

KEEPING SCORE

Sir Tom is how I referenced him when talking on the phone with Angelica, waiting for him to pick up. 510-524-6XX0. Can't forget it. He made you feel like you were his new-best-old-friend, and curiously more like yourself (oftentimes the parts you didn't yet know about or never wanted to realize anyway).

Let's see: he had a very vast and particular way of seeping things out of people, however one may attempt to phrase it. Around him, things could somehow get impossibly unyielding while at the same time remain totally attainable—that is, if you could hold your own. There wasn't a side, but there was a side. The side was that you had to think on the spot. In my experience, the less you did the less you got; the more you did the more you got (give or take). Conversations with Tom were labyrinthine and you had to keep up, or at least be game enough to be caught in-between thought. It was all about the hinges, the shift in things, collaging non-sequiturs and articulating their connections into an ongoing orchestration of contrasting movement. Or really just how to use your gift, your wit, to invoke and evoke, regardless of outcome.

The question of how to be timeless would frequently come up. One needed to write towards cosmology and obtain a "timeless tone" i.e. use the poem as conduit of feeling (affect) to keep an edge on things so that anyone who reads your poems can relate to the human condition of being uncomfortable. That's what keeps the poem (you) and "the work" alive. To forever be during and current, and stay present that way.

He called a lot, usually around midnight, and we'd talk for hours. I mostly listened and learned how to chart whatever cartography was at hand and it usually wasn't until the next day or two that I realized what was actually being said. There was a responsibility to the imagination and the ability to respond to it; to take all information, regardless of source, and twist it into one's own version, in order to make everything new or at best, dangerous. Anything from boy band gossip, to rare Joy Division songs, to baseball players from Louisiana (he was a huge fan of the Cajun Yankees pitcher, Ron Guidry), he knew about it and it all mattered. His fingers were on each and every pulse. He was always weaving ahead and behind, such that one wondered how he even kept up with it. But he did every time, and gave it to you right there in the air as an invitation to pick apart and collaborate. Some mornings before hanging up the phone he'd offer great stories of his friends. Here's a poem by one of his favorites, Ted Berrigan:

TOM CLARK

I take him
purely as treasure
His exquisite pain
pinpoints my evasive pleasure

Don't think him to be
Any more than you see
& Don't be beastly
 to him. If you do
he'll let you see him
 seeing you:
& you'll wake up hating yourself
 for hating him.
You will.

With Tom, nothing went unnoticed. Ever. Back in the landline days we got a caller ID and he was so pissed off that we weren't answering "at that time in the morning." I heard about it for months on end and no matter how I'd attempt to qualify (Sunnylyn started managing a restaurant on Valencia and I skate to pick her up at 2am every night, etc.), his mind was made up that we got it as surveillance for his calls. This was finally curbed when I offered the details of what streets I skated down, how fast the hills were, how long it took to get there, what was the night life in the Mission like (he thought SF was dead), what the décor of the restaurant looked like, how was the music, how many people were there, the lighting, how was our walk back at 3am, etc. Total details. He paid attention.

Besides going to his house for class on Monday nights with Christina Fisher and Patrick Dunagan, I visited him and Angelica a lot in the late evening where he would hold court at the end of the dining room table, mixing my weed with his. Then we'd take a long stroll to the North Berkeley Station where he'd drop me off and he'd walk back home alone. His generosity then is still beyond comprehension, especially how naïve I was to "the world of poetry." You could say, as with countless others, that he took me under his wing. A wing that I had been told about and nevertheless was honored and enthralled to have been, and be, under. In its shadow still, I offer a sonnet:

BEYOND THE PALE

A mountain cabin steeped with shrubs
A biographer for the Temple of Maiden Thot
A thief's thief easy to find
A paranoid polymath and kicker of shrines
A pimp of adverbials in the cartography of pain
A black mirror dealer known to double cross
A leaking roof to accentuate the Bolinas frescos
A flask of leaves to tease bare trees
A heretic hermetic the same day as Jack Spicer
A child's bed perfectly made
A Bobby Fischer sort in the TMZ of poetry
A midnight call to reveal the death of it all
A river in all the skyness of purgatory
A votive substance aloof and essential

To close, here's a poem from his friend Bob Creeley:

FOR TOM

Friends make
the most of it
the more of it
quite enough.