

Tom's Cross

(Written for Tom Angelucci, whose card reads: "Vincent's Clip Joint--SPECIALIZING IN CHILDREN'S FIRST HAIRCUTS" on the occasion of the 55-year reunion of his U.S. Army Air Corps unit, the 23rd Photo Reconnaissance Squadron)

Tom's clipped 'em, all of 'em, quite neatly
in his late Father Vincent's shop
for more than 50 years, whipping those sharp shears
through the air, snip snip, snip snip!
while some of the boys shriek to the heavens
as if it's the hand of God bearing down on them
as he waves his scissors so close to their throats
and in a dotting voice makes jokes
kidding all of them, as he clips off
outcast relics of their innocent flesh
which fall haphazardly around them
a scene of utter slaughter

And their parents stand nearby, grinning gamely
though cringing in sympathetic ache themselves
as they watch their infants recoil
until after the horror is finally over
they welcome them back into their arms
tell them how good they look
that they love them so very, very much
and now they can go out for ice cream and candy
They say, "That wasn't so bad, was it?"
and tell them they have grown up just a little bit more
that someday soon they will be like their fathers
standing straight and tall, masters of their own worlds
counting off the days until that happens

Tom is counting days, too, for he's worked
every one of them, so that he can be blessed
with a lovely wife, loving son and daughter
and his fine home in Lynn, near Boston

and his wire-hair Terrier, Nicholas
who wears funny hats and follows him, everywhere
Now Tom in the golden autumn of his life likes to
garden in the turnabout in front of his house
goes often to church, and every few years
travels to one of the marvelous sites on this globe

Today we're in France in a gallery
on the "Cathedral Choir Tour" and the spires of the
museum seem to reach almost to the stars
Lately, we've sung on the altars of Salisbury, Notre Dame
and Rouen, and marveled at the arches and stained glass
and Tom's gracious son is our musical director
who played the organ in Tours
like he was born with the hands of God, too
There, our fifty voices lifted up to the heavens as one
Now Tom's happiness is whole
and the days that are counted are good

Though the tour has taken us through Normandy
And as a tribute to the men who fell, we've sung on the beaches
and in the cemeteries on the bluffs above
so many crosses and stars and markers
so many British, Canadians, French, Poles, Americans, and all
yes, Germans, too
because we did not see any Generals' crosses
those men were like Tom, they married
their young, first lovers and worked hard
all of their lives

So, we shuffle along with the crowd and ask
"Wasn't that something?"
look at each other and laugh
Tom's eyes lit up with the splendor of the works
as another measure of his success
until someone is reminded of the crosses
and, unsuspecting, asks, "Tom, what did you do on D-Day?"

He stops walking and looks down at the floor
starts to smile and answers, "I got to France

three days later—I would've been there the next day
though--(suddenly he turns a deathly grey and
a memory long-shuttered awakes) there was
only room on that plane for one. Bobby and I were
excited and both wanted to go. (Now he's having
trouble standing but there's nowhere to sit down)
You know how it is, he says, when you're twenty . . .
you think you're going to live forever
(And then, Oh Great and Terrible and Magnificent God
in the middle of the room, inexplicably, he begins to cry)
So, we flipped a coin, and he won, and the plane never got there
(Now Tom's shoulders are heaving and Millie walks over
and takes his arm and doesn't look us in the eye)

I wanted to touch him, too, but couldn't
and people were stopping and staring, although soon
because he does count the days, one by one
he begins to smile again and says, finally, "Sorry"

We were astonished by this quick grief
and wondered, will there ever be a world
where all horrors end without blood
and God releases us back into our parents' arms
bright as the new day, and offers us sweets
and salves all our wounds?

For in the instant of his pride
God looked down at Tom and smote him, and us
because he counts every moment--
and he watched his only son nailed to a wooden cross
to save our wretched, pitiful souls, so that
surrounded by the fat arrogance of human works
in the millions of years since antiquity
our most abiding memory
should be that of a grown man, standing alone
crying in the Louvre

© 2001 Christopher J. Musser