

The Story of Me by Pam Woolway

Recently I tallied how many employers I'd worked for in the 15 years I've lived on Kauai. When I hit 16 I stopped counting. How could I have worked more jobs than years in one place?

This may be the definition of an artist: Waitress. Surveyor. Program Coordinator. Volunteer Coordinator. Editor. Journalist. Website Designer. Community Outreach Coordinator. Laundress (I wish I were joking) Waitress, again. And now, proprietor of a Poetry Swag Shop.

When Kate asked me to reflect on my story, I giggled. Then I laughed out loud. Then I poured a glass of wine and got down to the brass tacks.

Secretly, I knew I was a poet at 12.

When I was 27 my dad showed up for dinner at my house with a manilla folder that read "Pamela" in his looping script.

"I'm cleaning out my desk drawers," he said unceremoniously. "Thought you might want this."

Filed between pink elementary school progress reports, goofy school pictures and a birth certificate, were blue lined notebook pages of my earnest and sloppy poems. It would take decades before I'd speak and own the title of "poet" out loud.

I knew I would claim it the day I read "A Walk," by Rilke, and every line made me quake with recognition. I was in college and still in the closet about being a poet though.

In 2006 I returned to school for an MFA in Creative Writing. My dad's death coincided with that new beginning and in a way, christened it. Poetry was the only route through such a shocking loss. He was the guy I exchanged poems and mix tapes.

In 2014 my sister sent me an LA Times article about a gal who takes her manual typewriter to farmer's markets to type poems for people on the spot. The article hung on

a magnet to my fridge for months. Meanwhile, I searched for a manual typewriter on Kauai.

It took a year.

I went to Carol Yotsuda's art pod to pick up the relic. The Underwood is a 50 pound block of Detroit steel, has plastic forest-green keys and a long silver lever for the carriage return. The heft of it made the dream more real as I staggered 100 feet to my car, put it down, and looked at my bruised forearms with pride: deep red fissures ran their length. I couldn't have been happier.

My first night on the street with a typewriter and sign reading "Poems to order. Your topic. Your price," was truly terrifying.

I thought, "Why did I think this would be fun?"

I sat on a bench in a narrow alley by a retail store with parades of people passing by who looked at me as if I were homeless and had a tin can on the sidewalk asking for change. I guess in a way I was asking for "change."

I remember the first couple to approach me.

I asked, "Can I write you a poem?"

The woman stared unblinking. She backed away, flushed red and said, "Oh no. That's too personal."

I was so surprised. It occurred to me then what an intimate act poem making can be. I decided then the world needed poetry to be more accessible, familiar and fun.

For a year I lugged the Underwood to Kapaa Art Night the first Saturday of each month. Then four girlfriends pitched in to buy me a sexy, sleek, black Remington 5 packaged in it's own little case. It weighs in at a svelte 12 pounds.

With the collaborative and creative spirit of my dog walking gal pals, we devised an accurate and fun description of me and my poem making. First we came up with the waitress guest check as the perfect medium for my poems. Then came my name: The Short Order Poet.

Today my sign reads "Short Order Poems: Your topic. Your price."

There are two rules that govern the process though. One is no backstory on the word or phrase offered, and the second is the recipient read what I wrote aloud back to me. This is the sweetest part: their voice and my words.

Eighteen months of typing poems to order, and still working as a waitress and a coordinator, I realize the poems have legs that want to stretch further. This month I launch my Etsy SoPoet Swag shop of books, cards and placards. My goal is to be my own boss and leave both my other jobs. Stay tuned and visit me at one of my virtual venues, or drop by when you find yourself on the island of Kauai.