

# Scribbler

This issue is dedicated to the memory and work of Tom Quontamatteo,  
November 9, 1944 - September 18, 2012.

APRIL 2013

ISSUE 75

## Remembering Tom

I first met Tom Quontamatteo in a poetry writing workshop in Clive Matson's living room, probably around 1990. As I knew him, Tom was soft-spoken, slow-talking, relentlessly even-keeled but often with a wry grin on his lips or a smoky chuckle. Yet week after week he would bring in another short, sharp, exactly observed masterpiece of lyric poetry, often drawn from his life and experience, winnowed down through a moment of clarity. Many of these pieces were a single, tightly coiled sentence. They made me think of 3 am at the kitchen table, when it's so quiet that you can hear the refrigerator's motor kicking in.

Tom and I spent numerous evenings at poetry readings or potlucks or having a drink at the Rite Spot bar on Folsom Street. Gradually I learned about his years in the Peace Corps in Iran and the uniquely filtered world view they gave him; his star turn as catcher for the University of California baseball team; his beloved daughter Frannie; and his struggles with mental illness, primarily bipolar disorder, which occasionally went spinning wildly out of control, even landing him in institutions.

His mental illness often provided a context for his poems, which dissected and mapped the territory where the pendulum had swung him. I know he crafted these poems in longhand, line by sculpted line, draft after draft, often sitting on the deck of his apartment at the Emeryville Marina overlooking the twilight bay or over coffee and cigarettes and coy glances at the waitresses at Lyon's restaurant.

A book of Tom's mostly short lyric poems, *Emptiness that Plays so Rough*, was published in 1995 by Gail Ford and Broken Shadow Publications. A box of books from that press run sitting in the closet at Clive's house deserves to get into the hands of a new generation of poets. The Bay Area poetry community, by and large, never really got Tom or gave him the credit he deserved. He wasn't a forceful advocate for his own talent, but he told me of the frustrations of taking classes from prominent local poets who could not get their hands around his sharp words.

Tom died on September 18, 2012, after a number of years at an assisted living facility in Hayward. His parents had passed on in recent years but he is survived by his sister Lois Hart and his daughter Francesca Galliot of Nice, France. There is an intention to hold a memorial for Tom this summer. In the meantime, enjoy this special issue of Scribbler, with some of Tom's poems, from his book and others, as well as reminiscences by Clive Matson, who rues the loss, the unfulfilled promise and the lack of recognition for Tom's talent; by his publisher, Gail Ford; by poet Judy Wells, who attended Alhambra High School with Tom; and by Sally Bolger, who never met him but encountered the powerful residue of his memory on a hiking trail.

When I contemplate Tom's life, work and illness, it occurs to me that mental illness can be considered in terms of how it gets between people and reality – blocking, obscuring and distorting our perspectives and our relationship with the world. But in Tom's poetry I see a painstaking, determined insistence on breaking through the distortion to view life clearly, candidly, heartbreakingly – and real to a breathtaking degree.

-- Larry Beresford, April 04, 2013

Tom Quontamatteo's obituary was published in the *Contra Costa Times* on October 4, 2012 at: <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/contracosta-times/obituary.aspx?pid=160252080#fbLoggedOut>. There is also an online memory book at: <http://www.legacy.com/guestbooks/contracostatimes/guestbook.aspx?n=thomas-quontamatteo&pid=160252080&page=2> with contributions from some of his Martinez friends.

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**WRITING EXCURSIONS: SEE PAGE 8**

For more information about any workshop, visit matsonpoet.com or phone 510-654-6495. To register (unless otherwise noted), phone 510-654-6495 or email clive@matsonpoet.com.

**SCHEDULE AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**POETRY SALOON (dunk on poetry!)**

Meets at 472 44th Street, Oakland, the second Friday of the month. Potluck at 6pm, reading at 7:30pm. Bring poems or prose by you and others to share, or come just to enjoy. Hosted by Kayla Sussell.  
April 12, May 10, June 14, July 12

**CRAZY CHILD WRITING WORKSHOPS (fee: \$80)**

Saturdays, 10am - 5pm, once a month  
April 6 in Bolinas  
May 4 in Middletown  
June 8 in San Rafael  
July 13 in Oakland

**EXPLORING YOUR CREATIVE WRITING POTENTIAL"**

(10-week class, to register, 510-642-4111, EDP 055145, fee: \$525) University of California at Berkeley campus  
Tuesdays 6:30 to 9:30pm, starts June 4, ends August 27

**10-WEEK WORKSHOP** poetry, prose, plays, nonfiction (fee: \$400), Wednesdays, 7pm - 10pm, Temescal District, Oakland. Current series ends May 22  
Next sessions start June 5, end August 28

**NOVEL AND CREATIVE NONFICTION WORKSHOPS (fee: \$400 for ten sessions)**

Two ongoing, intensive workshops meet for three hours every other Monday in the East Bay and Marin. Writers bring ten pages to each session. Limited to five writers.

**THE NOVEL'S ARC (fee: \$500 for four sessions)**

In this workshop four novelists commit to reading each other's novels and examining how the novel works as a whole. We'll devote a two-hour session to each novel. Current sessions end June 28, next sessions start in July, dates to be arranged.

**HARBIN WRITING SEMINAR (fee: \$325, \$225 for Harbin residents, \$50 early registration discount, dormitory lodging and five catered meals)**

Fri., May 17, 6pm, to Sun., May 19, 4pm  
Harbin Hot Springs, Middletown, CA 95461  
(To register, contact Elaine Watt  
707-987-2339x72 or accounting@harbin.org)

**LAKE COUNTY WORKSHOP (fee: \$55)**

"Let the Crazy Child Write!"  
Sat., Sept. 7, 4 to 6pm, and Sun., Sept. 8, 10am to 5pm  
Lake County Arts Council Gallery  
235 Main Street, Lakeport, CA 95453  
(To register, 707-263-6658)

## Poems by Tom Quontamatteo

### Stillness

A summer moon  
hanging  
full and white...  
for a moment  
in the brow  
she is there  
alive, curious.  
How many eons ago?

### Silence

Silence  
past the  
time  
for silence.  
I make no  
gestures  
toward reality.  
In the stillness  
I watch  
and  
wait  
until  
the wind  
moves gently  
through the tree  
outside my window  
and then once again  
silence.

### Rendezvous

Only the fog  
seeping  
through  
the trees,  
the houses  
and me  
laughing at myself,  
the shadows  
playing at being alive.  
Where were you tonight?  
I waited for you on the wet streets.

### 1964: Samsara: First Sightings

That summer while I was in the mountains  
I received only one letter from you  
postmarked Thessalonica. It was August.  
You were distant and indifferent  
on your way to Istanbul.  
Without knowing it you were crossing  
an imaginary boundary in my mind.  
You mentioned that you were traveling  
with some foreign students who were, I quote,  
"making me realize things about myself that  
were previously unimaginable." You didn't elaborate.  
I envisioned you riding toward the border  
in a rundown bus, down a dusty road,  
in the arms of a Parisian student  
who was having his way with you, touching you.  
What had been only veiled premonitions of you in this  
light became vivid realities to me.  
Then there was a picture of you with the student in the Istanbul  
bazaar pricing suede, wearing sandals and a scarf around  
your neck, you laughed at me. The week after I received  
your letter I read of a bus crash near Izmir.  
My brain began to overload, slip off into unimaginable  
visions of a mangled bus off a mountain road.  
I felt the strange and conflicting sensations of worry  
and foolishness. For days there was a queer uneasiness  
inside me. The air was full of other disturbing imagery.  
That weekend I made love with Victoria for the first time.  
Until then I had been celibate as you and I had agreed upon.  
She restored the balance I needed to recover from your  
letter and the suspicion that you had betrayed me. All of  
my co-workers knew about my situation and thought me  
a fool to agree to such an arrangement.  
When I picked you up at the airport you were a stranger.  
More worldly, confident, and indifferent to me and what I  
had to offer you...

### **Spats**

Last night you and I were  
"two hands clapping"  
above the hollow  
street drums beating  
separate rhythms,  
in the heart of the wilderness  
end of the century  
urban madness.  
Only the street lights followed you home  
to the only-ness  
of your beauty,  
to the loneliness of your rooms.

I went home weaning  
myself from the warmth of new love  
thinking our time  
well spent for a seasonal event,  
a winter love, perhaps.  
Let's make the most of  
what little time our schedules  
leave us. Let's play it out, as if both  
of us can afford to get hurt.

### **Earthbound**

This dream we live with  
these songs of love  
full of wet incarnations  
crying out of the silent grass  
like martyrs from a distant moon  
who feel the world prey on stillness  
in the center of our minds  
where fear  
lingers like a virus  
calculating the survival of despair.

### **Twilight Muse**

Perhaps tonight the purple shade  
and the finality of silence  
without a thought  
to disturb the balance  
of reality  
from itself;  
where no voices  
speak the language  
of these colors

as they quietly unfold  
one from the other  
as if holding on to  
a promise of return.

### **Light in the Doorway**

Billy blue eyes  
was a light  
in my doorway  
smiling, on the bum,  
laughing at me in my green chair  
then disappearing  
out the door.  
I didn't get up  
with all his smiling.

Where was I headed?  
I didn't know. How long  
had I been sitting in my green chair  
when Gladys and baby  
Francesca came home? I didn't know.  
Franny ran up to me yelling  
"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy."  
We were dancing partners, you know,  
First in all my prayers.  
"Franny, Franny, Franny."  
Where have you been?  
Did you see ol' Billy Boy?

### **Almost Like Dancers**

I remember the high lakes,  
the sweet smell of summer rain  
on scrub oak and gravel roads,  
the scattered ranch houses,  
music mingling in the darkness  
with television sets  
glowing in front rooms  
like giant fireflies.

Stealing out of my house late at night  
I met friends in the hills.  
We would smoke and drink whiskey  
while the moon flew by  
lighting up the pastures,  
the horses making love,  
almost like dancers.

### The Moon Used to Tell You Tales

It took you forty years to get over his anger.  
To shake the sarcasm you couldn't see.  
Honor thy father  
and the daylight  
he stole from you.  
Now you learn to be your own father  
discover new bread and wine,  
new poetry,  
and your own sense of apocalypse.  
You will always be a partisan of his war,  
but now you can recognize  
the language resonating within you  
while nothing but time passes between heartbeats  
beneath cold stupefied moons.



### Hiking with Tom

Together on the mountain  
parchment and flesh  
we take this climb  
commanded by the sorrow  
in your friend's voice  
for your death unnecessary and un-timed

Would it comfort him to know  
that your words are still beating?  
Stop me  
breathless  
underneath the redwood tree?

Their compassion  
flooding my chest  
flowing over my feet  
seeping into the creek  
nourishing the forest

Would it comfort him  
that we follow a trail  
marked by crow feathers  
downy and pinioned alike  
signing the way at every turning?

No blood  
no innuendo of struggle  
just gift upon gift  
from the messenger of creation  
the omen of change

Until we come to a carpet of feathers  
at the edge of the chaparral  
a shrine  
all that was left behind  
when our guide crossed to the other side  
to join you on your journey

-- Sally Bolger



### How Precious the Smallest Gesture

I love Tom, I use the present tense  
intentionally.

I realize that the quality of my memories of  
him is different from my memories of others who  
have died without ever having poetry. It's such an  
intimate gift that Tom shared with us in life, and by  
doing so, he took on stature and grew in spirit, then,  
that continues to have tangible substance now.  
Reading his poems again, I have a felt sense of the  
man.

He felt deeply. He teaches that pain and  
beauty are forever at war and in play. He reminds us  
of how hard life can be, and how precious are the  
smallest gestures, slants of light, occasional moments  
of tenderness. Even our wanting is itself turned holy.

His poems are full of music and sadness and  
the yearning of a mystic reaching with every part of  
himself for that something that would make all going  
wrong come right.

I miss Tom. And I'm so grateful that he  
spoke for us. And speaks for us still.

-- Gail Ford

## For Tom Quontamatteo

“Almost like dancers,” completes Tom Quontamatteo’s description of horses mating in the fields at dusk. If he’d used a metaphor, that would color the horses in our minds. If he’d written “like dancers” we’d miss their essential quality, their horseness. They’re energetic and graceful in ways that are difficult to articulate, but we’ve all seen them, and “almost” frees our imagination to remember their full beauty and mystery.

Every poem shows this precise attention to the world, to his psyche, and to exactly what his words accomplish. “A full moon inflated over the eastern hills.” “Sirens wail in the distance like insects in search of a fix. “In the back of old Chevys still going straight in the hot redneck wind.” And “The telephone rings a few times before I take notice of it” concludes the title poem of his book, *Emptiness That Plays So Rough*. Quontamatteo presents the situation and his mind in a way that holds the essence of both....

Clive Matson's blog continues at: <http://matsonpoet.com>



## Some Thoughts about Tom Quontamatteo, Poet

On August 18, 1995, Tom wrote a lengthy note in bright red ink in my copy of his newly published poetry book, *Emptiness That Plays So Rough*:

“I hope you enjoy this book and that there is something in it for you. Most of it was written in the late 80’s and early 90’s when I was lonely, confused but creatively active. It seems my struggles with psychosis gave me a temporary edge on imagery and the like. Since then I have enjoyed the relief provided me by the pharmaceutical industry (Risperdal) and look forward to a life of stability and relative clarity (but in metaphors). I hope these insights don’t upset you too much.”

They didn’t. As a member of the Bay Area poetry community for years, filled with many who have struggled with anxiety, depression, bipolar

disorder, and schizophrenia, I was not upset by Tom’s revelations. What I did consider astonishing was Tom’s wonderful lyric talent in *Emptiness*. And what is most memorable from my first reading was that he was able to capture our small town Martinez in a poem: “Housekeeping in Alhambra Valley.” In the last stanza, from his perch on top of a hill, Tom writes:

To the north, in brilliant sunlight,  
an oil refinery  
smokes through  
its wonderland of pipes.

I attended Alhambra Union High School in Martinez with Tom from 1958 to 1962. Then, it was a town of 10,000, Contra Costa’s county seat filled with government offices, a court house, a jail, and a raft of lawyers, but basically it was a tough little working class town, dominated by Shell Oil refinery and nearby PG&E at Avon. Martinez, among its ethnic groups, had a large population of Italian-Americans, and Tom Quontamatteo was from one of its many families.

A Martinez friend of mine, who had a relationship with Tom in their later adult years, told me the Quontamatteos were the only Italians in town who were not Catholic due to a quarrel Tom’s grandfather had with the Church years before. That explains why Tom was not in grammar school with me at St. Catherine’s with all the other Italian kids (and Irish, Mexican, and Portuguese kids). Tom’s smiling face does appear, though, in my kindergarten class photo—a dark-haired lad, already handsome at five years old. I was about to enter the realm of Catholic schools for the next eight years and was only to encounter Tom again when we both entered public high school in 9<sup>th</sup> grade in 1958.

At Alhambra High, Tom was the most outstanding and versatile athlete in our class. As I look through our old high school yearbooks, *The Torch*, I recall that every year Tom played three sports: football, basketball, and baseball. He was also incredibly popular. He was elected freshman class president for both semesters, and from then on was always in student government in some leadership capacity. He was proud of his baseball skill, and in our sophomore year he wrote “Champs” in red ink over his baseball team picture in my *Torch*. In 1961, his junior year, he was elected team captain for the football season.

I had the good fortune to sit next to Tom in Mr. Merchant's geometry class in my sophomore year. I had a hopeless crush on him like many other girls, but he was already going steady with a popular, beautiful peppette who wore his letter sweater. He had a wonderful smile, and we talked and joked easily though I was of the "brain contingent" and he of the highest ranked popular crowd. He wrote in my *Torch* that year: "I hate sitting next to you in geometry. Every time we get tests back I get burned so bad it hurts. Anyway good luck and have fun this summer." So much for my crush!

Although I never really thought of Tom as a scholar (he did not hang out socially with the "brains" who were all in the college prep courses), he was an Alhambra High School scholarship winner and an honor assembly winner. I read in his *Contra Costa Times* obituary that he had a baseball scholarship to Cal, and I lost track of him and many others as I went off to Cal's rival, Stanford.

I ran into Tom some years later when I was a graduate student at Cal, and we discussed, of all things, poetry! I had just taken Alex Zwerdling's class in Modern Poetry (1967), where we read the work of the great moderns, including T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, W. B. Yeats, Robert Frost, and finally working our way up to the brilliant Sylvia Plath. Tom had also previously taken this class at Cal, and I was secretly astonished that this former star athlete was now interested in literature, often of the most difficult caliber. I had not yet started writing poetry seriously, and I wonder now whether Tom had already begun. Zwerdling was wonderfully inspiring to both of us. This small encounter with Tom changed my whole assessment of him from high school. Here was a literary man, a side of Tom I never knew.

When Tom finally emerged many years later as a published poet and began giving readings, we reconnected again. My partner (now husband) Dale Jensen booked him at Spasso's coffee house on College Avenue in Oakland, where Dale coordinated readings and we both often read. Tom did a magnificent job presenting his poetry to an enthusiastic audience, including his adult daughter. His medications were working well, and the popular Tom from his high school days seemed alive that evening. Sometime later, Dale booked Tom at the

Firenze Cafe in Berkeley on Shattuck Avenue. This time Tom was not well. He mumbled his poems, and we moved our chairs closer to him to hear what he was saying. He backed away from us, we moved forward, he backed away until he was finally up against a wall. It was not a successful night.

I had known about Tom's struggles with mental illness over the years. I think he mentioned his tribulations to me when I ran into him on another occasion years ago in Berkeley, and of course, the gossip circuit had always been alive and well in small town Martinez ("The football hero is in the J Ward") and in the Bay Area poetry scene.

At Alhambra High School's 50<sup>th</sup> reunion of the class of '62, held in October 2012, most of us knew Tom had just died in September. One former male classmate, who came all the way from Dublin, Ireland, to the reunion, came up to me, and his first words were about Tom. They had kept in touch all these years. I think Tom's death (from cancer, I believe) was felt profoundly among the men of our high school, because many had played on sports teams with Tom and under his leadership. He had admirers among both older and younger classmates – not just from the class of '62. As for myself, it was difficult for me to see this once handsome, trim athlete deteriorate physically (perhaps his medications affected his weight as did his increasingly sedentary life) and mentally when he had so much to offer.

Although *Emptiness That Plays So Rough* is testimony to the devastation and loneliness that mental illness can cause a human being, it is also testimony to Tom's wonderful mind which could poignantly, vividly, and even humorously capture its own deterioration:

Voices  
and visions  
the whole she-bang  
laughing in the  
ecstatic sky  
came down  
one morning  
lovely  
(I think it was Spring)  
and woke me up.

-- Judy Wells, February 28, 2013

## WRITING EXCURSIONS

June 16 - 23, 2013

"Feather River Art Camp"

Oakland Feather River Camp

Quincy, California, fee: \$1,050

(after May 10: \$1,140)

Karen LeGault 510-601-1619

or e-mail [info@featherriverartcamp.com](mailto:info@featherriverartcamp.com)

<http://www.featherriverartcamp.com>

August 9 - 16, 2013

"Writing Highway 395"

Pine Cliff Resort, June Lake

Lee Vining, California, fee: \$850

Clive Matson, 510-654-6495, 510-508-5149 cell, [clive@matsonpoet.com](mailto:clive@matsonpoet.com)

Elaine Watt, 707-987-2860, 707-987-2339 x72, [accounting@harbin.org](mailto:accounting@harbin.org)

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tainted blood, help him pay for this journal!

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