Writing Wrongs

Tory Dent’s poems express the unique feelings of a woman with HIV

August 1, 1995 By Donna Minkowitz

There seems to be a specifically American taboo about speaking your pain,“ Tory Dent says, looking calm and not particularly pained. We’re sitting in a coffee bar, and she is describing a writing workshop she’s teaching at New York University called ”The Poetry of Adversity." Dent’s been expressing pain and all sorts of other emotions about being HIV positive in chilling and exquisite poems since 1988, the year she found out her test results over the phone during a stay at a writers’ colony.

The results, she says, were totally unexpected. “I was dating someone and we’d both decided to get tested so we could have unprotected sex.” Dent’s life as a graduate student in English was turned upside down. “In 1988 if you tested positive, you were going to die,” she says. And as a heterosexual woman with HIV, Dent felt a tremendous sense of isolation. “I didn’t know any straight people who were positive who were living long enough to create a supportive community.”

One of the most striking things about her poems is how strongly they express a female -- and feminist -- voice that is also HIV positive. Dent, 37, writes about sexist male lovers, about the relation between their fear of her positive status and their fear of her femaleness. When she asks a new lover why he’s afraid to kiss her, he explains: “I think of you as a beautiful jeweled box... And inside you is a box even more beautiful.” The lover fetishizes and fears both Dent and the virus.

In those early days, “it seemed all I had left was my writing. I don’t know how I would have gotten through that first winter without writing these poems,” Dent says. “It was the essential initial component of my surviving HIV.” Her first collection, *What Silence Equals* (Persea Books/New York City), was published in 1993 to great acclaim. Dent is currently at work on an autobiography covering the past seven years.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Writing-Wrongs-1848-6715