# A Virus in Verse

Poet Tory Dent’s Final Howl

April 1, 2006 By Walter Armstrong

From 1988, when poet Tory Dent was diagnosed with HIV, until her death at age 47, on December 30, 2005 from PML—an infection of the central nervous system—AIDS spared her none of its cruelties. And she was just as unsparing in her poetry about the disease. Her third volume of poems, Black Milk, was published just weeks before her death. In it, she likens her own suffering and AIDS to death camps and war. “It was important to Tory to write about AIDS and the physical suffering it caused her, because so few people going through that are capable of communicating it to others,” says her husband Sean Harvey. Her first installment, What Silence Equals, was published in 1993. It unblinkingly expressed the isolation she felt as a straight woman with a “gay” disease. Her second volume, published in 1999, HIV, Mon Amour, details the experience of a series of serious illnesses, including tuberculosis and CMV, which nearly left her blind. With it came prestigious accolades, from a National Book Critics Award nomination to a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Dent’s speaking voice was sweet, eager to please, even laughing, contrasting with her howling and haunting verse. Adrienne Rich, a National Book Award–winning poet, said of her friend in a January tribute, “She was able to convert her rage to live under this verdict of HIV into an art that was actually equal to it.” She cuts off deep thoughts with hallucinatory images induced by extreme physical pain. “Take the needle, arrest the senses / Excise the egg-shaped moon from my field of vision,” she writes of CMV in Black Milk. Dent explained her work in a 2001 interview with POZ: “I could feel myself merge with nature and my body breaking down like a dying animal or a flower into mere matter. That [solidarity] seems to put into perspective what’s valuable in life.” For all their darkness, her poems are a celebration of humanity at its limits, where Dent found not only horror, but love.

*Black Milk was published by the Sheep Meadow Press.*

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