



POETIC GEMS

SELECTED FROM THE WORKS

OF

JOHN SHELTON REED,

Poet and Tragedian,

WITH

INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

AND PORTRAIT.

"See my deep insight into Human Nature"
REED.

CHAPEL HILL

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PRICE ONE SHILLING.



POETIC GEMS

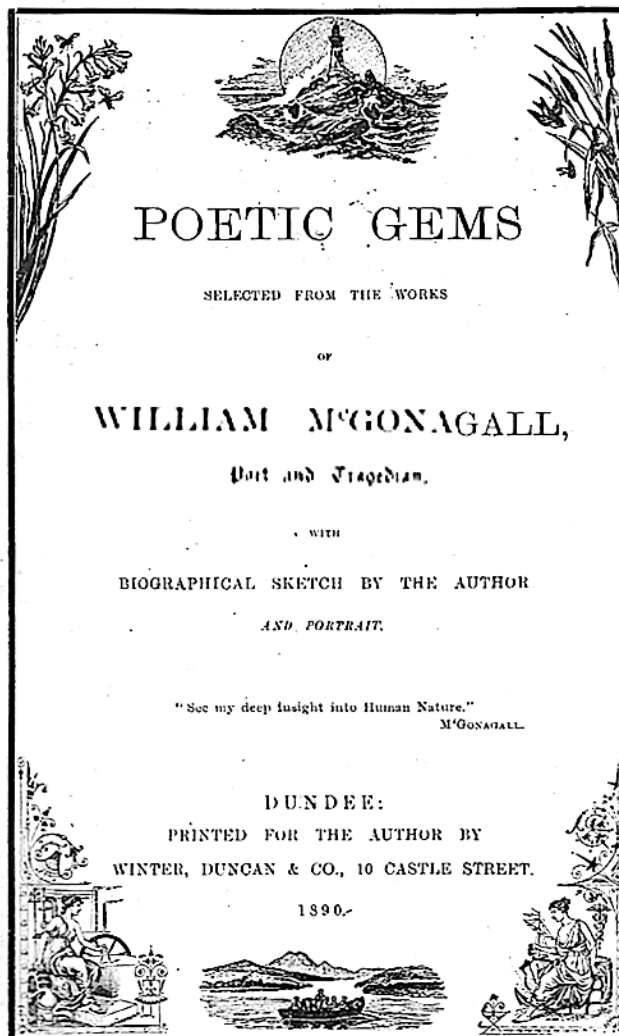
SELECTED FROM THE WORKS

OF

JOHN SHELTON REED



To the memory of
William Topaz McGonagall
Poet and Tragedian
(1825-1902)



PRICE ONE SHILLING.

INTRODUCTION

The poetic gems on offer here are of a special kind. They were written as song lyrics, and they should ideally be sung, not merely read. As you read them I hope you will sing in your imagination, if not with your actual voice.

My songwriting career began in high school and college, where I wrote a number of forgettable songs that had lyrics like these from “Julius Caesar Rock”:

Everyone said Julius was the best.

His motto was *Alea iacta est*.

What can I say? I was a tenth-grade Latin geek. Maybe it’s just as well that after college it was more than twenty-five years before I committed another song. But one day in middle age, without warning, the sentence “My tears spoiled my aim” came to me in a blinding flash of unsought revelation. I immediately recognized that this had to be the title of a country song, and once that was in place, the rest of the lyrics came easily. I’m pretty sure that I hadn’t heard Johnny Cash’s version of “Kate,” where the singer tells his murdered, cheating wife, from prison, “As sure as your name’s Kate / You put me here,” but the scene and the self-pitying sentiment are obviously much the same.

I was pleased with what I’d written, and proudly sent the lyrics off to a friend at Vanderbilt, a scholar with connections in the country-music business, asking him if he didn’t agree that it was a natural-born hit, and including the address to which my checks should be sent. Imagine my dismay when he wrote back to say that

my song was “too cerebral” for Nashville. Ouch.

Discouraged, I put the song away, although – waste not, want not – I used the title for an essay on violence in country music, and subsequently for a collection of essays. A delightful result of publishing that book is that I heard from Andrew Hudgins, a fine Southern poet who in “Reflections on Cold Harbor” had written about a Confederate soldier whose tears blurred his aim.

From time to time I dusted off the lyrics and tried unsuccessfully to set them to music. Then one day I mentioned the song to my friend, the multi-talented Tommy Edwards, who promptly showed off by sending me a tape of not just one tune but *three*: country, bluegrass, and rockabilly. Each was a gem in its own right, but the country version is my favorite and Tommy put it on one of his albums.

So in 2013 I finally became a published songsmith, if only in this modest way. That may have encouraged me to write the other songs collected here, all written in the next eight years.

One of them, “.38 Calibre Divorce,” is another song about the amusing side of domestic violence, this time from a woman’s perspective. It also started out as just a title. I once heard a Louisiana friend speak of the “.38 calibre recall” that took out Huey Long, and that phrase must have lodged in what a psychologist might call my apperceptive mass, to surface later. I may also have been influenced by what my late wife Dale said to an interviewer who asked if she’d ever considered divorce. No, Dale said – homicide, yes, but not divorce. (Billy Graham’s wife once said the same thing.)

It seems to me that borrowing, adapting, and deploying stuff from others’ cultures can be a good thing as often as a bad one,

perhaps the sincerest form of flattery, but since about 2010 “cultural appropriation” has become increasingly unacceptable in academic circles. “White privilege” emerged as a dogma and a term of abuse about the same time. “Appropriating the Blues” grew out of my displeasure with these developments. If I were still a college professor, this song might cost me my job.

The first of many times Dale and I drove from Austin to Houston, on the way home from our daughter Sarah’s place, we stopped in Elgin to pick up some of the spicy sausages known locally as hot guts and in Brenham to buy a cone at the Blue Bell Ice Cream factory. A few miles down the road the combination seemed to call for a song. The idea incubated for a few years before I wrote “Hot Guts and Ice Cream.” I fear that this celebration of Texas food may seem a little too cute coming from an out-of-stater, but if Ronald Clyde Crosby can move to Texas from Greenwich Village and become Jerry Jeff Walker – well, it looks like Texans are OK with cultural appropriation.

Yet another song that started with a title is “Cobwebs on the Woodpile.” Dale came up with this one. She and I wrote a book about barbecue called *Holy Smoke*, and she believed, as I do, that meat cooked without wood smoke, no matter how low and slow it’s cooked or what sauce you put on it, isn’t really barbecue. At the Campaign for Real Barbecue (TrueCue.org), which I helped to found and now serve as Éminence Grease, we call it “faux ‘cue,” a naughty tag that made it into the song. Dale didn’t live to see the lyrics I wrote, but her title inspired them and she deserves a writing credit.

Finally, Jerry Lee Lewis and I are both from the so-called Silent Generation (certainly an inappropriate label in his case) and he has

grown old along with the rest of us. One day I got to wondering what “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” might sound like if he wrote it today. The noun *geezer* would seem to imply a verb to *geeze*, and “Whole Lotta Geezin’ Goin’ On” is a tribute to Jerry Lee and defiant old age, written in full knowledge that any song with a title that requires a footnote isn’t going anywhere.

Speaking of old age, perhaps these lyrics aren’t “mature,” but they’re certainly products of my sunset years. The earliest was published three years after I moved to a “Continuing Care Retirement Community” that I like to call “The Home,” just to counteract the marketing cant about “active senior living.” We do a lotta geezing around here. Last year, for instance, we welcomed the New Year at 9:00 p.m. We told ourselves it was midnight in Fernando de Noronha.

But I digress, as geezers tend to do. Where was I? Oh, yes.

When I wrote these songs I was a pensioner, a triple-bypass survivor, and damn near an octogenarian, so what we have here are the opposite of juvenalia. Let’s call them *senilia*. I thought about using that word for a title, something like *Senilia: A Geezer’s Garden of Verses*. I also considered *Songs of Senescence*, *Ditties from My Dotage*, and *Cantos of Caducity*. (I do like alliteration. And I love a thesaurus.) A title calling attention to my age might have won me some sympathetic tolerance on the grounds that my writing verse is like a dog’s walking on his hind legs: It’s not done well, but you’re surprised to find it done at all. (Some will know where I stole that simile.)

In the end, though, I chose to pay tribute to my literary hero William Topaz McGonagall, author of the original *Poetic Gems*, by appropriating his title and even, as you can see, the cover of his

book. McGonagall's prolific output and serene self-confidence have been an inspiration, and this slim volume is dedicated to his memory, with gratitude and awe.

MY TEARS SPOILED MY AIM



I'm sittin' here in prison and you're out runnin' 'round.
I'd be glad to do my time if you were in the ground.
But seems like there's no justice; I'm a loser in life's game.
And all because my tears spoiled my aim.

My tears spoiled my aim, that's why you're not dead.
I blew a hole in the wall three feet above the bed.
I couldn't see where y'all were at, my tears were fallin' so.
I tried to shoot by ear, my dear, but y'all were lyin' low.

You said if I didn't like it I knew what I could do,
So I figured I'd blow you away and prob'ly waste him, too.
Send back my marksman medal: I can't stand the shame.
I missed because my tears spoiled my aim.

My tears spoiled my aim, that's why you're not dead.
I put a bullet in the sheetrock 'bout three feet above your head.
I couldn't see where y'all were at, my tears were fallin' so.
I tried to shoot by ear, ny dear, but y'all were lyin' low.

You fooled around, so naturally I tried to take your life.
Now you don't even visit me. You're such a lousy wife.
Some days things just don't work out; but, honey, just the same,
It's not fair that my tears spoiled my aim.

My tears spoiled my aim, that's why you're not dead.
I put a bullet in the wallboard instead of in your head.
They've got me doin' two-to-ten for what they call my "crime,"
But you go on and have your fun, 'cause I won't cry next time.

.38 CALIBER DIVORCE



Momma tried to warn me,
But I didn't pay no mind.
She said that man was trouble,
But love had made me blind.

The little things have added up
And jail can't be no worse.
I'm waitin' 'til the time is right
With a pistol in my purse.

He don't put down the toilet seat.
He never did hold doors.
He goes to church and falls asleep
And, what's more, he snores.

He belches and he picks his teeth,
He changes channels often,
Just sits around in his undershirt
Askin' for a coffin.

I put up with him for all this time,
But now the kids are grown.
They've finished school and moved away
And left us on our own.

Yeah, Momma had his number
And I was being dumb.
But twenty-five years later,
His time has finally come.

I don't need no lawyer,
Don't need no filing fee.
I just need a pistol
And an opportunity.

No, I don't need no paperwork,
I don't need no grounds.
All I need's my Ruger
And half a dozen rounds.

No need to adjudicate;
I got my problem-solver
Right here in my pocket book:
My .38 revolver.

He's been asking for it and
There won't be no remorse
When I get my .38
Caliber divorce.

APPROPRIATING THE BLUES



I ain't from Mississippi, I ain't from Arkansas.
No, I ain't from Mississippi, not even Arkansas.
Place I come from, man, s'whitest place you ever saw.

But when a white boy's baby leaves him, what's he gonna do?
Yeah, when his baby leaves him, what's a cracker gonna do?
I reckon I'll just help myself, 'n appropriate the blues.

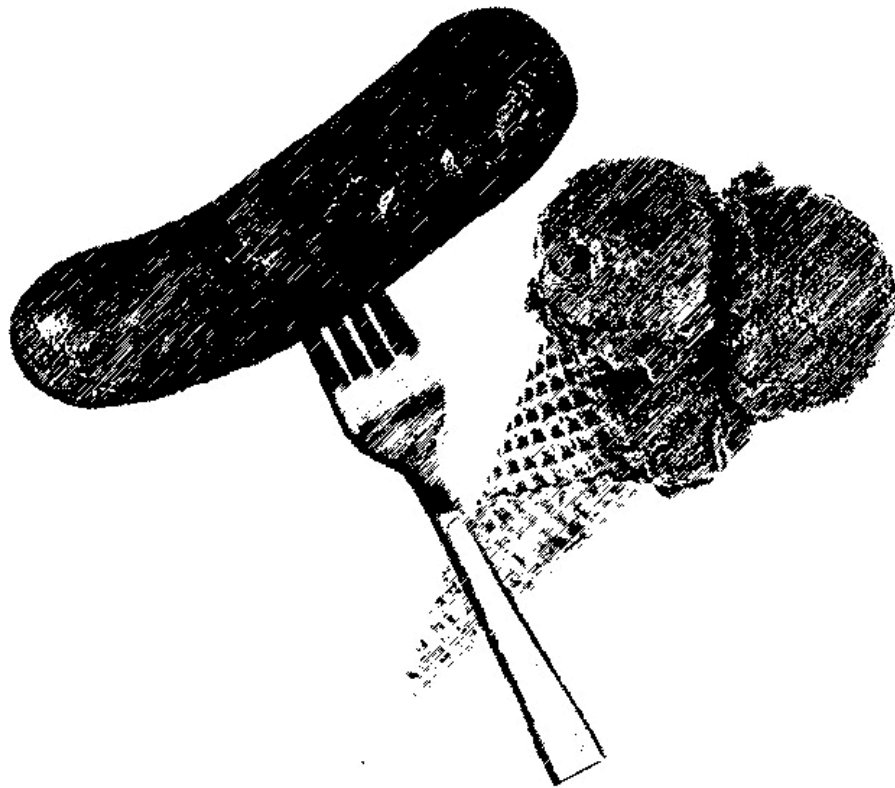
Man, I hear you sayin' that I ain't paid my dues.
Yeah, go on and tell me I ain't paid my dues.
But I got some mighty mojo I believe I'm gonna use.

I don't need no license, don't need no consent.
Don't need no permission, don't need no consent.
I'll sing 'em like I own 'em, won't even pay no rent.

Just checked out my priv'lege and, yeah, it was still there.
Checked out my ol' white priv'lege ~ sure enough, still there.
Mighty glad to see that it ain't gone nowhere.

Since my baby left me, got nothin' left to lose.
Since she up and left me, got nothin' left to lose.
So what the hell, I might as well appropriate the blues.

HOT GUTS AND ICE CREAM



Austin to Houston's a mighty long road,
But in Elgin and Brenham you can pick up a load
Of hot guts and ice cream to speed you along.
I did it once, and I'm singing this song.

Head east on 290, off I-35;
You'll soon be in Elgin, a half hour's drive.
You'll see Southside Market - it's just on your right -
You'll probably smell it as it comes into sight.

Get you some hot guts to eat in your car
While you drive on to Brenham - it's not very far.
Real Texas sausage, can't beat it for funk,
Washed down with that Shiner you keep in your trunk.

You'll hit Blue Bell Cream'ries in an hour or less
Stop and buy Blue Bell at its home address.
It's your choice of flavors, and they've got a bunch.
(I'm partial to the "Moo-lleennium Crunch.")

Hot guts for lunch, ice cream for dessert -
Puts grease on your fingers and cream on your shirt.
And you're halfway to Houston, with time to digest
And think about Texas and why we are blessed.

Hot guts and ice cream is all that you need.
Hot guts and ice cream's a mighty good feed.
Hot guts and ice cream sounds sorta surreal,
But hot guts and ice cream make a real Texas meal.

Hot guts and ice cream'll get in your blood -
Pretty soon your art'ries will fill up with crud.
But hot guts and ice cream'll make a man whole.
They're bad for the heart, but good for the soul.

COBWEBS ON THE WOODPILE



I headed out this morning on a mission
Got in my car to find some barbecue.
I saw your sign, a dancing pig, / and thought I'd take a chance.
Then I saw something really made me blue.

You've got cobwebs on the woodpile, propane tank out back.
You say you're cooking barbecue, but one big thing you lack.
Yes, cobwebs on the woodpile - it ain't real barbecue
If you're not burning wood, my friend, I've got no use for you.

Maybe you've just simply lost your way.
You have to know real barbecue takes smoke.
C'mon man, I can't believe / that you were never told
"Barbecue" with fossil fuel's a joke.

There's cobwebs on your woodpile, propane tank out back.
You say you're cooking barbecue, but there's one thing you lack.
Yes, cobwebs on the woodpile mean it's not real barbecue
If you're cooking without wood, my friend, I got no use for you.

It don't matter if you've got good cole slaw;
You'll turn me off if you turn on the gas.
I don't care to stick around / to sample your hushpuppies
It's just "faux 'cue" so I'll give you a pass

You've got cobwebs on the woodpile, propane tank out back.
I know your sign says barbecue, but there's one thing you lack.
Cobwebs on the woodpile mean it ain't real barbecue
If you ain't burning wood, my friend, you and I are through.

WHOLE LOTTA GEEZIN' GOIN' ON*



*Geezing: What a geezer does

Come on over, baby,
Whole lotta geezin' goin' on.
Yes, I said come on over, baby.
Baby, you can't go wrong.
I ain't teasin', whole lotta geezin' goin' on.

Well I said come on over baby,
Baby, I'm gettin' tremory (oooh huh).
Come on over, baby,
I'm losin' my short term memory.
It ain't pleasin', whole lotta geezin' goin' on

Well, ache baby, ache, ache, ache.
Ain't fakin', whole lot of achin' goin' on.
Ahhhhh ~ Let's go!

Well I said come on over, baby,
We got chicken in the barn.
(Whose barn? What barn? My barn?)
Come on over, baby.
(Baby, what's this about a barn?)
Why you wheezin'? Whole lotta geezin' goin' on

Easy now -

Shake.

Ahhhh, shake it, baby.

Yeah. You can shake one time for me.

I said come on over, baby,

Whole lot of shakin' goin' on.

Now let's get real low one time now.

Shake, baby, shake.

All you gotta do, honey, is hang onto your walker,

Wiggle around just a little bit.

That's what you gotta do, yeah.

Oh, babe, whole lotta shakin' goin' on.

Now let's go one more time.

Shake it, baby, shake,

Shake it, baby, shake.

Shake, baby. Come on, baby. Shake, baby, shake.

My knees are seizin', whole lot of geezin goin' on.



The Author

A NOTE ON TUNES

(The hyperlinks below were functioning as of early 2022, but in the nature of things that won't last forever.)

You can hear Tommy Edwards sing “My Tears Spoiled My Aim” to the tune he wrote for it (and play guitar, banjo, and mandolin) at johnshelton.weebly.com. (Click on “More,” then “Videos and Music,” and then scroll down to the bottom of the page.) It can also be found on Tommy’s CD “Old Songs/New Songs.”

You can probably improvise your own tune to “.38 Calibre Divorce,” starting with something like one of these:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCl8YuqHURE;

www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUoQ5J9SUhM;

www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0s8oXT0Ei8 .

“Appropriating the Blues” needs only a simple 12-bar blues backing like this: www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6aZZFnZUVk.

“Hot Guts and Ice Cream” is in, ahem, dactylic tetrameter. So is “Waltz Across Texas” (karaoke at www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJeKDMjkThc).

Just a thought.

“Cobwebs on the Woodpile” was written with the tune of “Heartaches by the Number” in mind. I think the best of several karaoke tracks is for Dwight Yoakum’s version:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rTym3dB1ec.

“Whole Lotta Geezin’ Goin’ On” obviously calls for the Killer’s piano. You’ll find that on the karaoke version of “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On,” here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=dT-holNQypA.

“My Tears Spoiled My Aim”

Lyrics by John Shelton Reed, tweaked by Tommy Edwards

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“.38 Caliber Divorce”

Lyrics by John Shelton Reed

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“Appropriating the Blues”

Lyrics by John Shelton Reed

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“Hot Guts and Ice Cream”

Lyrics by John Shelton Reed

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“Cobwebs on the Wood Pile”

Lyrics by John Shelton Reed and Dale Volberg Reed

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“Whole Lotta Geezin’ Goin’ On”

Lyrics by John Shelton Reed

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