Roses slowly fade
marriage is oft fleeting
but her annual poetry
sets his heart beating

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Every Valentine’s Day for nearly 60 years, Phyllis Gottlieb has found a poetic way to tell her husband, Calvin, she loves him.

The collection, which Calvin “squirreled away” over the decades, includes at least 60 poems written on scrolls, by typewriter, some even scribbled on the back of grocery lists. One is written like a bank statement: “Here’s my annual accounting of my love for you.”

Another is the lyrics to a song, “Valentine Cowboy.”

“It’s been a lot of fun, in her writing them and me getting them,” said Calvin, 87, a professor emeritus in computer science at the University of Toronto.

“It’s a little too cute,” said Phyllis, 81, going through some of the poems, which include sonnets, haiku, limericks and ballads.

One of the poems is receiving a more public viewing this Valentine’s Day after it caught the attention of U of T English professor Ian Lancashire. A decade ago, he started a project to create a poetry database online. He happened across a poem Phyllis had written to Calvin in 1969, called “First Person Demonstrative,” while editing a collection of poems she was trying to get published. He liked it so much he decided to add it to his Valentine’s Day edition of the database.

“Initially, I didn’t expect these to be any more than dashed-off verses, just private things I wrote,” said Phyllis, a science fiction writer and poet.

But her poem resonated with Lancashire and he decided to feature it on the website. “I thought hers was the most honest, heart-rending and human of the love poems that I have read. It thought it was complex because it captured the flyness, the delight and the long feeling of a marriage that has gone on for 20 years.”

The first verse begins like few other love poems: “I’d rather have half a brick than say I love you, though I do. I’d rather crawl in a hole than call you darling, though you are. I’d rather wrench off an arm than hug you though it’s what I long to do. I’d rather gather a posy of poison ivy than ask if you love me.”

“It’s a love poem that is not sentimental,” said Calvin, adding it exemplifies their relationship.

Phyllis wrote her first poem to him a few years after they got married in 1949 — not out of love, but desperation. “I was having a very dry period with my poetry,” she said. “I wasn’t producing anything.”

Except her poems to him. As the drought grew longer, she suggested she dabble in a different genre. Being a scientist, he encouraged her to try science fiction.

After she started writing science fiction, the poetry came back.

Regrettably, Phyllis said, she still hasn’t come up with a poem for this Valentine’s Day. “If I can’t write one this year, maybe he should look over his old ones.”

But Calvin is thinking beyond that. “If she lets me, I want to make a compilation out of these poems. I don’t mind sharing some of our love with the rest of the world.”