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Donald Trump is My Muse

Tuesday, August 8, 2017, and I'm working with my publisher to get a manuscript to the printer in Ohio that turns books around in two days. We don't have a publicist. Or, rather, I'm the publicist, just like I was for the two prior books we've done. That's a trade-off of working with a small press. One big advantage is we can get a timely book out quickly. But our budget is minuscule. And for this book there's just the publisher, who does this on the side amidst other projects, and me.

Our plan is to get me books by Friday, August 18. With an official January 2018 publication date, that would give me a week to properly send out the book for review. Thursday evening, August 24, I'm to leave from near Lafayette, Louisiana for an eleven-week tour, first stop a 1,000-mile drive to a conference that begins Monday, August 28 in Columbus, Ohio. From there I drive 2,500 miles to Seattle for another conference, then jobs in Oregon, California, Nevada, back to Washington state, and Montana. On the road, it's so much tougher to mail packets like this—and if you're reading this after receiving the packet, you have an idea why. This new book is titled *Trump Sonnets, Volume 2*, and in many packets I've also stuffed *Trump Sonnets, Volume 1*, which was published six months ago.

That earlier book got in our hands the second week of January. Because the publisher was busy with other commitments and I was on tour, we couldn't even get review copies out until mid-February, just weeks before the official release. Though having the book by mid-January ultimately proved smart—amidst a range of events in a range of places, I'd never before had such an easy book to sell—we

didn't do as well with reviews. It was a challenge to even land the eight bookstore gigs we did confirm those next months. I vowed to do my next book differently.

For this, then, I found distinctive envelopes, stuck in both of the Trump collections, plus material that was part of the big mailing I recently completed for the performing arts market. I also included the national review we did receive for *Trump Sonnets, Volume 1* along with the *Austin Chronicle* preview of my July bookstore appearance, where the weekly ran my photograph and listed me as one of the week's entertainment picks.

I also decided to include this essay, which first I had to write.

It's another of the joys, and perils, of small-press publishing. When the publisher, or the author, has an idea, there's nothing stopping them but the limits of their resources.

Donald Trump is My Muse

Donald Trump, it's now nine months since you've been
elected U.S. President. Crazy,
isn't it, how you've embraced such lazy,
destructive policy, become champion
villain and freak. You embody the sins
of our age. Nine months! This is your baby,
making daily drama instead of safely
guiding a diverse, powerful nation.
This, the hundred and fortieth sonnet
I've written about you these nine months, means
I've taken you in as I would lover.
I can't stop. I won't stop. I'm in on it,
our public obsession. You're the obscene
secret. I'm the poet discoverer.

There, and I count the 71 sonnets in the first collection, the 68 in the second, and now this, written today, all in the 39 weeks since the election. That's an average of three and a half poems a week, or one every other day.

Donald Trump must be my muse, all right. What the hell happened? And what does that even

mean?

Before the 2016 presidential election, I'd read enough about Trump to feel concern as the polls tightened. The last week of October, when one outlet claimed Trump had a 10-15% chance of winning, I grew alarmed. 10-15%? From what I knew of him from the past months of casual reading, his chances should have been zero.

I spent part of Election Day at a meeting in Nashville, then drove to Bowling Green, Kentucky, where I had more meetings scheduled on Wednesday before beginning a nine-day arts and education residency there on Thursday. I watched the election returns in a lonely motel room, and went to bed dispirited. Wednesday morning, listening to the radio in the car before heading to my first appointment, I found a pen and notepad, and wrote, "You make George W. seem a statesman, your opening trick," a sentence which became the first line and a half of a sonnet I finished a few days later.

I wrote two more Donald Trump-inspired sonnets over the next weeks, then flew to Buenos Aires for ten days to see my girlfriend. My sweetheart lived in a small studio and didn't have internet access—part of our daily ritual was going to a neighborhood cafe to log on. Mornings, she liked to sleep in. I'd get up a few hours before her, sit at the breakfast table, and write three or four sonnets, some in Donald Trump's voice, others addressed to him. I left Argentina with more than 30 new poems. Combined with the handful I'd written in November, I was halfway through a book.

I spent the next days in my Louisiana office space, holed up, continuing this chance Buenos Aires project, though the sonnet-writing wasn't as fluky as it sounds. More than twenty years earlier, I'd written a series of sonnets in the voice of comedians. Some time after that I'd written sonnets about writers, then sonnets about sports. And in 2006 I'd written a whole collection of sonnets about the 43rd president, George W. Bush. But even that latter project, which was completed over the course of three months, wasn't like this. By December 21, I had enough poems for a full-length volume. The next

week, 50 days in, I pitched the project to Ridgeway Press, the Michigan publisher who'd done the Bush book, and received the go-ahead. A friend offered to format the manuscript during his time off around New Year's. The publisher and I both began looking for a printer. Everything fell into place and *Trump Sonnets Volume 1* was in my hands by the inauguration.

For a month I happily sold books at various appearances. We did especially well at AWP, a big annual gathering of writers and writing teachers that this past February was in Washington D.C.. Afterward, I finally had a short break, and the publisher and I sent books out for review. At a late February Mardi Gras party near Lafayette, Louisiana I brought a couple of dozen books, found a corner, and sold them 2-for-1 to friends there. Soon a number of strangers came by, one whispering conspiratorially, "You have something I know I want," before slipping me a twenty for two books, telling me to keep the change.

I left the party having sold all I brought.

About to leave for a mammoth four-month Western tour, I found myself once again writing a few Trump-inspired sonnets. Titling the first collection *Trump Sonnets, Volume 1* felt like a joke, but before I took off in early March, I challenged myself to finish a second collection before my early July return. Besides, many of the people I talked to wondered if I were working on a sequel, and, if so, whether I could keep up. Daily, there was something to respond to.

As I drove around the West this past spring, often working in very conservative places, I took my cues in how people responded to me.

In some conservative communities where I appeared primarily as a musician, I decided not to even display the new book with the rest of my merchandise, though was quick to mention it in one-to-one conversation if the talk veered that direction. At one public university, I was specifically asked not to mention the book at my event, which I thought was odd. At least there I made sure to display the

book at the performance, where I sold a few copies.

But every place was different and it's all part of the narrative.

In Cochise County, southeast of Tucson, I spent three days in Sierra Vista, on staff for a writers' gathering. At the Thursday night opening, the four of us visiting writers each had five minutes to read work to introduce ourselves. I began by playing a fiddle tune and reciting a poem about old-time Appalachian fiddling, then read a short poem that partly explained the workshops I'd be leading the next two days. I closed by holding up *Trump Sonnets, Volume 1*, and reading "*Trump Phoenix: Food*," a poem in the president's voice. Later, a woman came up to buy the book, said she especially enjoyed the poem, and proudly identified herself as a Trump voter.

"You're not going to like the book," I told her.

"But I really liked that poem," she said.

"It's satire," I said. "Parody. You're not going to like the book."

"But I liked the poem. I'm a writer, too. I want to buy your book."

I could tell she was set to dig in. I shrugged my shoulders, took her twenty, made change.

A week and a half later in Dillon, Montana, I was walking downtown one afternoon after visiting the local elementary school as a guest of the local Arts Council. I passed a small independent bookstore, decided to turn around, stop in, and introduce myself. My idea was that since I had a children's book and two kids' CDs, maybe the proprietor would like to stock a few. But when I saw the display of work by Montana writer, Rick Bass, I took *Trump Sonnets* from my backpack, and handed it to her. She flipped pages, then asked to see my other books.

"I have more time tomorrow," she said. "Come back, and I'll buy five of that one from you, plus two of the children's book, and two of your memoir."

I smiled. "I know it's conservative here, similar to Alaska. Something like 60%. Right?"

The bookstore owner smiled back. “It's more like 80-20. Beaverhead County. But I already know at least five people who'll probably buy this. Bring the books tomorrow, write up an invoice; I'll give you a check.”

In Spokane, my bookstore event in support of the new collection drew two dozen people on a cool Tuesday evening. The *Trump Sonnets* event had been listed in the store's monthly calendar along with a description of the new book. What I didn't know was that the preceding day the events manager, or one of the assistants, had sent an email promoting an evening of toe-tapping fiddle music plus Alaska-set poetry and storytelling with Alaska's Fiddling Poet—not a word about the new Donald Trump-inspired book .

It had been almost a decade since I'd done any kind of bookstore tour, and these dates were fill-ins amidst the paying gigs. It was new terrain for me, figuring how to publicly combine the fiddling and storytelling with the political poetry. The new material called for different pacing, different stories. So I started by playing mandolin, then fiddle, began talking, recited a music poem, then segued into the Trump material, telling stories of the past weeks in Sierra Vista and Dillon, reading a few poems from the book.

In the middle of the event, I asked if there were any questions. There were none, so I went on. At the end, I asked again if there any questions. A young man in the middle of the audience asked if I had poems that provided solutions, or at least better explained what people should be doing to confront Donald Trump.

“They're poems,” I answered. “Sonnets. Hopefully, they're read, and enjoyed so people will want to reread them and think more critically about what's going on. I don't think there's one way through this, or that a book's function is to be didactic like that. But you might like this one.”

Then I read the poem that was on one of the cards I'd placed on the seats, “To Donald Trump,

from Berkeley” which included the lines: “The way/forward is to march, shout, write every day/and night. Donald, you're the double agent/of change, so change we must. We can't be silent/before you.”

A woman then raised her hand, asked rhetorically why we couldn't at least give him a chance, and why was the country so divided. We needed a dialogue.

“Aren't we having a dialogue now?” I asked.

The woman beside her said, “Some of us here are part of the deplorables. We didn't enjoy this. We thought it was going to be something else. It was supposed to be fiddling.”

It was only then at the tail end of the program that I learned that the bookstore had sent the email announcement, and hadn't mentioned the new book. I apologized for the misunderstanding, but explained why I'd come, and said that at least I'd played a few fiddle poems, and shared a few poems set in Alaska.

The first woman who spoke then raised her hand. “He's not even taking a salary. Look at all he's doing for us. Why can't you give him a chance?”

In response, I read a last poem, one in the president's voice. Titled, “*Trump Newark: Language*” it was about emoluments, and how Trump explained that emoluments was a dumb word, part of a stupid story propagated by the failing *New York Times* because U.S. presidents had the right to do what they wanted. I'd given Donald Trump the last word, in a sense, but I couldn't help editorializing. Wasn't it obvious, I mused aloud, that he was profiting from the office in ways heretofore unseen?

That evening I sold several books and CDs, including three copies of the Trump book to a store employee who told me I should continue to do everything I could to get word out about the book.

The following week at a bookstore in Olympia, I asked the small audience, nearly all of whom had purchased the new book, what I could do to get more people at these events. One patron raised her hand, and announced I should go get myself arrested.

When I asked a similar question a day later in Seattle, about what I could do to get additional word out about this book in lieu of major national reviews, consensus was I ought to make YouTube videos of the poems, and see what happens. Maybe they'll go viral, one of the attendees said.

Recently I've uploaded eight videos to www.kenwaldman.com/trump-sonnets-volume-1 and www.kenwaldman.com/trump-sonnets-volume-2. Have they gone viral? Certainly not, and it's doubtful any of them will. But first, people have to know they exist, and I'm in process of making that happen.

A week after Seattle, at a show in Portland, Oregon, visibly enjoying myself as I randomly read one poem from the book after another, I mentioned that though most of what I'd been reading had been written five months earlier, they sounded like they could have been written yesterday. Or tomorrow. And that this writing was my process for dealing with the craziness. Reading them tonight in front of an appreciative audience felt healing, I continued.

“So we're all here as part of your therapy?” someone called from the back, and everybody laughed.

Early August at a music festival in rural West Virginia, I carried copies of the book everywhere, along with my fiddle and mandolin. One afternoon, I even had an impromptu book release at my campsite, where I played tunes with friends, displayed the book on the hood of my car, and sold a few, offering the 2-for-1 discount I liked to give friends in informal settings. As I was packing up, a guitar player, who was camping two sites down, walked by, examined the book, shook his head, said he was one of the 70% of West Virginians who voted for Trump, then mentioned it was a shame how most all of his music buddies didn't see eye-to-eye with him.

I told him about the Arizona woman who was also a Trump supporter, who heard one of my poems and decided to buy the book,

“Read me that poem then,” the guitarist said.

I read it, then looked at him to see what he thought.

“You seem like a nice enough fellow,” the guitarist said, then went into his wallet, took out a twenty. “Keep the change,” he said. “I’m a supporter of the arts.”

“Two-for-one,” I said, pocketing the cash, giving him a pair of books. “Maybe you’ll want to pass one along to one of your pals.”

He looked at me dubiously, but came up to me later in the week. “I did what you said, gave a copy to a friend. He was really appreciative. Thank you.”

Trump Sonnets, Volume 3?

I haven't started it, have no idea what direction it might take if and when I do, but it wouldn't surprise me. For now, I've written 140 poems in 39 weeks, enough for two full-length poetry collections. Donald Trump is my muse, my bogeyman, my prompt to go talk about current events, no matter what.

As I wrote earlier here, every place is different and it's all part of the narrative.

It's a narrative that will continue, whether we participate, or not.