had amazing chemistry and thanks to his abilities, we even over performed the most ambitious plan that I had made. But Joe was so much more than a talented salesman. He had great human qualities. He was kind, upbeat and positive. He also had a rare sense of integrity. I do not know of anyone who ever said anything negative about him. So there I was, I received the news of his death and I was stunned. I have to admit that I struggled to process the news. Then, out of nowhere, it happened. I felt the urge to write something about him. I did not want to write a eulogy. I just needed to put my thoughts on paper, and it came in the form of a poem, which you will find in this book. It is titled “Joe”. Perhaps, it is not a very original title, but to anyone he knew him, he was Joe, and we all knew what this meant.

Joe’s poem was finished but I was not. There was more inside that needed to come out. Perhaps, I had an unconscious need to write about things that are dear to me, and since I have a passion for food and agriculture, I chose to write about them. This is not my first book about these topics. I have written two books in the past, but they cover the much more serious topic of the future of food and farming, and the challenges to feed a growing world population. I had also been thinking for a while of the need for a new angle and a new narrative on these subjects. I guess that several interests were converging and here is the result. This book is obviously rather different. This is why I included poems that deal with more serious stuff, which I have gathered in the section titled “Gravitas”. The book consists of five other sections. “Chlorophyll” is about plants, “Pastorale” for animals, “Human” for people, “Edibles” for foods and “Destinations” for countries and their cuisines that I enjoy particularly.

Of course, I needed to gather information about how to write poetry seriously and to learn about the many different formats and styles. Among the many aspects of poetry, the use and the necessity of rhymes was high on my list. “Must poems rhyme?” was one of my first questions. Like for most things, there are many different opinions on the subject and there are many good arguments for either answer. One of the difficulties of writing rhymes is that the number of rhymes that work well is not unlimited. It is possible to build verses in such a way that they will rhyme, but trying at all costs to find a rhyme can also have side effects. One of them is a feeling that the rhyme is forced. The verse then sounds a bit corny and it tends to weaken the emotional content that I would try to express. It is less of a problem for certain formats. For instance, limericks need to rhyme. They tend to be usually goofy and the rhyming reinforces the comic effect. The same thing is true for villanelles, which are a type of poem that have a musical rhythm, with a couple of

refrains. But for more serious poems, I came to the conclusion that rhyming was not an absolute necessity for the goal that I was trying to achieve. I have done my best to use rhymes as much as I could, but when I had to make a choice between having verses that rhyme or conveying emotions, I chose for the latter.

An interesting aspect of the writing of this book is that I started writing the poems in English. Although my mother tongue is French, I have been living in English-speaking Canada for a couple of decades and I use English about all the time. I wrote my previous two books in English. As I also wanted to publish this book in French, the rhyme challenge occurred twice, once in English and then again in French. Except for very rare exceptions, it is about impossible to translate literally a poem from one language to another and keep rhymes and the number of syllables per verse the same. Then, I chose to focus on passing the message and the atmosphere of the poem before aiming at a perfect translation, whatever that may mean. A positive aspect of this exercise has been a constant critical review of the English version as I found some new ideas in French, which in the end has been beneficial to both versions. The only exception is "Uprooted", a ballade that I initially wrote in French and then translated in English. The result of all this work is that it produced two books that are very similar, although slightly different. Two for the price of one, you might say. The French version is titled "Vers de Terre", which is a pun in French, vers meaning verses and also worm, so the title means both Earthworms and verses of the Earth. Only the French would find this funny, and probably not all of them, but I have no shame with silly puns.

One of the poetry formats that I particularly have enjoyed writing is the haiku, the well-known Japanese poem form that has a strict rule of having a total of 17 syllables divided in three verses of respectively 5, 7 and 5 syllables. Haikus do not necessarily have to rhyme. Altogether, I have used the following different formats: free-style, sonnet, cinquain, rondeau, haiku, limerick, villanelle and a ballade. The specific type of a poem, when applicable, is mentioned next to the title in the table of contents.

A number of the poems have their roots in personal experiences or deal with topics that are dear to me. I will let the reader figure out what and which ones. Some poems also have a specific significance to me. Writing this book has been quite exciting. It took some time. Just like wine, I had to let it rest for a while. Initially, I wrote all the poems in less than two weeks. I waited almost a year to review them. This was useful. Time had helped remove the emotional charge that I mentioned at the beginning of this preface. Thus, I could read them again with a more objective eye, which proved quite beneficial, as some of the poems needed some makeover. I also have had an educational angle in mind. Because of urbanisation, people have grown disconnected from agriculture and many myths and fantasies of all sorts are being told about food and agriculture. Perhaps, these poems could be instrumental in starting constructive conversations about food and farming, and an opportunity for the readers to do more research and realise that the topic is complex, and anything but black and white. In the current times in which polarisation and intolerance seem to prevail, this might difficult to achieve, but I can only hope a constructive and positive dialogue can be started with this book. The future will tell. It is up to us.

It may have been challenging at times, but I have had great pleasure in writing this book. I hope that you will have the same pleasure reading the poems.

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