

MEMORIAL DAY



A Selection of Poems by Tom Romeo

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THE EXTENT OF MY ART

I don't sing like an angel
Or play like a saint

And the things that I write?
Well, Shakespeare it ain't

But I can open my heart
and let the love shine through.

That's the extent of my art.
But hell, it'll do. ♦

FIRST DATE

Much of the evening is spent
taking inventory
making lists
exchanging "love résumés"

It's said the devil's in the details -
though some are convinced it's God

HE
hums along to the music of her voice
as she shares dreams
and disappointment...

Realizing he's been staring
at her breasts,
he quickly shifts his gaze -
hoping she hasn't noticed.

SHE
laughs at his jokes,
even the lame ones that limp
their way to the punch line,

and tries to focus on his life story
but is distracted
by restaurant Muzak -
"The Sounds of Silence" in Mandarin.

Finally, their eyes make the connection
that words could not.

Blue water caressing golden sand,
they stroll along that shoreline
until "Good night,"
a sweet kiss
and "We must
do this again." ♦



WHY IT DIDN'T LAST

I made the mistake
of giving you an answer
when you asked
if your eggplant parmigiana
tasted as good
as my mother's. ♦

LOOK AT ME

"What, brown?"

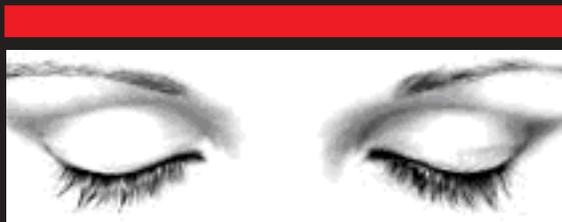
That's what you said
when I told you
I loved the color of your eyes.
You smiled shyly
and buried your face
in my chest
hiding them from my gaze
as if afraid of their power.

"Look at me," I said.

You took your time,
slowly lifted your shining face,
and traced a golden path from my heart
to where our eyes would have met
if you had not locked yours shut.

"Look at me."

You opened them carefully,
and I found myself
lost in their chestnut darkness. ♦



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Crossing the bridge
between New Hope
and where you live
in Lambertville

Hundreds of spiders
make their homes
in diamond-shaped spaces
formed by a web of iron

While in the halo of last light
winged insects
caught in warm currents
rising from the river
avoid the dark solid
supports of the bridge
by heading intentionally
into the soft receding glow
of perceived safety
between

As light sinks
lower into the horizon
we weave desire and expectation
into a temporary shelter.

And caught in heat
of a different kind,
sing an off-key "Harvest Moon" -
following intention and our
lengthening shadows
to where we attempt to satisfy
our own desperate hunger

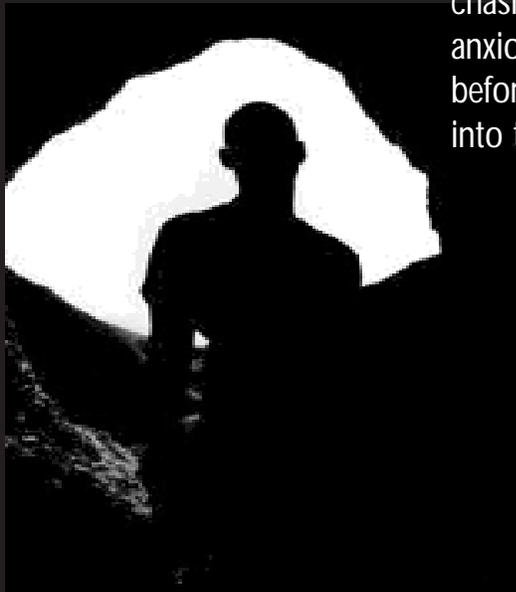
Leaving the spiders
to wait patiently
for their dinner. ♦



CAVE DWELLER

As I watch you sit
in the dark
in the cave
where you dwell,
while you entertain yourself
watching the shadows
cast by the fire
of my loving attention
dance on the walls and ceiling
and build a philosophy
upon how they intertwine
creating various
shades of black,

It occurs to me
that I could spend
my entire life
waiting for you
to see the light,
and still you would
close your eyes tight
to shut it out. ▲



It occurs to me
that as I waited
for you to turn
and discover the source
of the glow
that gives life to
your projections,
my eyes had adjusted
to the dark
and I had called it
enlightenment.

It occurs to me
that perhaps you
are a shadow
of my projection

So I turn
and see
the sun
setting
and run
chasing it's glow
anxious to reach it
before my world falls
into total darkness. ◆

REST IN PEACE

You have a way of
sneaking up on me
without warning
a silent hands-over-the-eyes
"Guess who?"
that brings back a hint of
what was

A taste of salt-touched sweetness
an echo of twilight whispers
a familiar tingle in a hand
which once found a home
in the small of your back

Phantom sensations of an amputated love
I had hoped sufficiently mourned
and safely entombed

I'd prefer to leave
these memories buried
headstone neglected and overgrown
an absolving blessing
having put them
to final rest ▶

But here they come again
the hounds of hell let loose
tails wagging
wet tongues flapping
begging me to join them
in some demented game of fetch

They overtake me
these unleashed memories of you
and carry me back
into the black underground
where I struggle to dig my way out

To escape the darkness
before I give in to its
comfortable familiarity
and come to rest in melancholy ◆



HOUSEWORK

When it came time to clean the house
I'd grab bucket, broom and garbage bags
while you'd break out furniture polish and rags.

In an hour and a half, I'd sweep
through half the house
picking up dirty clothes,
old newspapers, books and toys
putting them in their proper place,
while you worked diligently
making sure the coffee table gleamed
dust-free with a mirror-like finish.

When I would point with pride
to the uncluttered, ordered, neatness I had made,
you would run your finger through the dust
to show me what I had missed.

When you proudly revealed the sparkling gem
you created from mahogany and wax,
I'd comically trip over the mess of paper and boxes
scattered around you on the floor,

and we would laugh. ◀

Neither of us liked housework.
We both had a high tolerance
for dirt and mess and clutter.

But, when the urge struck,
you would spend your time creating
one small, shining corner of perfection
while I used my energy to put things
in order.

You ignored the huge mess
that was building up around us,
I missed too many important details,
and so, we no longer do housework
together.

But, every so often, I find myself
on my knees working diligently
with wood and wax
staring into a perfect, shining surface
of my own creation,

I see your reflection
and laugh. ◆





**IN HER IMAGE
AND LIKENESS**

At last
suffering makes sense:
It's the pain
of giving birth
to myself. ♦

Do not go gentle into that good night
Dylan Thomas

into that good night?

white capped
on the corner
cruel light crust
dries in coarse skin folds
deaf
dumb
on the corner

empty plate outstretched
into that good night.

alone
fate soled
holy shoes
won't bring home
no matter how many times
he clicks his heels

he walks barefoot
into that good night. ◀

white night
consumed
by dragons
by fiery sneeze
enraged he runs
arms outstretched
blinded
by bright sun

demanding to be taken
into that good night.

day wake
he snores coarsely
rattles in bright sleep
"Age! Age!" he moans
in the dying of the light

and dreams his way
into that good night. ◆



HOW BEAUTIFUL THE FLOWERS HAVE GROWN

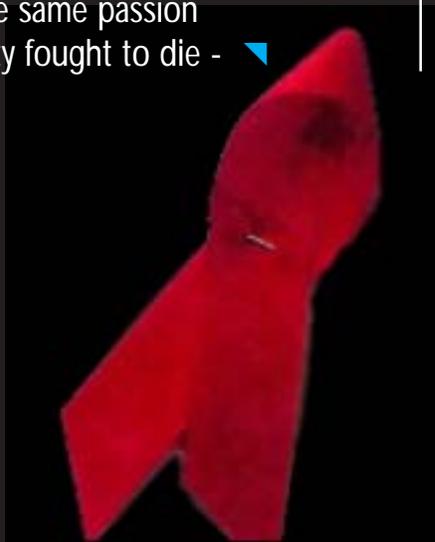
in memory of Dorothy Iken-Mendler

Dotty died
in gray spring
before the flowers bloomed.

Her body had frayed and faded
like the once bright red ribbon
she wore as a badge of defiance,
which now lies tattered and pale
in the bottom of her sister Mary's
dresser drawer.

She had tried to fall
in autumn
like the leaves -
to float down
on a final breath of wind
awash in color of her own choosing -
blood red and bright yellow,
but Mary wouldn't let her.

She glimpsed a hint
of vibrant green
and remembered a time
filled with summer light and heat,
and so, fought for life
with the same passion
as Dotty fought to die -



falling with her
to the cold kitchen tile
where wine pooled red
and yellow pills scattered
like frightened roaches
running frantically across the floor
toward the safety of shadows.

Dotty struggled to follow them
to her own sanctuary of darkness
but Mary would not let go
and held her sister tight
until restraint softened to cradle,
and they rocked together
into a mysterious sleep.

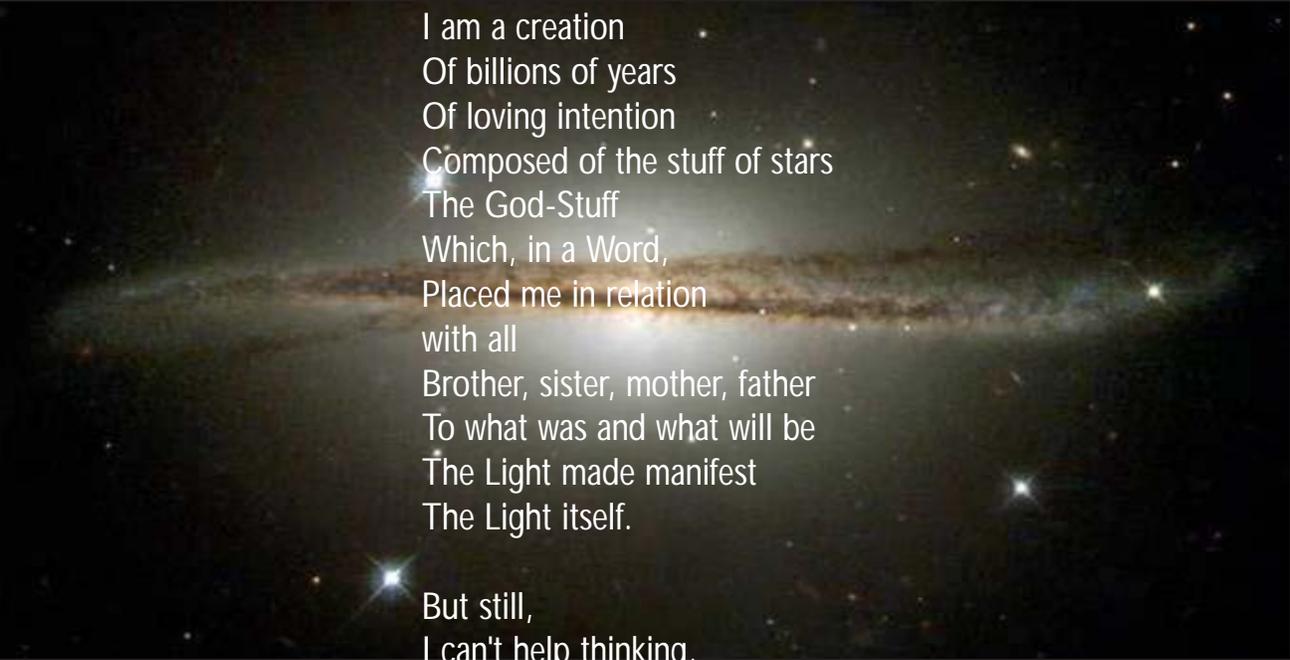
Throughout the winter
they walked in dreamtime
saying their goodbyes
giving their blessings
and planting seeds of color
as a remembrance.

Dotty died
in gray spring.
How beautiful the flowers
have grown. ♦

MEMORIAL

Where the darkness of your passing
Is met by the light of remembrance
I see your Spirit
Dancing in the shadows. ♦

AND?



I know
I am a creation
Of billions of years
Of loving intention
Composed of the stuff of stars
The God-Stuff
Which, in a Word,
Placed me in relation
with all
Brother, sister, mother, father
To what was and what will be
The Light made manifest
The Light itself.

But still,
I can't help thinking,
"Is that all there is?" ♦

DOPPLER EFFECT

(after fundamentalism)

I long for
black
white
pure tones
simple explanations

constancy.

But there are no constants to the speed of life
where simple melody is distorted
in a chorus of dissonant voices
and white light is shattered
into a confusion of color
that shifts towards red
as it escapes
my understanding. ♦



QUANTUM LEAP

How polite
the particle of light.
It waves
as it goes by. ♦

THE PASSION

I am not
your poor, sweet,
crucified Jesus
painted on velvet
whose eyes follow
wherever you
decide to move
testing to see if you can
escape his sorrowful gaze.

I am not
the Jesus you created
in your own image and likeness
who changed water into wine
because His mother asked it of Him.
sweet little Jesus
meek and mild
who, now broken and bloody,
bitterly wears disappointment
as a crown of thorns,
and looks for someone to blame
just so he can forgive them.

I am
Jesus raging
in the temple
purging the house of God
of those who would dare defile it.

I am
Jesus who cursed
the fig tree
when it refused to give
what it was asked. ▲

I turn the other cheek
when struck
to show you I can take
whatever insult
you can dish out
and still stand my ground.

Tear me down
and in three days
I'll be back
Transforming the laws
of man and nature.
healing the sick
raising the dead
and putting into question
all you believe.

I am,
like you,
a child of God
and endure the cross
because it is my job
nothing more or less
sacred than that.

I can't
I won't
carry your cross.

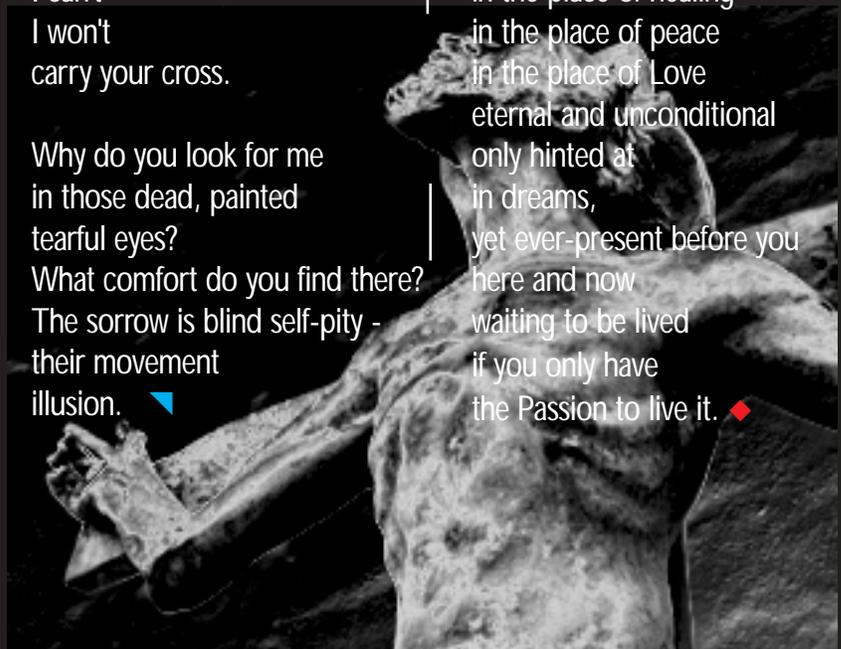
Why do you look for me
in those dead, painted
tearful eyes?
What comfort do you find there?
The sorrow is blind self-pity -
their movement
illusion. ▲

They see nothing.
They can neither blame
nor forgive.

Let the dead bury the dead.
Take up your cross
and follow your own path.
It is there you will find me.

Where I am
beside you
as you hang in agony
crying out to
the God
whom you trusted
the God
who abandoned you
the God
who led you
to the suffering
you now endure.

I promise you
Resurrection;
A seat beside me
in the place of healing
in the place of peace
in the place of Love
eternal and unconditional
only hinted at
in dreams,
yet ever-present before you
here and now
waiting to be lived
if you only have
the Passion to live it. ◆



DARKNESS

Without the darkness,
What joy
Would there be
In taking ourselves
lightly? ♦





SARA NEWBORN

Ten toes the size of peanuts
newly released from their shell
The smell of dew-basted sweetgrass
baking in the sun
The unexpected texture of peach fuzz skin
basket-warmed, ripened soft
An often-whispered prayer answered
by the cry of a new voice testing
Resting in my grateful arms. ◆

DANIELLE AT 5

A flash of energy bursts
through the door
Dances on piano
ceiling and floor
Brightens the room;
with radiant delight
With a parting wave
disappears from sight.
Love at the speed of light. ◆



WHY I LOVE R & B

Nuggy and Snakehead
played basement R&B
in the winter of '65
while I sat on the couch
still small enough to be
"He's so cute!" to the girls.

Surrounded by beehives, ponytails
and the sweet smell of Prell and Ivory Soap,
I was 99 and 44/100 percent pure
but old enough to feel the energy
of moist teenage heat
and my own near-adolescent temperature rise.

I watched the "Change in Time"
all stovepipe chino'd and pointy-booted
play "Midnight Hour"
bearing too-cool poses
betrayed by awkward timing and
faux soul phrasing.

Artistry was not their intent.
They wielded guitars like pool cues
banking desire off the knotty pine and linoleum
trying to find magic in three chords
that would help them sink the 9 ball
into pockets other than their own. ◀

Sweat poured down Nuggy's strained face
as he nearly swallowed the mic singing
"...that's when my love..."

The cheap PA distorted the words
into rhythmic grunts.

Snakehead played a clumsy lick
squeezing out what passion he could,

While all around me
the girls giggled and swayed
shooting back hot sighs
and knowing looks
through pouty red lips and
half-closed aquamarine eyelids.

Suddenly, I was grabbed by the hand,
led to the only free square foot
left in that small basement room,
and spun round and round
caught in some ancient ritual
that left me reeling
in dizzying ecstasy
and unselfconscious delight.

Is it any wonder
I love Rhythm and Blues? ♦



MEMORIAL DAY for my Father

Once, when I was 10
and you were off fighting
in the corporate wars
that took you from me
the way the war in Europe and Asia
took you from your parents,
I went looking for you
in bedroom closets
and dresser drawers
that smelled
of Aqua Velva and Ben Gay.

I found a leather-covered box
in your nightstand
buried carelessly
beneath white handkerchiefs
and cancelled checks
- a miniature chest
I hoped held hidden treasure
or at least a map
that would lead to you.

So carefully I opened that box...

Inside, laid ceremoniously
on maroon velvet,
was treasure -
ribbon, metal and memories -
proud symbols of bravery and honor

(My father?) ▲

I didn't notice
you in the doorway
hat and briefcase in hand
or hear your footsteps as
you walked slowly over to where
I knelt in awe.
You slowly bent down
took the box
from my small hands
closed it
then, just for a moment,
cradled it in yours
rubbing the leather top
with your thumbs.

You smiled an odd smile
and said:
"Every day since '45
I've been living on borrowed time,"
then put the box back in the drawer.

Continued



MEMORIAL DAY (cont'd)

You once told me a story
about a visit
to your father -
You were an officer,
a decorated pilot
home from the war
returning to the house
in Bensonhurst
in a shiny black limousine.
He barely shook your hand.
He said nothing
about your achievements -
no words of pride or affection.
He left you alone
to stare out the window
at the empty limo.

"I know he loved me," you said.
"I know he loved me."

"I loved flying,"
you told me,
"and still dream
of being at the controls."

When I said I too
would like to learn to fly,
you took time
I never knew you had
to teach me about air speed,
altitude and attitude.

We studied charts
with well worn tools.
You helped me learn
how to navigate
a safe course
away from home. ◀

"Your mother thought
it was too dangerous.
So I gave it up."

(Every day on borrowed time.)

For years, I felt sad for you -
a pilot grounded
by job and family,
wife and children.
Me.

But today,
with your family
surrounding you
at the dinner table,
a different son asks
about sadness and regret -
and again that smile.
"None. Not one," you say.
"I figure everyday since '45
I've been living on borrowed time."

Our visit over,
we share a full-bodied
Technicolor hug
made awkward by the dance we do
to keep your hearing aid from
squealing.

Over your shoulder,
I see you in 8x10 black and white -
younger than I am now -
wearing dress uniform and
flyboy smile.

I know you love me.
I know you love me.
And still dream of flying. ◆

THIGHS AND WHISKERS

I carry the weight of the world
in my thighs

Tree trunk round
redwood thick
roots planted
firmly
in the air

In the summer,
when I walk,
they chafe and sweat
and make a sound like
branches laughing in the wind.

In the winter
I long to rub them
against another

To spark the fire
of passion with a
sandy-haired woman
with thighs like birch

To plant the tendrils
of my heart
deep in
the musky, fertile,
moistness of her soul,
and nourish myself ◀

Carved in their flesh
are the memories of those
who stopped for a while
made an impression
and then moved on
leaving much more
than just initials
embraced in an open heart.

When, at long last,
they are cut down
and ready
to be thrown
into the fire
examine them
closely

Count the rings
and see
just how long
and how well
I have lived. ◆



A DAY OF GRACE

I will frame this day
and hang it on a wall
near a window
where it will catch
the morning's glow

Then when I come upon it
after a long dark night,
I can borrow its light
until the sun rises in me. ♦

